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VIEWPOINT

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# Power to the People? How to Judge Public Participation

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## **Power to the People? How to Judge Public Participation**

Community involvement now seems secure as a key principle of urban regeneration and neighbourhood renewal. It is enshrined in legislation and policy guidance (DTLR, 2001), serves as a foundation of national strategy (SEU, 1998) and is recognised as a fundamental civil right (Richardson, 1983). It promises a host of benefits, from better policy through greater social cohesion to enhanced self-respect for those who get involved.

However, there are also signs of some disquiet. At an ideological level, there are those who claim that involvement is merely part of the systematic oppression of the most excluded sections of the population, whereby a small minority are incorporated into the workings of the state (Cooke & Kothari, 2001) while others see it as part of the obfuscatory language of repressive neoliberalism (Callinicos, 2001). At a more pragmatic level, there are long-standing concerns among decision makers that involvement can be a very costly business that does little more than provide 'the usual suspects' with another opportunity to advance their views and complicate what is already a difficult process of public choice (Foley & Martin, 2000). Finally, community involvement initiatives are frequently criticised for being half-hearted and tokenistic, poorly resourced and badly planned (Alcock, 2004) and in study after study the practice of community involvement in urban regeneration does not seem to match up to the theoretical benefits (Burton *et al.*, 2004).

Is there any way, however, to move beyond the rhetoric and begin to weigh up the costs and benefits of involvement in a more rigorous and

empirical way? I believe there is, but to do so we must begin by considering some of the theoretical principles that underpin involvement. I also believe we will find it easier to proceed by replacing the term 'community involvement' with 'public participation'. As Chanan (2003) has shown, community involvement introduces some unhelpful ambiguity by referring to both the involvement *of* communities in local decision making and to involvement *in* community affairs, as well as raising the perennial question of what we mean by community.

Some claim that a hallmark of any democratic system of government lies in the right of people affected by a decision to have an opportunity to participate in some way in the making of that decision (Richardson, 1983). No doubt many of us would agree that if we were drawing up a bill of rights, the right to participate would figure prominently. However, we really need to explore in more detail the questions thrown up by this general statement of the civil right to participate. In particular, we need to think about who can claim this right, which types of decision it applies to and what type of participatory relationship we envisage. In answering these questions, not only will the general right become tangible and enforceable, but we will also be better placed to test whether the good things claimed of participation are actually realised in practice.

### *Who Should Participate?*

Although in some cases public participation initiatives seem to be mainly about trying to engage the hardest to reach groups, if we think about who has the right to participate, then the starting point is usually something along the lines of 'everyone affected by a decision'. This may well be quite easy to determine if we are talking about physical development proposals. But what about decisions on marginal tax rates, which affect everyone in the country? Gordon Brown is unlikely to extend formal participation rights to every current and future taxpayer in the country when drawing up his budget.

Typically, in debates on who should participate, the most common concern is usually about representativeness. One obvious way of dealing with this is to use random selection techniques that allow us to generalise from a sample to a wider population within known confidence limits. However, although random selection for civic duties served the ancient Athenians well and continues to be used in selecting trial juries, many politicians – and indeed members of the public – prefer more purposeful methods of distributing the right to participate. If we want to avoid the biases inherent in self-selection, then we need some other criteria, and demographic factors remain popular in ensuring a balance of gender, age, ethnicity, class and so on. Nevertheless, there may be situations when we are more interested in securing the participation of people who are knowledgeable and interested in a topic than in achieving a demographically representative sample of disinterested and ill-informed citizens. Of course, another way to address this issue of knowledge

and understanding is to use deliberative techniques in which a group (usually a small group in comparison with all those affected) is given the space to develop its views over time with the support of subject experts and process facilitators. The key point is that we cannot sensibly claim that any one of these principles of selection is inherently better than any other: what is best will depend on other factors, such as the type of decision and the nature of the participatory relationship.

### *Which Type of Decision?*

The Chancellor's decisions about taxation regimes – whether taxes should be direct or indirect, levied on sales or on incomes, or be mainly progressive or regressive – can be seen as strategic decisions and, most significantly, they constrain subsequent decisions. In the field of regeneration policy, strategic decisions include those about the share of the overall budget to be given to area-based initiatives, the use of deprivation indicators to allocate resources and the role of the private sector in driving renewal. At a lower level there are programmatic decisions, which relate to more specific policy choices. For example, what should be the minimum densities required of brownfield housing schemes or what is the best way to stimulate local economic growth in peripheral estates? Finally, there are decisions about individual cases in which the rules and principles agreed at the strategic and programme level are applied in particular cases. So, we might be faced here with decisions about which embryonic firms should occupy the incubator units in a business centre; which local contractor should be used to carry out small-scale housing repairs in a block of social housing; or which training provider will be selected to deliver a capacity building programme to local residents joining a partnership board.

Not only do more strategic decisions constrain programme decisions, which in turn constrain individual decisions, but the range of people directly affected by these decisions varies. More people will usually be affected by strategic decisions and fewer will be affected by individual decisions. This in turn influences other aspects of public participation. For example, in deciding who can participate in a strategic decision, it would be difficult to deny that all those living within a particular jurisdiction are in some way affected by the decision and hence have a legitimate right to be involved. At the other end of the scale, the individual decisions about the granting of contracts or tenancies could reasonably be claimed to affect a much smaller group of people and so limit the right to participate to that group. In this case, it might be legitimate to say to the population at large: this decision is really none of your business and we have no moral or legal obligation to allow you to participate.

Of course, the real issue for most managers of participation schemes is not that they have to deny people the right to participate, but rather that they should ensure that the right to participate is actually exercised by those that have it. In practical terms the problem becomes one of recruitment

rather than selection. Imagination and commitment are required in convincing people that participation is worth the effort and, paradoxically, this can be most difficult in relation to more nebulous strategic-level discussions. At this level it is all too easy to strike the wrong balance between matters of broad principle and detail and to confuse and deter the lay public.

### *The Participatory Relationship*

Ever since Sherry Arnstein (1968) described her 'ladder of participation' with its eight rungs stretching from therapeutic involvement to citizen control, we have been used to thinking about different types or degrees of participation. Unfortunately, her ladder metaphor has also led us to think that some of these relationships are inherently more democratic than others and that we should aspire to climb her ladder towards participatory heaven. Many have criticised Arnstein's analytical device and proposed alternatives, but it has proved difficult for most to escape the metaphor of the ladder and all its limitations (Burns *et al.*, 1994), although McLaverty's (1999) matrix is a good start.

However, as political historians remind us, it was only in the last few hundred years that democracy ceased to be a term of abuse (Macpherson, 1966) and there is still a tendency to assume that representative forms of government are somehow less democratic than more direct forms. In practice, direct democracies have only really applied to very small societies in which political participation was limited to a privileged elite, usually of male property owners.

Nevertheless, it seems clear that if more responsibility for *making* decisions is given to participants then the question of who has the right and the duty to participate assumes greater significance. If it is made clear from the outset that a process of consultation is being undertaken and that the final decision will be taken by others – who we hope are themselves democratically elected and accountable – then it does not matter quite so much if not many choose to take up their opportunity to participate. On the other hand, if responsibility for taking a decision is passed to the people, then the extent to which they participate can be crucial. Think of the importance of turnout in any referendum and how the legitimacy of any decision taken on this basis can be seriously compromised by low turnout.

Common sense, backed by research (Ashworth, 2000), shows that clarity around the nature of the participatory relationship is most important. Most participants prefer to know how their input is going to be used by whoever is going to take a decision, and complain most bitterly when they feel they have been misled about the nature of the exercise. Although there are signs that the public at large is showing less trust in politicians and the institutions of government, the misrepresentation of public participation exercises is more often the result of poor planning than it is of cynical manipulation. We should also take note of research that

demonstrates a marked reluctance by the general public to be given responsibility for some public policy decisions and a preference for the resolution of many 'wicked issues' to be left in the hands of those who choose to be politicians (Abelson *et al.*, 1995)

### *A synthesis?*

If we draw these three strands together we will be in a better position to understand what our notional civil right to participate might mean in practice. And by thinking more carefully about who should be involved, in what type of decisions and on what basis, we will be better able to set sensible criteria for judging success.

In some cases, where the right to participate extends to all citizens, the challenge is to ensure that as many as possible exercise this right. But how many, or what proportion, would need to participate for an exercise of this type to be judged successful and what benchmarks should we use in making these judgements? And what are we to make of low levels of participation? For some this is clear evidence of public contentment while for others it is a sign of apathy and alienation. Still others claim that it demonstrates a lack of real commitment by government at whatever level to draw participants into the fold. In situations where it is more important that issues are explored in depth only a few will be able to participate and the key question becomes which method of selection should we choose? We need to remember also the difference between selecting people because they are representative in some way of a larger population and selecting people to act as representatives of others, with all the obligations of communication and accountability that go with it.

Participation matters, but we still do not know as much as we should and could about how it matters. Participation is also costly and there are those who argue that these costs outweigh any benefits and make it an expensive indulgence. There are also those who see it as something of a velvet glove, housing an iron fist that continues to hammer away at the welfare gains of an earlier post-war settlement. Both may be correct, but unless we are able to test more systematically the claims made for participation, we will have to rely on rhetoric more than evidence in making our judgement.

By taking a more sophisticated view of what participation means in theory, we will not only be better placed to exercise our civil right to participate in practice, but we will also be able to test some of the claims made for participation more rigorously. In the long run this will be the best defence against those who say it is a costly indulgence and might in practice give more power to the people.

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