

The Challenges of Community Planning for the Community and Voluntary Sector in the Current Climate: A Road Well Travelled?

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Introduction:

This topic is of particular interest in Scotland, but the localism approach which it represents has become a key policy priority, particularly at local level, across the UK and beyond. My response draws on relevant policy literature, and my own knowledge of the field; but I also refer to the work of two former students who were employed as Community Planning Officers in two different local authorities near Edinburgh and who have written about their dilemmas in reconciling policy and practice in community development work (Fraser, 2012; Scott, 2012).

I am going to summarise what appear to be the main concerns, criticisms and challenges of localist approaches to policy, although these are by no means exhaustive and relate to the Scottish context in particular. I will then place this approach within the wider context and look at how these challenges might be addressed.

In relation to the metaphor of ‘the road, which is the title of this talk, the question arises as to whether this the road already well-travelled or is it uncharted territory? If it looks like the road we know, but it turns out not to be, we may lose our way without realizing it until too late.

1. The Challenges of Community Planning

I want to start my comments with a quote from a publication from the North Edinburgh Social History Group *Never Give Up: A community's fight for social justice* (2011). This is for two reasons: it establishes historical connections – these kind of partnership initiatives are indeed a road well-travelled for this particular community; and because it is a response from those who are weary of travelling that same road and ending up not only in the wrong place, but forgetting where they were heading in the first place, and have decided to take a different road altogether, or simply stay at home:

Ironically, the policy to promote community engagement and community participation in local communities, appears to have contributed to a decline in community activism in our area. ... activists [were concerned] about the numbers of meetings they were being expected to attend which left them with very little time to participate in grass roots initiatives. New community participation structures were put in place in the hope that the new system would allow more people to become actively involved in local decision-making. Today it's much harder to get to and debate with the real decision makers.... When people stop speaking out, democracy dies. (Never Give Up: a community's fight for social justice, 2011)

I suppose the first challenge of community planning, then, is whether it *does* mean that more people become actively involved; whether it encourages and supports democratic participation or whether there is a danger that it actually does the opposite in silencing or even extinguishing local democracy. If this is the case, then there is a broader question about what it's actually *for* and who benefits.

First some key markers in the move towards community governance and the part community development is expected to play in facilitating it:

2004 Local Government Scotland Act, Scottish Government Establishes Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs)

Community Planning is a process which helps public agencies to work together with the community to plan and deliver better services which make a real difference to people's lives.

2007 Concordat between Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and Scottish government establishing Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs) under which Community Planning partners agree strategic priorities, focusing on agreed outcomes.

SOA's need to show clearly how locally agreed outcomes contribute to the Scottish National Outcomes. They need to be supported by performance management arrangements.

2008 Scottish Empowerment Action Plan, Scottish Government/Convention of Scottish Local Authorities

Community Empowerment is a process where people work together to make change happen in their communities by having more power and influence over what matters to them.

2009 Scottish Community Learning and Development Council Established as the professional body for Community Learning and Development (CLD). Develops standards for community engagement in Community Planning Partnerships.

2011 Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services

Reforms must aim to empower individuals and communities receiving public services by involving them in the design and delivery of the services they use.

2012 The Government's National Performance Framework sets out the strategic objectives for all public services, including those delivering CLD.

CLD's specific focus should be:

- 1. improved life chances for people of all ages, through learning, personal development and active citizenship;*
- 2. stronger, more resilient, supportive, influential and inclusive communities.*

2012 Strategic Guidance for Community Planning Partnerships, Scottish Government

CLD is an essential means of delivering Scottish Government priorities ... The implementation of this guidance must be led by CPPs, with support from Government bodies ... and with national and local Third Sector partners. It should form an integral part of public service reform, ensuring that Community Planning provides the vehicle to deliver better outcomes in partnership with communities.

This led to a further professionalization of CLD as a public service in pursuit of government priorities, and it has been subject to a professional registration system.

So, we have a developing culture of 'public service reform' and 'empowering communities'. The question is in what ways these things are connected, in what context, and with what degree of power. Kaela Scott's summing up of the situation is as follows:

In practice ... [the Scottish Government] retain the functions of metagovernance tightly within their own state apparatus, creating a strong strategic framework in which any operational freedom devolved to other agencies is disciplined firstly by national priorities and targets, and secondly by national systems of monitoring and reporting. ...

exemplified by the Concordat between the Scottish Government and Local Government (2007) which has framed the development of Community Planning under their administration; charging public services in each local authority area to develop a Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) which, while informed by an assessment of local priorities and needs, will be aligned with and accountable to national outcomes and indicators. (Scott, 2012)

This has been described as a ‘tight-loose-tight’ approach to democratic governance involving: *tight* national objectives and priorities with clearly specified targets on jobs, health, education, crime and so on; *loose* control of local agencies to allow local communities room to develop local solutions eg through local strategic partnerships, and *tight* audit and accountability to ensure that targeting is in line with policy priorities and that Best Value and national standards are met. (Somerville, 2005). It is obvious that this approach will produce all kinds of tensions, complications and challenges.

2. Challenges for the community and voluntary Sector

The arguments made by different actors with different interests in community planning come under six broad headings, although they are clearly interconnected and overlap in some instances: democratic, political, economic, organizational, ideological, cultural

The democratic argument: Challenges

The democratic argument for Community Planning Partnerships and other local governance initiatives is that communities will have a greater say in the decisions on public services which affect them. The Community Empowerment plan goes further in ‘unlocking enterprising communities’, including community right to buy and asset transfer, moving towards a model of community control. Against this, there are a number of counter arguments:

1. The dominant model of community empowerment as it is framed in policy is quite clearly based on increasing citizen participation in the practices of government rather than on independent community action as a means of informing and changing practices of government. This is evident from the tight-loose-tight approach which some have characterized as a ‘smothering embrace’. It is also the conclusion of a major research report into localization processes in the UK as a whole, including Scotland, 4 or 5 years into the process. (Painter et al, 2011) In other words, the community is there to serve the priorities of government rather than vice versa.

2. One important democratic concern, therefore, is that local groups become preoccupied with the business of the state (Meade, 2005) at the expense of canvassing or representing local issues in any serious way. This restricts the political space for communities to raise those issues which are of most concern

3. An important extension of this point is that those forces which are most powerful and influential in terms of governance (eg market forces) do not lend themselves to democratic accountability and so a crucial aspect of decision-making about public services is not directly visible at a level that this kind of participative democracy can address.

4. There are wider democratic questions about the political status of democratically-elected councillors in these processes of empowerment; in which they appear to occupy an equal stakeholder role, rather than that of political representation: ‘Zombie councillors who administrate, but do not govern’. In fact power has been systematically taken away from local government over the past 20 years, partly through concordats such as that drawn up in Scotland. For example, the concordat between government and local authority ringfences government priorities. So if council tax is frozen by government policy, for example, as it has been in Scotland, local authorities are still bound to meet contracted obligations, but with a smaller resource base. This raises questions about local democracy.

At the same time, there is a question about how seriously local government takes local governance. Given the widespread investment in localism, it might surprise you to hear that in a recent poll amongst elected members in Scotland, over 50% agreed that ‘councillors should use their own judgment to make decisions rather than be bound by public participation’ (Orr and McAteer in Scott, 2012). Local councillors are understandably, in some instances, threatened by ‘empowered’ communities.

5. Local people lose their legitimate political representation to various *ad hoc* do-it-yourself groups with limited accountability.

Although representative democracy has always had its detractors, nonetheless, as history reminds us, ordinary people secured with their votes that which they could never afford to buy in the market place or indeed achieve through partnerships: schools, hospitals, community facilities and so on (Fraser, 2012)

In addition, the depoliticizing of local government has reduced the overall quality, in all parties, of those presenting themselves as candidates for local government elections, some of whom even describe themselves with pride as being ‘non-political’.

For all of these reasons, the way in which community empowerment is enacted might suggest that democracy is regarded as simply a top-down managerial procedure to be delivered rather than a bottom-up political process of negotiation in which there are legitimately different interests.

The political argument: Challenges

Community Planning and empowerment initiatives are justified in terms of their value in rationalizing and simplifying what they call ‘a cluttered landscape’. To this end, different tiers of government are given the task to work together with communities as partners to pursue policy priorities.

1. Critics would counter that this assumes that all parties are automatically and always in agreement ie that there is a corporate consensus in which communities set aside

what might be different priorities. There appears to be no real interest in whether these priorities are shared, nor is there any opportunity for communities to dissent or disagree except in the most tokenistic of ways. For example, consultations are framed in ways and timescales that exclude much that is of real local interest. I have heard of instances where issues not related to the priorities (eg a school closure) have been excluded for discussion at local forums for being too political. Nonetheless, the community stamp of approval has become a central means of legitimating the direction of public policy. This is particularly of concern when such processes are used, as they now are, to decentralize decisions about cuts – from ‘make your own decisions’ to ‘make your own *incisions*’.

2. It has been suggested that, through these processes, communities may be unwillingly, or unwittingly, contributing to public service reform for which they may not have voted and which they may consider to be against their long-term interests had they the opportunity to say so. The way in which the process is framed rules out any possibility of questioning the frame itself.

So, it would seem to be the case that political responsibility is being decentralized – communities are being responsabilised – and that power is being significantly centralized – centralized decentralization; centralized localism.

The economic argument: Challenges

It is almost commonplace that all policy is justified primarily in relation to economic objectives for growth and, more recently austerity measures. The Scottish Government’s national performance Framework which drives all policy defines the government’s purpose as ‘to focus government and public services on creating a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth’. Like everywhere else, commercialization permeates everything and trumps everything.

The economic argument for localism in particular is that efficiency savings can be made by a corporate approach, through a move to collaborative or co-production of

services. In addition, the creation of new pathways to outsource, transfer and marketise services and functions means that local organisations and groups are presented as a cheaper means of delivering publicly-funded services through state-managed competition. There are a number of counter arguments:

1. The context of competition is one of decreasing and increasingly targeted public and private funds, so contracts will inevitably drive down wages and standards in order to outbid. Alongside the competitive contract culture, payment by results has discouraged practice which cannot guarantee positive outcomes. This can have the effect of reducing time- and resource-intensive work with vulnerable people even further, with negative economic as well as human consequences in the long run.

2. Communities are regarded as sites of enterprise and investment and Empowerment initiatives are designed to facilitate this process. However, communities must make themselves more attractive to outside investment in ways which may work against community interests and needs. For example, in the boom times, a marina development close to a declining estate agreed to invest in some minor local infrastructure with promises of jobs at the cost of several hundred houses and the loss of prime land. The development has stopped, leaving dereliction and debt in its wake.

3. The change from being activists to becoming entrepreneurs, has had some successes in addressing social need through social enterprises, but it has limited long-term potential in a competitive market for service delivery. In addition, the combination of participatory governance and enterprise can be seen as a double hazard for local organisations as they try to navigate their way through the bureaucratic landscape that constitutes Community Planning on the one hand, whilst creating new and innovative projects on the other.

4. There are further potential hazards which have yet to surface. For example, research consistently shows that those who are most likely to participate in community activities are those with the resources to do so, in terms of time, interest and wealth ie the middle-classes. At the same time, traditional social and political

action around issues of concern in poor and neglected areas has been so absorbed into bureaucratic schemes of one kind or another that many activists have given up or been neutralized. So the question arises as to what happens in areas in which there is a low level of involvement – in poor areas, for example? There is a real fear that services will simply be lost, or that they will be provided by those private companies who are waiting in the wings to step in when the community fails as it is bound to in many instances. (Fraser, 2012)

As Whitfield (2012) sees it ‘The rhetoric of community rights and localism may actually be cover for the accelerated transfer of power ... from service users to commercial contractors’.

In general, there is a fear that business interests have an unequal level of influence over local democracy through planning and procurement processes which are not readily understood by amateurs, and that these will inevitably prevail at the expense of community interests.

The organisational argument: Challenges

Clearly, the system has become streamlined to ensure that all interests are working together towards a common end: ‘better alignment of services and optimal use of resources’. However, a consultation on the Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill conducted in 2012 raised concerns.

The responses highlighted that communities and their representative bodies often feel isolated from the Community Planning process and do not feel that they have much influence in decision-making processes. For many, Community Planning is a mechanistic process for public sector bodies to integrate their operational plans and service delivery and has little to do with genuine community engagement. (Community Empowerment Bill Consultation, 2013)

This suggests a democratic deficit, but it also raises questions as to how Community Planning works, and what are the consequences for community groups and the voluntary sector in general. A number of organizational challenges have emerged:

1. The organizational capacity of local groups to act as a surrogate state and the willingness of voluntary effort to undertake such work is under much discussion. For example, there is a great drive for volunteers, as part of the central task of CLD, but already there are signs that there is a mismatch between what people are required to do and what they are prepared or qualified to do. Relying on goodwill only goes so far.

2. There are also questions about who is attracted to the kind of alien and alienating managerial politics represented by Community Planning, and who is totally put off. It has been argued, for example, that many people are actually deactivated by the ways in which they are expected to 'perform' to the policy script, leaving the way open for a very small section of the community – a 'consultative elite' – who may be well-intentioned and tireless, but who can cause resentment and division. There is already quite a lot of evidence from across the UK and Ireland to support this argument.

3. There are also questions about how well community and voluntary organisations will fare in the competitive tendering processes which underpin localism agendas. Many groups feel have been forced to join the public services delivery market, many reluctantly so.

Already many organisations have lost their funding, been incorporated into larger consortia which try to strengthen their market position by cutting staff and undercutting erstwhile colleagues or partners, or they have adjusted their work to reflect the all-important government priorities. This skews work away from certain kinds of objectives to others: from campaigning or advocacy work, for example, towards service delivery, further diminishing the space for alternative ways of thinking or arguing. For example, Women's Rape and Sexual Abuse Centres have faced swingeing cuts to their work. For over three decades years, these centres have

been providing support to individual women, whilst at the same time advocating and educating for changes in attitudes about gender-based violence and improved services and legal provision for female survivors. In the context of austerity, only person support work is of interest to funders. The restructuring of priorities across the sector can have the effect, if not the intention, of reinforcing the service delivery model at the expense of all others.

4. There are particular hazards in the competitive culture for user-led groups. The necessity to create the most competitive bid often means that the painstaking democratic process of involving users in the decision-making structures of their organisations is simply too slow to be cost-effective. This undermines developments which have been the outcome of historic struggles by marginalized groups to be treated as full members of society. For organisations committed to inclusive practices, the successes of previous democratic struggles can be all too easily stalled or reversed.

5. As some groups become more professionalized, processes of exclusion are consolidated. Those who become most able to effect change commonly become distanced from the communities they seek to represent. (Harrison, 2012) And of course a new layer of managerial staff and consultants has been recruited to develop community leadership in ways which sometimes exacerbate this division.

The last two kinds of argument may be less obvious, even invisible on a day-to-day basis, but maybe of the most long-term significance.

The ideological argument

On the whole, governments do not describe themselves as ideological; they simply are, in the sense that they wish to shape values, attitudes and behaviours as much as to pursue specific policy priorities. Successive governments since the Thatcher government of 1979 in the UK, and governments throughout the world since, have adopted a broadly neo-liberal approach to politics, so much so that it now informs policy in a way which is almost completely taken for granted. This refers to a number

of interlinking processes: reducing state intervention in the economy, opening up new markets in public services and deepening business involvement in public policy making processes.

The community and voluntary sector have been given a central place in policy and they may understandably feel that their contribution has at last been properly recognized. Such increased status may indeed be understood as an expression of successful campaigns to democratize decision-making and to broaden participation in policy. Third sector research suggests however, that there is nevertheless a great general unease about the future:

1. At its best, the move towards localism *can* be regarded as a way of achieving additional leverage for community and voluntary sector groups to have more influence over local services, facilities and development. Equally importantly, though, it can be seen as a way of destabilizing and fracturing public provision to pave the way for further marketization and privatization. (Whitfield, 2012) This has potentially far reaching and long lasting consequences.

2. Every social settlement, in order to establish itself, is crucially founded on embedding as common sense a whole bundle of beliefs as if they are truths – ideas beyond question, assumptions so deep that the fact that they *are* just assumptions is only rarely brought to light (Hall, Massey and Rustin, 2013). We need to think about what has been engrained as common sense in relation to community governance, and how it might if necessary be questioned.

First, the ideological restructuring of welfare and the remoralisation of the individual – that people must look to themselves without reference to wider structures of support, power or domination; to see what were once regarded as public issues (poverty, inequality, poor housing, joblessness) as private troubles. To see how ‘we are all in it together’. To feel responsible and to see rights as a luxury which have to be sacrificed in the face of austerity.

Policy emphasizes a role for community development in empowering, responsabilising and activating citizens to assume identities and functions appropriate to the economic and social climate. Individually, citizens would work their way out of poverty and into inclusion; collectively they would become partners in government (Clarke, in Meade, 2011)

Second, it is becoming regarded as entirely normal for people to work for free: trial shifts, internships, unpaid work experience, community participation. There are now questions about where public participation ends and unpaid work begins. It will in any case undoubtedly have an impact on the possibilities for well-paid local jobs, and on the expectations of getting them. It also acts to discipline the unemployed 'dependents' into accepting no-hours contracts, low wages and the prospect of poor pensions.

Third, it has almost become an accepted fact in public discourse that 'public' is 'bad' and 'private' is 'good' and this is constantly reinforced by reports of unacceptable practices in public institutions and the evils of the dependency culture produced by too generous a benefits system. To see the state as the enemy, or at least as an unwanted encumbrance, is to reduce confidence in collective social and economic solutions as they may be expressed through the state, relying instead on various versions of self-help and market provision. In this sense, the progressive language of community planning can act as a foil for less progressive practices.

The cultural argument: Challenges

The purposes of such initiatives is in part at least to facilitate the restructuring of welfare; pushing responsibility away from the public to the private sector. How all of this changes local practices, local expectations, local demands, traditions of social solidarity and community relations remains to be seen. It can lead to divisions between the 'good/deserving' participating community and 'bad/undeserving' apathetic, disengaged community under constant surveillance from their well-behaved neighbours: leading to demonization and stigmatization, and a bigger gap developing

between the engaged and the estranged (Meade, 2005). Horizontal violence can emerge as scapegoats are sought – whether ‘benefit cheats’, drug-users or immigrants.

3. The current climate

It can be seen that democratic arguments about community participation and empowerment can be easily hitched to particular political and economic objectives. But such change is not always obvious when it’s happening. Rather than a conventional political conflict or struggle where people might conceivably take sides, it can simply spread like a virus which gradually infects everything. Like a Trojan horse, somebody writes, a neoliberal society is one where market objectives and practices are in place, and in *us*, before we see its full manifestation and it’s too late.

It has been argued that we are now in a third phase of neoliberalism of which governance is an important part (Whitfield, 2012). The first started in the 1980s and saw the wholesale privatization of public industries and utilities (rolling back the state); the second in the 1990s saw the process of modernization in which public services were subject to ‘consumer choice’ and (rolling out) market models and processes, and the state took on the role of enabler – steering not rowing; the third phase sees the latest mutation of the privatization project in the turn to asset transfer (rolling over) the public good. This third phase may actually be facilitated by bureaucratic participatory mechanisms, competitive contracting and compliance mechanisms through which public goods and assets end up in the private sector.

4. Addressing the challenges

There are sharp tensions between representative and participatory democracy – and so there should be because, ideally, they keep each other alive. This may be where some opportunities lie for democratic practice.

The language of community has always needed translation. It is never quite clear what or who the community is. In policy documents it takes its meaning from what function it is expected to fulfill at any given time. Historically, it has been drawn upon to justify all kinds of things, by all kinds of political interests – it is always

contested (Shaw, 2008). This means that it can also be given different meaning by those who want empowerment to mean a shift in power rather than responsibility. In this sense, the language of empowerment may offer some opportunities to do this but only under certain conditions. The two former students I mentioned at the beginning have developed their arguments in rather different ways, taking into account local experience, and the particularities of their context, and both offer distinctive responses in relation to the possibilities for real empowerment and democratic participation. Broadly speaking these approaches could be described as follows:

Strategic participation: Making discriminating decisions about how and when to participate in ways which strengthen communities against the market. (Invited spaces of policy: those spaces provided and mediated by the powerful):

- Making the structures work more democratically and effectively
- Holding politicians and institutions to account
- Ensuring democratic processes have considerable grassroots support
- Challenging manipulative or tokenistic forms of engagement
- Capacity building for communities to be ‘influential’ in challenging problem definitions and articulating alternatives
- Testing the claims and limits of partnership: the duty to consult also means that the state needs communities, thereby giving communities an advantage in negotiations.

Strategic non-participation: Supporting independent autonomous groups in making demands upon the state as a means of strengthening it against the market. (Demanded spaces of politics: where groups can collectivise and articulate their concerns and desires in political terms):

- Strengthening democratic processes outside governance structures
- Promoting and encouraging active forms of civil society to organise and engage in and/or outside existing structures

- Challenging the way in which democracy is framed in policy and practice
- Making demands on the state
- Highlighting the destructive role of the market and articulating alternatives
- Providing counter-information to balance the dominant narratives
- Conserving public services through campaigns

Both advocate a form of working *in* and *against* the state but also, and critically, as the state is being colonized by the market, there may be a necessity to work *for* the state (if we are not to lose it) by helping to construct an authentic settlement between policy agendas and the aspirations and needs of communities. This will require not just willing and capable communities, but also willing and capable political representatives and institutions. Participatory governance could provide the basis for such a political project, the question is whether it will.

There are always dilemmas and choices for community workers and community groups in any case. I will leave the last words to the North Edinburgh Social History Project:

We need to remind ourselves how capable we are as a community. We are organisers, campaigners and people with knowledge, experience and skills... In the past we had the confidence to take on the establishment when we were unhappy about things and we can do that again. (Roberta Blaikie, long-term activist from North Edinburgh: Never Give Up)

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