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Measuring the Impact of Community Engagement on Policy Making in the UK: A Local Case Study

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ABSTRACT *Innovative attempts to involve citizens in policy making have been one of the defining features of the New Labour government in the UK. In this article, we examine the nature and impact of community engagement mechanisms within the flagship regeneration programme—the New Deal for Communities. Through interviews with practitioners, analysis of survey data and participant observation of governance boards we examine the methods and impact of initiatives to engage residents in policy making. While it is apparent that innovative strategies have been put in place to engage and empower communities in local policy making, this has not always been matched by the development of tools for measuring the impact of involvement or for scrutinizing the policy development and decision-making process. More people may have got involved, but little is known about precisely what effect their involvement has had upon policies at the local level. Consultation, or just publicizing what is happening and community involvement in decision-making are often conflated, and there is only a limited attempt to delineate and quantify the impact of each. It is also evident that information gathered as a result of some community engagement initiatives is not easily linked to policy development and is not always utilized in the policy process. For community involvement to become a meaningful and sustainable aspect of local policy making, an appropriate infrastructure needs to be developed to ensure that the decision-making process is transparent and accountable, and that the input from citizens genuinely informs decision-making.*

KEY WORDS: Engagement, consultation, empowerment, citizenship, policy making

Introduction

Community engagement is seen as a way of bringing about democratic renewal by opening up new structures for more localized decision-making and engendering public interest in governance. Engagement can be viewed as the process of involvement, while empowerment is both the process and an outcome where people have specific powers.

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Both engagement and empowerment are inextricably linked in the rhetoric and practice of community governance. Yet it is not always clear what kinds of community engagement and community empowerment are ultimately desired. More involvement has been outwardly championed by policy makers as a 'good' thing but it has not necessarily been linked to the policy-making process in a consistent and transparent way.

A recent review of empowerment in the UK (DCLG, 2009) has identified three key factors defining empowerment success: increased political efficacy, improvements to the local community and the impact on decision-making. The issue of how power is devolved and to whom is, or should be, at the heart of debates about community policy making. Evidently, community engagement can take many different forms. At one extreme is the absolute transfer of power; while at the other is community engagement as a rubber stamp to decisions previously taken, or as a tool for legitimizing decisions about to be taken. Arnstein's (1969) influential work in the USA conceptualizes participation in terms of eight levels ranging from manipulation to citizen control. While on the surface the channels for participation have multiplied since Arnstein's work, arguably there is still a hierarchy of power. Burns, Heywood and Wilde (2004) develop Arnstein's theory by proposing that the ladder of participation consists of a 12-tiered hierarchy of levels at which participation could occur: the lowest level consists of 'civic hype', which represents 'citizen non-participation'; the highest level consists of interdependence, where there is 'citizen control'.¹ Burton, Goodlad and Croft's (2004) paper, which is based on an extensive review of existing research on community engagement initiatives, argues that much of the evidence on community engagement has been flawed due to an inability to adequately theorize the processes of engagement. A first criticism is of the exclusively 'rights-based justification' of explicit support for the principle of community involvement without a corresponding attempt to understand or evaluate how that involvement could generate positive outcomes. A second criticism is levelled at those studies which actually look at the substantive benefits of community involvement but tend to focus, mistakenly, on the 'enumeration of inputs, outputs and outcomes'. The authors contend that this approach is flawed, as community involvement does not lend itself easily to measurement in the way that, for example, crime and unemployment levels can be monitored. In other words, it is not the end product of participation that should be the focus of research so much as the form, process, purpose and degree of participation itself.

In the UK, community engagement has come to be seen as a key to ensuring effective policy development and public service outcomes (Smith, 2005; Morrissey, 2000). Public involvement is part of the statutory requirements of service delivery, governance and performance assessment across many policy areas. Across government public consultation is part of many different Public Service Agreements. Underpinning New Labour's urban renewal agenda is a firm commitment to community engagement, and there has been a shift from centralized forms of 'government' towards horizontal and participatory 'governance', often instituted at a local level (Birch, 2002; Coleman, 2006; Newman, 2005; Smith & Sullivan, 2003; Stoker, 2004; Stoker & Wilson, 2004; White *et al.*, 2006). 'Citizen-centred governance', as it has been described (Barnes *et al.*, 2008), is seen as key to ensuring effective policy development and public service improvements (Home Office, 2003a, 2003b; ODPM, 2005). Such a focus can be traced back to the beginning of the New Labour government in 1997. Two key policy documents produced by the Social Exclusion Unit on neighbourhood renewal—*Bringing Britain Together* (1998) and a *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* (2000)—both strongly advocated

the need for community involvement in renewing deprived urban neighbourhoods. The *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* 2000, for example, reiterated the need to build community capacity by developing local organizations and to involve the community and voluntary sector organizations in service delivery. At the heart of this agenda is the belief in the need to revive and empower the community; without this, regeneration would have much less chance of success. The Best Value Performance framework, which was at the heart of New Labour's reform of local government, included a duty to inform, consult and involve service users particularly through measuring consumer satisfaction (DCLG, 2006; DETR, 1998, 1999; Entwistle & Laffin, 2005).

Across a range of policy areas in the UK, the public is now increasingly engaged through different strategies including: citizens juries, user satisfaction surveys and more formal involvement via public membership of management and governance boards. Formal training and qualifications in active citizenship are also now part of the UK education system. With varying degrees of success, one-off large-scale consultation exercises such as the *Big Conversation* have also been conducted.² Such different channels for engagement and empowerment, including on-line petitions, face-to-face meetings and interactive events, are important if different sectors of society are to be enabled to participate. Research by John (2009) using national level survey data suggests that new forms of involvement are serving to engage previously uninvolved groups.

The 2006 Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* places a renewed emphasis on citizen consultation and empowerment. The recently published *Communities in Control* White Paper (DCLG) argues that empowerment of citizens can help 'revive civic society and drive improvements in the NHS, police, justice system and local councils' (DCLG, 2008). The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill introduces a duty on local authorities from 2009 to inform and consult residents in local policies and decisions.

In a regeneration context, community engagement and community empowerment are seen as ways of making regeneration more sustainable by drawing on local knowledge and creativity and by embedding the desire and capacity to continue to push for change in communities. It is also seen as a way of generating dialogue, reconciling disagreements and therefore building community cohesion (Involve, 2005). The desire of government in the UK to involve citizens in revitalizing deprived areas is not an entirely new development. As Raco (2000) argues, community involvement has something of a 'cyclical nature'. The succession of schemes that have emerged since the 1960s have varied considerably in the extent to which they have promoted community participation. Examples include the Urban Programme launched in 1968 to fund social and welfare projects in deprived areas, followed by the Community Development Projects (CDPs) launched a year later to improve the co-ordination and management of local services (Lupton, 2003). The CDPs were credited with developing an increasingly radical, community-centred focus from their inception until they were wound up in 1978 (Foley & Martin, 2000). The focus on community, however, was sidelined in the subsequent wave of area-based interventions as the steady decline of the UK's industrial base saw governments switch to centralized, top-down policies in an attempt to stimulate economic revival. The Labour Party's 1977 White Paper, *Policy for the Inner Cities*, sought to promote place-based schemes, such as industrial estate development, over the people-based schemes of previous programmes (Lupton, 2003). The Conservative government in 1979 continued to emphasize 'economic development', with several initiatives

(enterprise zones, urban development grants, city grants) and specialist agencies including Urban Development Corporations established with the express purpose of securing private sector funds and expertise. One of the most trenchant criticisms to emerge from this period regarded the way in which central government had eschewed local people (Marinetto, 2003). A shift away from centralized, private sector-driven schemes towards a more 'local' approach (Lupton, 2003) with an emphasis on 'community participation, partnership and empowerment' (Imrie & Raco, 2003) subsequently emerged. This was evident in schemes such as City Challenge launched in 1991 and the Single Regeneration Budget which followed in 1994. Both constituted a distinct shift in urban policy insofar as they provided funds directly to local authorities to administer on the ground, while also creating structures for local community, business and voluntary groups to become involved.

Implementing community involvement in policy making in practice is, however, a challenge for a number of reasons. The transference of decision-making power is problematic if priorities and targets are set nationally, if only a limited number of citizens ever become active, and if those that are active have limited access to the information required to make policy decisions. For example, it is contended that the apparent commitment to the empowerment of local communities in area-based policy sits at odds with New Labour's centralizing tendencies (Diamond, 2004; Foley & Martin, 2000; Marinetto, 2003). Moreover, the assumption that public involvement in policy making is wholly positive has been questioned. As Gardner (2007) argues, involving people in decision-making can make service delivery agencies more responsive to local needs and circumstances, and build capacities, but involvement has only brought limited improvements in the socio-economic circumstances of local communities. Community involvement may have limited impact because the initiatives are often short-lived, local views can be parochial, and deprivation is rooted in economic structures. Moreover, the communities themselves may want leadership rather than to be leaders.

In summary, there has been a growing tendency to devolve governance to the local level to engage communities in policy making. This is particularly the case with urban renewal programmes, with the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme explicitly resourced and tasked to engage residents in the process of revitalizing deprived areas. As both Arnstein's and Burn's typologies illustrate, however, engagement activities vary considerably in the extent to which they genuinely devolve power. While research has examined the capacity of urban renewal programmes to engage citizens there has been comparatively little attention paid to the monitoring frameworks these programmes use to measure engagement initiatives. This is a crucial omission as we can only assess the effectiveness of community engagement interventions if the appropriate tools for measurement exist.

In this article, we consider the numerous innovations in community engagement and participation that have been implemented in flagship initiatives such as the NDC programme, and we examine the extent to which local residents have influenced policies that affect the neighbourhoods in which they live. We also consider whether such programmes have the necessary methods in place and evidence for measuring the policy impact of community involvement.

Methodology

In order to fully capture the dynamics of community engagement we have combined qualitative research and quantitative data analysis. We focus specifically on the NDC

programme which is a high profile UK government regeneration programme that has as one of its core principles a commitment to community engagement. The particular case study NDC area was selected on the basis that it is widely regarded as having an intensive and innovative approach to community engagement and so, in theory, it should have some of the most advanced methods in place for measuring the impact of community engagement.

First, we conducted secondary analysis of survey data relating to the outcomes of community engagement and community empowerment initiatives both nationally and in the case study NDC area. Second, we conducted a series of discussions with policy officers in the case study area who were involved in community engagement work. In total, we consulted 10 policy officers and also conducted 3 in-depth elite interviews. The interviewees were selected in order to include practitioners and officers working directly with local residents as well as those working at a more strategic level within the organization. The focus of the interviews was on: what community engagement initiatives had been put in place; how these initiatives might vary in relation to particular populations and during different phases of the policy process; and finally, how the policy impact of community involvement was measured. We also observed resident and board meetings during 2008. This participant observation was designed to capture the decision-making process and to gain some insights about the nature of the interfaces between residents and practitioners. Finally, detailed analysis of relevant policy documents from central government and the case study NDC was also undertaken. Furthermore, one of the authors worked as a seconded researcher at the case study NDC for 18 months. The other author has also worked as a consultant in three NDC areas in the past decade. For this reason, we also draw more broadly upon observations made while working in the field.

Local Case Study

The NDCs is the flagship urban renewal programme implemented by the New Labour government in 1997. Over two waves of competitive bidding in 1999 and 2000, the NDC programme awarded an average of £50 million to 39 separate NDC areas. A commitment to community engagement is one of the principles underpinning the NDC programme. Between 2000 and 2004, expenditure on community engagement across the NDC programme amounted to almost £100 million, some 22% of the total NDC spent (CRESR, 2005a).³

The case study NDC area we are focusing on was set up in 1999 and received over £50 million of government funding, which was combined with £25 million from the Single Regeneration Budget. The total population of the area was nearly 9000 people (2005). It is an area of significant deprivation with an unemployment level of 6% compared to 2% in the UK (December 2007). It is among the top five most deprived areas in England (Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2004).

Different engagement and empowerment initiatives in the run up to securing the NDC funding included: visits by residents and staff to look at successful projects elsewhere, open meetings, training for residents, the distribution of information packs, the setting up of thematic task groups to determine priorities, youth consultation events, and community planning events. In July 1999, an Information and Participation Strategy was established. Fifteen resident groups already active within the area were brought into a single area Residents' Forum. Three residents were elected to represent the three parts of the

area on the bid team and the initial NDC delivery plan. The Residents' Forum continues to meet and remains the key mechanism for electing residents to the NDC board. As of 2006, the Residents' Forum was comprised of 51 residents' groups across the case study area. NDC officers argued that the engagement of local residents played an integral role in securing the funding for the programme and, it is claimed, remains at the core of its delivery (Case Study, authors' interview with case study area officer, 2007a).

Community Engagement Initiatives

The NDC's approach to community engagement is formally laid out in the organization's information and equality strategy. This states that the organization must 'inform, consult and engage' (Case Study, 2002, p. 1). The means to achieving this are listed in Box 1.

Box 1. Community engagement strategy

Helping to involve people and bring them together.

Letting people know what is going on in their neighbourhood.

Providing ways for residents to influence activities.

Establishing what their role is in bringing lasting improvement to the area.

Supporting and encouraging creativity and problem solving.

Helping those getting involved to adapt to change.

Helping to build relationships, informal and formal.

Helping the information gathering process.

Ensuring that services become more relevant and appropriate.

Providing opportunities to influence service delivery.

Ensuring that the needs of people are taken into account.

Encouraging and supporting residents to take greater responsibility in the management of the area.

Source: Case Study (2002)

Examples of the specific community engagement and community empowerment initiatives put in place during the first years of the programme to the present day are outlined below. We have categorized these initiatives into a typology of engagement (Case Study, 2002).

Information and Awareness Raising

Information provision

This has included the production and distribution of annual reports including in novel formats, e.g., printed on tea towels. A local free paper has also been set up. Other activities have included production of a video and a DVD charting the area's progress; poster and billboard campaigns; and publishing three editions of a local service directory delivered door-to-door.

Development of Online Community Portals

This project was set up in 2000 to provide subsidized personal computers, basic information and communication technologies (ICT) training, community help and support, and low-cost wireless broadband internet access. A community portal was also developed, designed specifically for the local community through intensive consultation, and to provide access to online services and news about the area.

Consultation—Formal and Informal

Formal consultations

In 1999, the case study NDC conducted a large-scale household survey. This has been repeated in 2002 and 2005, albeit at wider geographic scales, to reflect the changing funding boundaries as the NDC was absorbed into a larger regeneration structure.

Informal consultations carried out at large events

The case study NDC has a rolling programme of community events. A specific project focusing on the provision of information and promoting participation has been in place since 2000. This has resourced a wide variety of innovative activities including, for example, a video project in which residents were asked about their opinions on the regeneration of the area using a diary room format.

Initiatives to engage hard-to-reach groups and promote equality and diversity

A social inclusion toolkit has been developed to assist in the engagement of hard-to-reach groups. This has been developed with partners from the public and voluntary sectors and highlights projects, activities and best practice from projects such as a women's network group, inclusion projects for ethnic minorities and people with disabilities, a project for young fathers and supporting those disadvantaged or excluded as a result of drug or alcohol misuse.

Direct Engagement

Direct participation in decision-making structures—principally resident involvement on the NDC board and residents forums

The NDC Board has 13 members, which includes seven residents. Six of the resident members of the board are elected through the area Resident Forums while the remaining resident member is a young person elected by a youth forum (all young people who live in the NDC area who attend youth groups or activities can vote in the ballot). The non-resident members are made up of four public sector representatives agreed through the area Public Service Board, one business representative through the Business Forum and one voluntary sector representative appointed through the Voluntary Sector Network. Resident representatives serve a three-year term. The non-resident representatives are confirmed by the 'sponsoring' body annually. The board has a number of decision-making powers. It approves the programme spend (including a £20 million programme and the decision to transfer council housing stock to a not-for-profit company which residents then get to vote on), and it also oversees the evaluation of programme themes and impact. It is the body to which partner organizations report progress. The board members work to an agreed code of conduct.

In the resident and board meetings we observed, the resident board members were vocal and seemed to be providing scrutiny to the programme delivery and the work of partner organizations. The chair of the meeting is also a nominated resident. Good governance practices were being observed in terms of democratic procedures for chair holding, declarations of interests and having the freedom to raise questions in relation to reports of progress from practitioners, partners and service providers.

However, while residents were capable of asking challenging questions, it was not clear that they had the information resources or policy expertise to make a significant input into the bigger decisions. While their comments were insightful and based on real experience, it appeared that the complex policy process was ongoing, and the residents were not equal partners in this. Rather than policy making, it appeared to be an arena where residents could provide local information on the impact of initiatives and problems in their local area, and some scrutiny of the main players. Meetings of the board are minuted and publicly available on the NDC's website or available by request. As such, they could be used to a limited degree as an account of the decision-making process of the board, but it is doubtful that they capture the nuances of individual contributions, debates and the process of reaching consensus. It is notable that all decisions have to be unanimous to be carried.

A process of democracy in terms of election of residents to the board was in place, though this seemed to be a formality with few people voting. It is reported that turnover of representatives has been low and disagreements regarding decisions have been limited (Case Study, authors' interview with case study area policy officer, 2007b). While this may be seen as positive, and our experience suggested there were good working relationships between resident board members and practitioners, this does not mean that the participation of residents in policy making and the devolvement of power has been what was envisaged in the rhetoric of the programme. Chatterton and Bradley (2000) have suggested that in relation to community engagement 'the community often lacks the power, resources and technical knowledge to operate on an equal footing with lead partners' (p. 183). Hall and Nevin (1999) claim that participation is often a mechanism for lending legitimacy to regeneration policies, which are often pre-existing. The notion that a few individuals can represent large and often demographically diverse populations can also be contested. This is not to diminish the hard work and local expertise of the residents in terms of their knowledge, but to highlight how the structures themselves only devolve power in a limited way, including in terms of information flows.

Direct liaison and support of existing and new residents' groups

A dedicated Resident Liaison Team was set up to increase the number of resident groups, support the Resident's Forum, commission and deliver training, support resident board members and deliver wider community participation. The case study NDC area officers stated that they continually monitor the number of active residents groups (which increased from 15 in 1998 before peaking at 68 in 2003 and is now back to 52). One policy officer from the case study area suggested that this decline may actually be a sign of success, as resident groups tend to dissolve when their key concerns have been addressed (Case Study, authors' interview with case study area policy officer, 2007c). This temporary dynamic of engagement of some residents in relation to specific issues is an important insight perhaps into the scope and limits of community engagement and community empowerment.

Engagement through thematic programme structure such as a community gardens scheme implemented through an environmental programme

This work was focused on improving the physical environment in the area and relied on a network of steering groups to feed into their deliberations. Alley gating and community gardens projects have engaged local people in the design, development and ongoing maintenance of schemes, and grants have added to the local authority's cash grants, providing opportunities for local groups to bid for funding to undertake small-scale environmental projects and improve their quality of life. A citywide Community Guardians scheme involved local residents acting as the eyes and ears of the community.

These different aspects of community engagement and community empowerment are clearly very diverse, and innovation is important if all sectors of society are to be involved (Russell, 2008). Yet in order to develop a sustainable form of community policy making as envisaged in the policies of such programmes as NDC, there is a need to make these activities part of a coherent policy-making infrastructure, rather than just an ongoing combination of communication, *ad hoc* involvement and set piece decision-making. Below we consider how community engagement and empowerment has been measured.

Measuring the Impact of Community Engagement

At a national level, community engagement is measured as part of the National Evaluation of the NDC programme. The National Evaluation Team (NET) has undertaken an eight-year programme of research comprising: a biennial household survey in every NDC area with a sample size of approximately 400 residents, regular analysis of secondary data sets to understand thematic priorities and ongoing reports on key thematic concerns. The household survey includes a longitudinal element, and a small sample of the same residents is re-contacted to see how their views and circumstances have changed. Included in this is the tracking of people who have moved out of the NDC area. This longitudinal element is potentially a highly valuable resource, but it is primarily for use at the national level due to the small sample size at the individual NDC area level. A national NDC comparator survey was also undertaken in 2002, 2004 and 2006 in a sample of deprived wards in the same local authority districts as the NDCs, but not in wards bordering them. These surveys in similarly deprived areas are focused on developing an understanding of how change in NDC areas may differ from other deprived areas that have not received the same level of funding for regeneration (Russell, 2008).

The key questions from the national survey that can be said to at least relate to community engagement and community empowerment are under the heading 'community' and cover residents' views and activities as listed in Box 2.

Box 2. National evaluation questions

Feels part of the local community?

Friendliness of local people?

Contact with neighbours?

Feel you can influence decisions that affect your area?

Involvement in local groups?

Involvement in activities organized by NDC?

In the national New Deal evaluation report (CRESR, 2005b) an 'awareness of the New Deal programme' or 'feeling part of the community' are used as headline measures of community engagement. However, these are only measuring specific aspects of community engagement and community empowerment. Arguably engagement and empowerment are much more than this and extend to inputting into outcomes. Residents are asked if they feel they can have an influence on local decisions, but there are no data on whether they actually do influence decisions in practice despite the considerable funding resources dedicated to it in the New Deal programme. It is notable that the National Evaluation is proposing to capture more detailed evidence on the nature of involvement in policy making in future years.

The case study NDC area has also developed its own independent measurement tools. These include: an independent household survey, monitoring and evaluation of existing residents' groups by the Resident Liaison Team and specific project and programme evaluations conducted by programme managers and staff. The independent household survey has been conducted since 1999. It is the most frequently used source of evidence to gauge the effectiveness of the community engagement strategy, according to one senior policy officer (case study, authors' interview with case study area policy officer, 2007b). In the 2005 case study, NDC area survey the key questions from the survey relating to community engagement and community empowerment appear under the heading 'community life'. The questions match those asked as part of the National Evaluation.

Table 1 summarizes the measures and patterns of community engagement and empowerment in the case study NDC area, the average rates for all NDCs, the national level and the levels in the most deprived areas in England.

While the table tells an important story, the data only offer limited insights into the impact of community engagement and community empowerment initiatives. The surveys measure little about the processes and outcomes of involvement.

It is clear that back in 1999 the case study area had particularly low levels of community engagement even compared to similarly deprived NDC areas. By 2002 there were increases in the proportion of residents who felt they were part of their local community and the extent to which respondents felt that neighbours in their area looked out for one another. The case study area is now comparable to other similarly deprived areas in terms of residents' perceptions of community engagement, and specifically the extent to which residents feel they can 'influence decisions'. However, the rates of engagement and empowerment as measured here are still low considering the intensity of engagement and empowerment initiatives and the resources that have been put in place. Moreover, since 2002 it seems that the increasing proportion of residents stating that they felt they were engaged in their local community (in terms of these three measures) has levelled out and then declined. Some of the differences in the survey findings may be explained away by the limited sample size and the error in the precision of the measurements that this introduces. It is notable that turnout rates in the local elections in the area have remained fairly constant since the start of the NDC program.

In terms of the type of people who have been engaged, evidence from the 2006 MORI case study area survey suggests that women are a little more likely to feel they can 'influence decisions in their local area' compared to men (28% compared to 21%, respectively). The sample size is too small to look in detail at the impact of length of time of residence in the area, but there is some suggestion that people who have recently moved to the area are

Table 1. Measures and rates of community engagement and empowerment

Measures of community engagement		Number	% Feel part of local community (great deal or fair amount)	% Neighbours look out for each other	% Feel can influence decisions in area	% Involved in voluntary work in last 3 years	% Heard of local NDC	% Feel NDC has improved area (great deal/fair amount) (Base: all heard of NDC)
Case study NDC area (1)	1999 (INDEP)	1206	25	53	N/A	N/A	51	N/A
	2002 NDC (MORI)	502	43	70	20	10	61	52
	2002 INDEP	682	43	70	32	15	40	47
	2004 NDC (MORI)	434	47	68	25	14	58	46
	2005 INDEP	462	36	68	29	11	69	59
	2006 (MORI)	401	44	65	24	11	61	52
All NDC average (2)	2002	19,574	35	59	23	12	63	33
	2004	16,647	40	62	25	12	79	51
	2006	15,792	41	61	23	13	80	57
England (3)	2000		51	73	26	21	N/A	N/A
	2002		51	73	26	21	N/A	N/A
	2004		59	73	32	23	N/A	N/A
	2006		54	72	34	23	N/A	N/A
England (4) (comparable deprivation to NDC)	2004		43	65	22	11	N/A	N/A

Notes: (1) Case study area surveys conducted independently by the NDC and also as part of the NDC National Evaluation conducted by MORI; (2) NDC National Evaluation Surveys conducted by MORI; (3) General Household Survey—Social Capital Module 2000 and Ipsos MORI Social Issues Omnibus (2004 and 2006); (4) NDC National Evaluation Surveys.

the least likely to feel they can 'influence decisions'—it increases amongst longer-term residents but then declines for those who have been in the area for more than 20 years. This perhaps suggests a process of longer-term disengagement, but more evidence is required.

It is clear that in the case study area initiatives in community engagement and community empowerment had made an impact, but this seems to have levelled out. This may be a result of people feeling that they have had their say and it is now about the delivery of the regeneration, but it also may be a result of people becoming involved and then becoming disenchanted with the process. Duffy, Vince and Page (2008), drawing on the longitudinal NDC National Evaluation data, highlight how important it is not to raise false expectations, and to implement realistic and sustainable forms of involvement in policy making. Any engagement and empowerment policies need to take account of the limitations of time, resources and expertise of those people becoming involved. Moreover, our qualitative interviews with the case study area policy officers revealed that they felt that whilst a series of individual projects had been very successful in engaging and supporting minority groups (e.g., a refugee and asylum seeker project and deaf persons inclusion project), more effort is required to involve ethnic communities in the more formal structures, particularly in view of the growth in the number of migrant workers from the EU Accession countries (Case Study, authors' interview with case study area officer, 2007a).

However, an important point to consider here is the case study NDC's progress in other areas of regeneration delivery. For example, evidence suggests that unemployment has fallen, school attendance amongst local pupils has improved, educational attainment levels have risen and in certain periods burglary rates have fallen.⁴ Yet this seems to have come without greatly increasing the levels of community engagement and empowerment. Across the New Deal areas nationally, while there have been improvements in the socio-economic profiles of the areas on the whole (Beatty *et al.*, 2005), the measures of community engagement that are available suggest that engagement has not increased particularly.

It is also important to compare the differences across the various measures. Respondents are consistently more likely to report that 'neighbours in their area look out for one another' compared to those who report they 'feel they can influence decisions in the area' or 'feel part of the local community'. This perhaps says much about how people view their local area and its governance. As analysis by Duffy, Vince and Page (2008) drawing on the NDC National Evaluation data has shown, the strongest associations with satisfaction with their local area are the 'friendliness of neighbours', 'personal safety' and the 'quality of the local environment' rather than the extent to which a person feels they can influence local decisions or whether they have been involved in NDC activities. As such, just increasing community engagement is no guarantee of the success of regeneration as a whole, and while people may want to be kept informed, they may not necessarily want to be involved in making policy decisions, but just want effective and reliable services. It is notable that in other research on participation a sense of community has been shown to be associated with higher levels of civic engagement (Oliver, 2000).

Finally, in the headline figures there is no recognition of any discordant views within the community. Yet engendering participation among residents will also generate debate and disagreement amongst residents, and it is important to have an infrastructure in place for

resolving conflicts. The qualitative evidence gathered as part of this research highlights some of the possible tensions which can begin to emerge when citizens become engaged in policy making. One policy officer who works closely with tenant groups, for example, noted how capacity-building work gave one group the campaigning skills and knowledge of policy to overturn a compulsory purchase order (CPO) issued by the NDC through the council. While the NDC was adamant that the CPO was necessary to demolish a small number of residential properties in order to build a new academy that would benefit a far wider number of residents, tenants living in the properties earmarked for demolition disagreed and fought vociferously and ultimately successfully to overturn the CPO (Case Study, authors' interview with case study area officer, 2007a). As such, it challenges the model of community engagement and community empowerment as a mechanism for renewing neighbourhoods through consensual decision-making. Disagreement and resistance are possibilities as well, but this is something that has not yet been captured and analysed.

In summary, there are a number of further points of caution in relation to drawing conclusions from the survey evidence. First, there seems to be no agreement about what constitutes a high level of community engagement and community empowerment, only how areas at one point in time compare with another (Skidmore, Bound & Lownsbrough, 2006). Many aspects of community engagement and community empowerment remain unmeasured, such as the policy impact and the impact on individuals themselves. The surveys do not capture the detail of the pathways by which people got involved in their local communities. As such, much of the potentially positive impact of the various initiatives may be going unrecognized. There is also little indication of whether a perception of being able to 'influence decisions' is actually based on specific experiences.

Concerns about the reliance on survey measures were also articulated by one member of the NET who identified three issues in using large-scale surveys to understand the impact of resident participation (National Evaluation Team, NET, interview with authors, 2007). First, they stated that comparisons between survey waves are difficult because the survey is cross-sectional in design, and therefore there is no consistency in terms of asking the same individuals to reiterate their perception of change over time. Second, an area experiencing significant population turnover like the case study area will not have a stable population of residents with a clear perspective on long-term change. Third and finally, the member of the NET noted that the expectations of individuals change over time, so it is difficult to benchmark answers against earlier responses.

A NET practice study based on interviews, ethnographic observation and documentary analyses of four NDCs has captured more of the complex dynamics of community engagement and community empowerment. The overarching conclusion from interviews with residents is that, 'those who are involved feel that they are making a difference and bringing about change' (Russell, 2006). The report also notes that those residents who had got involved appreciated the presence of a dedicated NDC office in their neighbourhood. It goes on to concede, however, that 'it is invariably difficult to measure the impact of community engagement—or to establish how much more problematic the programme might have been if residents had not been involved'. As one NDC officer concluded, it is 'really difficult' to measure the impact in a systematic and rigorous way (Case Study, authors' interview with case study area officer, 2007a). Indeed, the officer conceded that, for example, the survey questions did not necessarily enable them to make a direct link between the initiatives implemented and the social outcomes achieved. Nevertheless,

the interviewee continued by asserting that it is still the ‘best and the most comprehensive thing we’ve got’ in terms of measuring the impact of community engagement strategies.

One further concern in relation to the case study community engagement and community empowerment initiatives we have described here is that our research found that material collected during consultation exercises was not always utilized to its full potential due to lack of time and a formal channel for its inclusion. There appears to be a frustration among the practitioners that material collected through consultation exercises is not always easy to analyse and link to policy. This perhaps highlights the tension between trying to involve residents and capture their views through more innovative participatory mechanisms, and then how to translate such evidence into policy.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Community engagement and empowerment have and continue to be given central importance across a range of policy areas in recent years in the UK. Innovative strategies have been put in place to engage communities in local policy making. There is often, it seems, a presumption that community engagement and empowerment are a ‘good thing’. However, the purpose, consequences and limitations of engagement have not been delineated and the location of power has not been made transparent. There has been a failure to elaborate on precisely how community engagement delivers policy and benefits to those people who live in a particular area.

In the specific NDC regeneration case study our research has shown that there have been numerous innovations in community engagement and community empowerment. The available qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that there have been increases in the level of community engagement and empowerment though this has levelled off. Moreover, where residents have been involved in making decisions that affect their local community, it is not always apparent what impact their input has had in terms of policy outcomes. A more focused analytical approach could have built profiles of individual involvement, and analysis of policy decisions could have been conducted.

Across all the NDC areas the number of residents who feel they can influence decisions has remained relatively low, but residents feel that their areas have improved. Evidence also suggests that people feel that they can influence decisions and can get involved should they choose to, but this is a very different form of local policy making from the version imagined in the rhetoric of the NDC programme. Perhaps, after all, many people are looking for both leadership, as well as an opportunity to input on issues that affect them, but they may not be looking to be leaders themselves. In this sense, as Lowndes and Sullivan (2008) argue in relation to the level of governance, ‘neighbourhoods can’t do everything’. It is notable that the National Evaluation of the New Deal has highlighted how in reality from its conception the NDC programme was perhaps unrealistic about the nature and scale of its community engagement commitment—‘perhaps in launching the programme too much attention was paid to the failures of previous ABIs to engage with their local residents and too little to the costs and consequences of such a heavy commitment to community engagement’ (CRESR, 2005a).

In the UK, policy making is a complex process often with a multitude of stakeholders and decision-making forums and gateways (John, 1998). As such, from a community policy-making perspective it is vital to document where public involvement is located in the policy pathways that exist within an organization. Burns, Heywood and Wilde

(2004) and Wilson and Wilde (2003) have rightly highlighted the complexity of measuring community engagement. They have developed example audit tools for benchmarking community participation in the area of regeneration. While these tools have been piloted and refined it is not clear how far they, or suitable equivalents, have been adopted and integrated into the policy-making process. Burns, Heywood and Wilde (2004) highlighted that institutional leadership and commitment to auditing community input was of central importance. Moreover, techniques such as Social Network Analysis could be used to examine links between residents and to practitioners and how they may change over time. Decision analysis could be conducted in order to map out exactly how decisions are made. This could also include measuring the impact of involvement in policy making on the individual residents themselves. Research by Lowndes, Stoker and Pratchett (2006) has also involved the development of a diagnostic tool which provides a guide so that organizations can examine their participation infrastructure. Skidmore, Bound and Lownsborough (2006) also suggest an innovation whereby funding for regeneration is committed but provided only incrementally (i.e., initial funding is given but this is a limited amount which is only increased over a given period in relation to meeting specific development objectives) thus allowing a programme to develop from the bottom up. This may particularly benefit the development of community involvement in the specific policy-making area where it is desired. Barnes *et al.* (2008) suggest having local governance registers listing the governance bodies in a particular area. This would help inform citizens of the policy-making framework and overcome any confusion of agencies and organizations, which has been highlighted by Russell (2008) and Barnes *et al.* (2008).

All new forms of community-led governance need to take account of the limitations of time, resources, expertise and responsibilities of participating citizens. Otherwise the public input into the policy-making process is, at best, left in the hands of what are often termed the 'usual suspects' or who Richardson (2008) in her research on community self help has renamed 'gold dust'. If this is the case the focus should be on identifying what has enabled such 'usual suspects' to become so involved, and how this can be drawn on to involve others. A key part of this is the enablement of public involvement through providing access to the information required to take a valid role in policy making. This links with Skidmore, Bound and Lownsborough's (2006) suggestion of giving more power to those who are active. Such an approach may itself engender a culture of community engagement. More power may encourage more people to be active. One of the main reasons given for non-participation is a belief that there will be little response or impact. Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker (2006) highlight evidence of councils having cultures of top-down policy making that do not overtly support community engagement and community empowerment.

We do not doubt the resources, commitment and hard work of practitioners that have gone into engaging residents and also the efforts of numerous residents themselves. However, while good governance practices may have been put in place, this does not automatically mean that those participating are making the decisions free from external and internal constraints. In order to embed the pluralism required for community-based governance, the on-going assessment and documenting of community input into policy making needs to be made a priority. Otherwise so-called community-led programmes are vulnerable to criticisms that community engagement is merely a legitimizing device. We are not suggesting adding further layers of bureaucracy to the policy-making process, but

highlighting the need to put in place mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability. This would be a first step to building workable structures for community policy making, where the people involved are making and are therefore responsible for the decisions taken.

In the UK, the legal requirements on public bodies to consult and involve citizens continue to be developed. For this reason, it is essential that a robust framework for evaluating the impact of engagement is developed so that the lessons of the NDC programme can be applied to other initiatives. Our view is that all consultation contacts with the local population should be part of a coherent and robust engagement and evidence framework that is linked to the overall programme. Consultations should be transparent about the connection, or lack of connection, to policy. The status of the input and how the evidence is to be analysed should be made clear to the participant. If there is a link to policy making, then this should be made clear even where the type of data collected is unconventional, such as, for example, via a video diary room or a road show event. Without this approach such evidence can easily be overlooked or at best dismissed in the policy process in relation to complex policy decisions. If the consultation is in fact merely a public relations exercise, a tool for generating policy ideas or for providing input into a research strategy, then this should again be made clear. Otherwise in the longer term the organization is going to struggle to establish an effective dialogue and relationship of trust with the local population.

Without a robust infrastructure of resources and support for those citizens involved, and transparent methods of scrutiny and impact assessment of how decisions are taken, citizen-led governance is not sustainable. Merely informing people about what is going on and/or inviting people to join in and govern by attending meetings and boards is too simplistic. Moreover, if there is only limited transparency of inputs, processes and outcomes, many of the positive impacts of community engagement and empowerment maybe going unrecognized.

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Notes

1. For further discussion see Duffy, Vince and Page (2008) and Skidmore, Bound and Lownsbrough (2006).
2. See Brannan, John and Stoker (2006).
3. For more general discussion see Russell (2008), Lawless (2004), and Newman (2005).
4. Data on the performance of NDCs in relation to these themes can be found on the National Evaluation website at http://extra.shu.ac.uk/ndc/ndc_data.htm.

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