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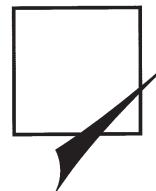
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How Would We Know What Works?

Context and Complexity in the Evaluation of Community Involvement

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In 2002 the UK Home Office commissioned a review of research on community involvement in area-based initiatives. This found comparatively few studies that set out to measure the impact rather than the extent and nature of involvement and hence few answers to the question of what works. This article takes that finding as its starting point and sets out to develop a more robust framework for evaluating the impact of community involvement. It notes the difficulties inherent in using a classic experimental design to evaluate processes as complex as community involvement and proposes a theory-based approach. To this end, it critically reviews the underlying theoretical claims of both community involvement and of area-based initiatives. An evaluation framework is then developed in which the potential benefits of greater involvement are considered for each stage of the process of developing an area-based initiative and positive and negative contextual factors are identified.

KEYWORDS: area-based initiatives; community involvement; complexity; context; urban regeneration

Introduction

As part of its ambitious programme to modernize public services, the UK government has placed great emphasis on the value of community involvement in decision-making, especially at the local level (Blunkett, 2003a; Taylor, 2003). This 'new localism' (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2004; Raco, 2003; Walker, 2002)

is proclaimed as a positive response in the face of the serious challenges to many of the assumptions of democratic legitimacy held by and about the institutions of government at all levels (Barber, 1984; Hirst and Khilnani, 1996). Greater public or community involvement is taken to offer the prospect of better policy-making, to foster better relations between the state and civil society and to promote the formation of social capital. As a former UK Home Secretary claimed, 'local communities are just better at dealing with their own problems' (Blunkett, 2003b:1). But community involvement is not without its ambiguities, nor is it above criticism. For example, Cooke and Kothari (2001) set out a wide-ranging critique of participation as a significant element of aid and development policy and in a recent review of UK urban policy Chanan (2003: 15) describes the 'unique but puzzling position' whereby community involvement is a requirement of virtually every policy concerned with local government and public services but at the same time lacks any concrete targets that might give it clear focus and direction.¹

Within government there is also a continuing commitment to the principle of evidence-based policy, with its rallying cry of 'what matters is what works'. However, there are signs that this is beginning to soften with growing reference to 'evidence-informed policy' (Nutley et al., 2003) and to the development of a more sophisticated conception of knowledge management in policy-making (Boaz and Ashby, 2003). An important aspect of knowing what works entails carrying out reviews of existing evidence before conducting new research. Systematic reviewing of existing research evidence is not new but has developed rapidly in the UK and elsewhere over the last decade, to the point that it is beginning to rival primary research as a source of evidence for policy. It is now much improved, both as a theoretically informed methodology and as a useful practice, and there are signs that within academia it is taking on the characteristics of a subdiscipline with dedicated conferences, journals and higher degree programmes (Boaz et al., 2002; Grayson and Gomersall, 2003; Macdonald, 2003).

These two commitments – to community involvement and to drawing on systematically reviewed evidence of what works – came together in 2002 when the Home Office commissioned from the authors a systematic review of the literature on community involvement in area-based initiatives (ABIs). The aim was to discover from the literature on community involvement and from studies of ABIs, 'what works, what does not work and what looks promising' (Burton et al., 2004).

The review was confined mainly to studies of ABIs in the UK and to attempts to evaluate in some way the impact of community involvement. Very few studies matched these two criteria: indeed, one of the most striking features of the studies included in the review was the lack of adequate description of the research design or methods used. The general tenor of most of the studies was that policy would be better in some way if there was more public involvement, although it was rarely specified what this might look like in practice or how much more involvement was needed to trigger it. Many studies described shortcomings in the strategies and approaches taken to achieve greater involvement but very few set out to examine the impact in cases where greater involvement had been achieved. In short, although community involvement is held by many to be an essential

ingredient in the successful delivery of policy objectives, we found few studies from the field of ABIs that set out to test this assumption in any systematic way and none that succeeded in doing so.² This article takes this finding as its starting point and considers why the impact of community involvement on complex interventions like ABIs has proved so difficult to research and evaluate.

The rest of the article is in three sections. In the next we briefly review some of the major debates about the evaluation of complex and multi-faceted interventions. In particular we look at the well-rehearsed problems of applying experimental designs to the evaluation of complex interventions and at the scope to overcome these problems with more pluralistic approaches that draw on emerging theory-based approaches. The article then moves on to sketch the various theories underpinning both ABIs and the principle of public involvement before drawing them together into a more robust framework for evaluating the claims made for public involvement in ABIs. In the final section, the article concludes by reflecting on the particular difficulties of evaluating the impact of community involvement due to its reliance on both substantive and procedural justifications as well as addressing the linked issues of complexity and context.

Evaluation

As experienced policy researchers, we are aware of the danger of adopting the rather lofty tone noted by Rossi et al. in their reference to: 'authors of review articles in applied research journals who attempt to synthesise available research on the effectiveness of various interventions [and] regularly deplore the poor methodological quality of evaluation studies and urge a higher standard' (1999: 32).

While practical, budgetary and political considerations clearly limit the scope of many evaluations and sometimes inhibit the use of the most appropriate research designs and methods, we believe that from our review we are able to offer some critical observations on the way studies of public involvement in ABIs have been framed and about how they might be better framed in the future.

What, then, might have been standing in the way of well-designed evaluations of the impact of public involvement? As we will describe in more detail, public involvement is in general justified on two grounds – procedural and substantive. The procedural strand claims involvement as a fundamental civil right whose benefits derive from the application of due process in reaching public decisions. Civil rights of this type do not require empirical justification, although they can be investigated empirically to determine their practical application. However, the substantive strand does make a number of claims about the tangible benefits flowing from involvement and these could in principle be investigated empirically. In our review, though, we found very few instances of rigorous empirical investigation of what impacts policy-makers or citizens within ABIs were seeking, possibly because researchers appeared to take for granted that the value of community involvement was not to be challenged. Further, it is difficult to design plausible and feasible evaluations of something so complex as community involvement in ABIs and there is no clear resolution to an ongoing debate about the fundamental

principles underpinning the evaluation of such complex initiatives. As Pawson and Tilley (1998a: 73) put it,

experimentalists still manipulate and control, realists prefer to muse on causal configurations, constructivists choose empathy and negotiation, auditors balance costs with benefits, post-modernists lounge playfully in linguistic ellipses, and so on and so forth.

We hope, nevertheless, to make a small contribution to getting beyond this impasse by focusing on the design of evaluations of community involvement rather than on abstract principles of methodology.

From its origins in clinical trials and because of the elegant simplicity of its expression, the research design traditionally favoured by those seeking answers to the question ‘what works?’ has been the classic experimental design (Campbell, 1969; Oakley, 1998a, 2000). By comparing the circumstances of an experimental and a control group before and after an intervention, proponents claim to be able to isolate causal elements, develop explanations and construct more general theories. Although critics have long pointed to the practical difficulties of controlling variables in the social world as they might in the laboratory, and to broader ontological, epistemological and ethical reservations, this design is still held by many evaluators to generate the most robust and reliable evidence of what works (Cook, 2000; Feder and Boruch, 2000; Oakley, 1998b).

In the broad field of urban policy (of which ABIs are an important part) many state-sponsored evaluations strive to achieve some elements of experimental or quasi-experimental design in taking before and after measurements of the areas subject to intervention. However, few of the other defining characteristics of this approach are achieved in practice and Bradford and Robson (1995) have described the main difficulties in designing any robust evaluation of the cumulative impact of a succession of urban policy interventions along these lines. Nevertheless, the principles of the experimental or quasi-experimental approach continue to find favour with the sponsors of many urban policy evaluations and are enshrined in the UK Treasury’s Green Book on evaluation (HM Treasury, 2003) which informs the specification of many evaluations of central government policy interventions.

Our review found no cases of evaluations of ABIs and community involvement that adopted the principles of experimental design in which the unit of analysis was the ABI and community involvement treated as the experimental or independent variable. Clearly the difficulty of selecting ABIs that were sufficiently similar in all respects other than their approach to community involvement has proved impossible to overcome in practice. The studies included in our review in fact demonstrated vividly that a host of locally variable circumstances – including different local political histories, the quality of professional staff employed or variations in patterns of local economic development – are critical to any nuanced or ‘thick’ understanding of local practice. But at the same time, these local variations all compromise the internal validity of each case and undermine an important principle of the experimental design.

But perhaps the most difficult factor to deal with in this design is the assumption that 'community involvement' is itself a sufficiently tangible and constant phenomenon to serve as an independent or explanatory variable. In fact, it is likely to manifest itself in such radically different ways and to follow such markedly different trajectories in practice that it cannot be used in this way at all. A moment's reflection reveals why this must be so. Community involvement is not so much a substantive form of intervention as a procedural or operating principle. In other words it is not the same as a substantive intervention that claims, for example, that the provision of subsidized training might help unemployed residents obtain jobs or that property-marking might reduce the incidence of domestic burglary. Rather, it reflects a commitment to operate in a different way: to involve more rather than fewer people in the planning and development of the work of an ABI. Thus, greater community involvement might be expected to lead to new ways of framing problems, new solutions to existing problems and new ways of working. But most importantly, while we might be reasonably confident that an ABI will do some things differently as a result of greater involvement, we cannot predict what these will be in practice.

One of the more promising developments in evaluation design in recent years has been the use of theory-based approaches to evaluation. It might be thought that any evaluation must be based in some way on the theoretical assumptions embodied in a programme about how it is going to work. But this has not in fact been the case. While some explicit theory-based evaluations have been conducted over the last 30 years, especially in the USA and in Australia, many more adopt a 'black box' approach. In these, evaluators choose to focus more on the enumeration of inputs, outputs and outcomes without paying much critical attention to the processes by which inputs are turned into outputs and outcomes. However, many more evaluators are now trying to open up these black boxes, make explicit the underlying programme theory and then use this to structure their research and analysis.

In a recent state of the art review, Rogers et al. (2000: 5) offer a useful definition of theory-based approaches, 'PTE [programme theory evaluation] consists of an explicit theory of how a program causes the intended or observed outcomes and an evaluation that is at least partly guided by this model'. But behind this simple definition lies a bewildering variety of practice and even of labels for the very practice. Their review found cases where the programme theory was developed by the programme managers and others where it was developed by the evaluators and some by a combination of the two. In some cases it was developed before the programme was implemented and in some cases after the event. In some cases evaluations were essentially 'theory-testing' evaluations and in others 'action-guiding' evaluations. As to labels, Chen (1990) talks of 'theory-driven evaluations' and identifies seven subtypes, Funnell (2000) advocates a 'programme theory matrix approach', while Rossi et al. (1999) distinguish 'impact theory' from 'process theory' within an overarching conception of 'programme theory'. This is virtually the same as Weiss's (2000) helpful notion of implementation theory and programme theory adding up to a theory of change.

Notwithstanding these complications, theory-based approaches to evaluation appear to offer a way forward in the evaluation of relatively complex interventions in which a classic experimental approach would not be feasible. They have been adopted and promoted by staff at the Aspen Institute in the USA (Connell et al., 1995; Fulbright-Anderson et al., 1998) and in the UK in the evaluation of Health Action Zones (HAZs) (Judge and Bauld, 2001) and of the Rowntree-sponsored 'Communities that Care' initiative (Crow et al., 2004; Farrington, 1997). Of course they are not themselves above criticism (Barnes et al., 2003; Pawson and Tilley, 1998a, 1998b) but some of these difficulties would be mitigated by heeding Sanderson's sensible advice to be alert to the unintended as well as intended consequences of interventions, to recognize the significance of institutional as well as individual and structural factors and to accept that major policy changes sometimes happen suddenly and unpredictably (Sanderson, 2000).

In the next section we set out the key features of the underlying theory of ABIs and of community involvement before developing a more integrated framework for evaluating the relationship between them.

The Theory of Area-Based Initiatives

From the slum clearance programmes of the 19th century through to more contemporary urban regeneration schemes, a major strand of urban policy in the UK has always relied on area-based initiatives to provide a focused or targeted approach to intervention (Burton, 1997; Edwards, 1997). While critics have long pointed to the ecological fallacy embodied in attempts to improve the circumstances of people by investing in places (Spicker, 2001) and to their failure in practice to achieve the intended benefits, ABIs look set to continue as a key vehicle for the delivery of a variety of contemporary policy objectives (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998, 2001).

So, what is the underlying theory or logic that explains how ABIs contribute to urban regeneration or renaissance? At its simplest, the logic of ABIs provides that some parts of towns and cities show clear signs of decline in their economic fortunes, the quality of their physical environment and the social structures that might otherwise improve residents' quality of life. Incomes are low and there is a heavy reliance on state support; the health of the population is poor compared with other parts of the same town or city; people are often fearful of crime and are victims of much anti-social behaviour. Children leave school with few qualifications and hence are likely to experience the same extremely limited life chances as their parents. These areas continue to be ones where few would choose to live and from which many choose to leave given the opportunity.

Previous attempts to tackle these problems have been hindered by being short-term, poorly funded, too narrowly focused on a limited range of problems and centrally imposed. Nevertheless, the main forms of substantive intervention via ABIs have remained broadly the same over the last few decades, even if the significance of some, such as public health, has risen. These main forms of intervention are listed in Box 1.

Box 1. Main Arenas of Substantive Intervention of ABIs

Local economy and labour market
Local housing market
Education, including pre-school provision
Public health
Crime and community safety
Physical environment
Delivery of local public services

The precise detail of what might be done under each of these headings is often less clear in the overall theory, although there is a growing list of suggested interventions. If we take, for example, the heading of the local economy and labour market we might see any number of interventions. Box 2 lists some of these.

Box 2. Projects within the Arena of Local Economy and Labour-Market Interventions

Building incubator units for new firms
Providing business advice services to new firms
Offering cheap loans and grants to new firms
Producing directories of local firms
Advertising and marketing of the area, its firms and its labour force
Providing low or no cost job training schemes for unemployed local residents
Providing job search and interview skills training
Offering subsidies to local employers who recruit unemployed local residents
Providing financial assistance with the costs of being employed, e.g. travel or dependant care costs

Of course, each of these more specific interventions has its own underlying theory and some degree of flux is likely to be found in each element of the overall package of interventions. But the most significant aspect of this general theory of ABIs is not so much the content of these substantive interventions, but the assumptions that a variety of strands must be pursued at the same time, for a reasonable period of time and with a sufficient level of funding. In short, the logic of the intervention as a whole is that it must be joined up, properly resourced and sustained for many years. These operating principles have been evident in the logic of ABIs since the 1970s, but have become more prominent in recent years and have been joined by a fourth principle: that community involvement is an essential ingredient in successful area-based regeneration. Again, this is not an especially novel element in the broad theory of ABIs, but it is now a major component of the discourse and rhetoric of urban policy (Raco, 2003).

The Theory of Community Involvement

What does the underlying theory claim are the benefits of local residents being involved, or perhaps more involved in the development and management of an ABI? Policy statements give some indication, for example, the 2001 local government White Paper says, 'Effective community engagement leads to better decisions and better implementation. Community involvement is a key component of best value' (DTLR, 2001: 20). While in the 2000 White Paper on urban policy the Deputy Prime Minister states:

We believe people should be involved in deciding how their town or city develops. We will only achieve real, sustainable change if local people are in the driving seat from the start, tailoring strategies to local needs. (DETR, 2000: 6)

Similarly, the Audit Commission (2004) claims that community engagement is 'a means of improving public services in deprived areas . . . community involvement is essential to sustaining the gains from regeneration activity in deprived areas, once short-term grants have run out'. By and large these statements do not elaborate on how these benefits are achieved. As our review revealed, there is a tendency simply to assume that once greater involvement is achieved, a number of beneficial consequences will follow as a matter of course.

However, we can construct a broad statement of the ways in which it is assumed these benefits might be realized, drawing on Richardson's (1983) distinction between procedural and substantive claims. While procedural claims invoke arguments of due process in treating involvement as a civil right, the substantive strand claims various developmental and instrumental benefits. The procedural benefits of due process are sustained by moral and logical argument and in this respect do not need empirical evidence to support them. However, the substantive claims are susceptible to empirical testing as it is possible that some of the assumed benefits will not be realized in practice. There are three main claims of substantive benefit:

- to the individuals who get more involved;
- to the wider community or society of which they are a part;
- to the programme or policy decisions in which they get involved.

For individuals who get more involved, it is assumed that they will benefit personally through feeling more valued as a result of their contributions; that they will feel more connected with their fellow residents and that they will develop the valuable capacity to help themselves more effectively in the future as their self-confidence and self-esteem grows.

The communities of which these individuals are a part will also benefit from the greater and denser social ties and connections that are established through greater involvement and which then serve as infrastructure (or social capital) for further positive social relations. A further benefit is seen in the enhanced collective self-confidence and in the wider recognition that problems which might not be amenable to individual solution can be tackled through collective action.

The third area of benefit assumes that better decisions will be made about the substance or content of ABI programmes if local residents are more involved. Decisions will be better in two respects: they will command greater respect from local residents and hence carry more local legitimacy and they will benefit from the insights and local knowledge brought by local residents and acquired through living in the area. Figure 1 summarizes all these claims.

The implications of this theory are considerable for evaluation. By opening up processes of decision-making to a wider range of people and at the same time seeking to accord equal measures of respect to the contributions this variegated population makes, we inevitably move away from the comparatively simple and manageable conceptions of success and failure associated with more closed systems. Participation and involvement are not easily contained and managed and if people are invited to comment on a narrow range of options they will often raise questions about the range itself, ask to be allowed to consider a wider range or even question the very need for intervention. If an ABI does indeed succeed in drawing a wide range of local residents into the plethora of decisions taken about the programme as a whole, about individual projects and about appropriate measures of success and their application, then it is inevitable that this whole process will be more complicated, complex and unpredictable. This may lead to it becoming less manageable and less capable of evaluation, but of course this is no reason for not pursuing it.

Thus, greater involvement introduces greater unpredictability into the political processes of policy development, programme implementation and evaluation. If it did not, there would be little point in going to the trouble of encouraging it. While we might be confident that these processes will be different, we cannot know in advance precisely what these differences will be. We cannot predict, for example, that involving more people in decisions about a local economic development strategy is likely to see greater emphasis placed on the provision of advance factory units than on the establishment of apprenticeship training schemes. In short, all we can predict is unpredictability. In order to lay the foundations for more effective evaluations of the impact of community involvement we need, therefore, to make greater use of theoretical and conceptual constructs to help deal with this complexity and unpredictability.

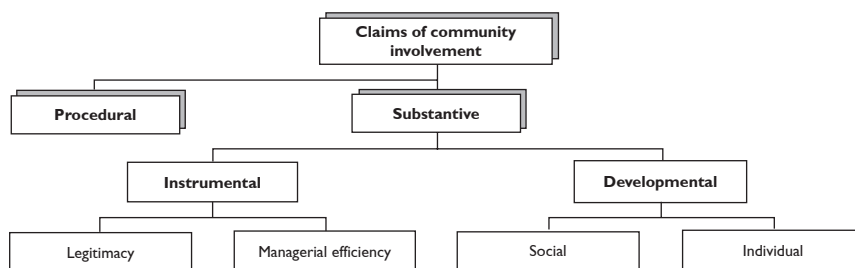


Figure 1. The Claims of Greater Community Involvement

These theoretical constructs themselves may well need to be rather more complex than those used to date, not least in taking into account the context in which involvement occurs in specific cases. Barnes et al. (2003) suggest that in complex systems like HAZs and ABIs context is part of the open system in which the programme is operating and should not be seen as something external to it. Moreover, 'context itself is subject to change as a result of actions and activities beyond the scope of the programme, but also from the intended and unintended consequences of programme implementation' (Barnes et al., 2003: 269).

They have also usefully highlighted the socially constructed nature of contextual factors and demonstrated convincingly that these will change over time as programmes unfold, 'Any attempt to evaluate complex, open systems ... needs to understand how serendipity, chance and internal processes of adjustment affect the way systems created with the express purpose of achieving change operate' (2003: 281).

Thus context becomes an element that varies not only from place to place, but also over time in the same setting, as a result of the ongoing development and implementation of a programme. This leads to a subsequent problem: that it might not then be easy to distinguish causal mechanisms (identified in a programme theory) from contextual factors in the kind of complex systems we are dealing with in ABIs.

In order to develop a more robust evaluation framework we need to bring together these two strands – the theory of ABIs and the theory of public involvement.

A Framework for Evaluating What Works

Like many other policy vehicles, ABIs are often seen as unfolding or developing in a series of stages and each of these stages provides an opportunity for more or less public involvement. Thus in the early stages decisions need to be made about the definition of the area and the drawing of its boundary. This will be followed in most cases by some form of bid to a department of central government for recognition or inclusion in a programme of special funding or the granting of special powers. Broad strategies prepared at this stage will then need to be translated into more detailed operational programmes, which in turn will require the creation of systems of day-to-day management and monitoring. Finally, towards the end of the lifecycle of the ABI, accumulated data will be used to carry out some form of summative evaluation, possibly to use in decisions about the continuation of the initiative, the expansion or contraction of the programme on a national scale or about the application of good practice in other settings.

At each of these stages there is scope for more or less community involvement, and this offers a useful dimension for developing the evaluation framework. We have already noted that in evaluating the procedural justification or theory of public involvement we are not looking to deploy empirical evidence to justify a normative claim. However, empirical research could be used to assess how far the general right to be involved is realized in practice and these points of involvement may help, therefore, in assessing the realization of this principle.

Table 1. Points of Involvement in ABIs and Instrumental Benefits

Points of involvement in the development and management of ABIs	Possible instrumental benefits of involvement	
	Legitimacy	Insight and local knowledge
Selection of area and application for funding or designation	Boundary changed to exclude an area always considered to be part of a different neighbourhood	Local history group included recollections of area in better times as evidence of the potential for improvement
Preparation of broad strategy for intervention	Adjustments made to overall balance between main elements (economic, social, environmental) of the strategy	Health component boosted due to local recollection that old cottage hospital had been first in country to be built
Creation of more detailed operational plan	Plans for skateboard park modified following input from local youth forum	Proposal to train local young people as home security advisers dropped because of fears expressed by elderly residents
Day-to-day management and ongoing monitoring of specific projects	Steering groups with majority of local residents set up for each project	Members of youth forum suggest innovative ways of measuring success of skateboard park
Final summative evaluation of the impact of the ABI and preparation of exit strategy	Accessible summary report of evaluation prepared with help from residents and sent to every household in the area	Local councillors draw on knowledge of other funding sources to maintain support for some projects

The points of involvement are likely to be most useful though in assessing the substantive instrumental benefits claimed for involvement, for these relate specifically to the legitimacy and managerial efficiency of decisions made at different stages of the process. Table 1 illustrates some of these possible benefits at each point of involvement.

While Table 1 shows how the development of an ABI might proceed differently as a result of greater public involvement, it does not necessarily establish that these differences are beneficial. We need, therefore, to consider how to construct appropriate measures of the legitimacy of decisions and of their managerial efficiency, to see whether and how this varies as more people have more input into the decision process.

Regarding the legitimacy of decisions, this is no easy matter as the very stuff of politics lies in asserting and disputing the legitimacy of public decisions. But the point is not to enable the evaluator to judge whether an objectively ‘correct’ decision had been made but to explore the extent to which residents and project managers believe that an ABI management board with community representatives

on it could be trusted to act in the interests of all local residents and to reflect their views when making decisions.

We also need to be able to judge the nature and significance of the contributions brought by local residents to locally made decisions. It is possible to distinguish here between the views of local residents and those of external professionals working in the area and to apply this distinction to views about both the ends and means of local intervention. Again, evaluation has the potential to reveal not an objective truth, but any differences in perspective among the various stakeholders and the extent of any shared perception of desirable ends and means. Evaluators would therefore have to take a clear position on how they reported, analysed and presented different perceptions of success and failure associated with different stakeholders. We return to this in the conclusion.

A further complication lies in the very nature of decision-making. The preceding discussion assumes that decisions are clear-cut and that responsibility for taking a decision is easily attributed. Neither is the case in practice. As the literature on policy-making and implementation amply demonstrates, policy decisions are often shrouded in uncertainty: it is not always clear that a decision has been taken; it is sometimes unclear what the decision is and who has taken it; and its consequences may not be apparent (Goggin et al., 1990; Hill and Hupe, 2002). In these circumstances it can be very difficult to determine the precise contribution of any one individual to a process that is ongoing, iterative and often mysterious to all involved.

Because of the need to speak in detail with a wide range of people involved in the work of an ABI, going back to some of them in order to allow them to reflect on the views expressed by others, intensive rather than extensive research methods are likely to prove most fruitful. Extensive survey techniques that rely on relatively simple questions asked of large numbers of people will rarely yield anything of value to an evaluation of the impact of involvement. Of course proponents of qualitative research (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) observe that this is the case in most fields of social inquiry.

The other claim of substantive benefit is two-pronged and relates to the personal development of people who become more involved in local decision-making and to wider social or community benefits. As we have noted, a number of claims are made for the personal developmental benefits that individuals are likely to enjoy as a result of participating more. It is reasonable to assume that some form of administrative record will exist of those who do take part in various participatory activities. In principle this allows for comparison with a group of people similar in other respects who have not participated, to see whether or not there is any evidence that the more active participants enjoyed higher self-esteem, felt more knowledgeable about local politics and more confident about getting involved in other civic or political activities. It is possible that research using quasi-experimental designs could be employed to test these assumptions and we propose to explore these in further work.

The assessment of any social benefits is rather more complicated. The claim here is that social ties, connections and networks between residents will grow and become stronger as a result of some of them participating. This might be described

as an increase in social capital and a number of surveys have attempted to develop measures of some of these phenomena. For example, the 2000 General Household Survey included a module of questions designed to generate data about social capital (Coulthard et al., 2003) and the Home Office Citizenship Surveys attempt to measure civic engagement, neighbourliness, social networks and social support (Attwood et al., 2003; Prime et al., 2002). However, these have their flaws and there is still much debate about the value of the concept of social capital, let alone its measurement, and this echoes much longer-standing debates about the nature and measurement of 'community' (e.g. Harper, 2001; Roberts and Roche, 2001; Stone, 2001).

Finally, in trying to articulate and utilize the underlying theory of public involvement in ABIs in an evaluation we must consider how to deal in practice with contextual factors. While context clearly matters in trying to understand what goes on in any complex policy intervention, we should not treat it as something fixed and external to the social processes of intervention. As Pawson and Tilley (1997: 216) suggest in respect of their realist framework, evaluators 'need to understand the contexts within which problem mechanisms are activated and in which program mechanisms can be successfully fired'.

So, what might be the contextual settings most conducive to the successful firing of the mechanisms of public involvement? It is here that many of the findings of the studies included in our review are of most help. For what many of them in fact provide is a list of very specific contextual factors that impinge on the theoretical capacity of public involvement to generate the benefits anticipated of it. Thus the capacity to persuade substantial numbers of local residents to become involved in the planning and management of projects intended to benefit them and their neighbours will depend *inter alia* on the history of involvement in the area, the character of the local voluntary sector and the stance taken by local councillors. From their evaluation of HAZs, Barnes et al. (2003) remind us not to assume that these contextual factors will be constant or static. They are likely to change as the operations of the ABI unfold and as people experience for better or for worse the reality of getting involved. This important aspect of complex systems, in which systemic boundaries are not fixed and the relationship between systems and an external environment is variable, adds further complications to the practice of evaluations of this type.

Nevertheless, in Table 2 we set out some of the key contextual factors that might influence the experience and impact of community involvement in ABIs. To illustrate the contingent nature of these factors we suggest possible negative and positive impacts. From the studies included in our review we found many rich descriptions of cases where contextual factors had either facilitated or hindered the development of effective community involvement and affected the ways in which it was experienced by local residents and ABI professionals.

We believe that in preparing for any rigorous evaluation of the impact of community involvement, context matters. The factors described in Table 2 provide a starting point for analysing the range of contextual factors and also remind us that the precise nature of those factors and their impact can be negative or positive.

Table 2. Contextual Factors and Their Possible Impacts

<i>Contextual factors</i>	<i>Possible positive impact</i>	<i>Possible negative impact</i>
History of previous attempts at involvement	Previous successes might raise expectations	Previous failures might engender scepticism
Role of formal representatives and decision-makers, e.g. councillors	Welcome additional input	Fearful of challenge to own role and responsibility
Pattern of devolved decision-making in locality	Local residents already have some positive experience of significant involvement	Previous experience of involvement has fostered cynicism or scepticism
Sociodemographic profile	There is some correlation between certain demographic characteristics and propensity to get involved, see Home Office Citizenship Survey and ESRC Citizen Audit. Causal connections less well established. Note: correlation could be used to calibrate the magnitude of the challenge to promote involvement.	
State of local voluntary and community sector	Constitutes valuable infrastructure for helping organize local input and involvement – foundation for greater involvement	Used as substitute for more extensive involvement Struggles to cope with burden of additional role
Attractiveness of techniques of involvement	Imaginative techniques can harness previously untapped potential – sensible application of ‘horses for courses’ principle	Danger of over-complication and reliance on outside experts – technique-driven
Resources	Enough resources to carry out meaningful programmes of involvement and overcome barriers – time, cash, expertise, commitment, legitimacy	Not enough resources to deliver effective involvement Resources devoted to involvement seem disproportionately high in comparison to resources for service delivery, etc.
Timing	Ground for involvement well prepared in advance	Involvement only introduced after fundamental strategic decisions already taken

Conclusions

We began this article by observing that, while community involvement is assumed by many to be a good thing, there have been few empirical studies that set out to test rigorously whether the ‘good things’ of greater involvement are realized in practice. Our review of studies of community involvement in ABIs supports this conclusion, but in other fields of intervention the situation may be different. This lacuna can be explained by two reasons: a reliance on the rights-based procedural justification for involvement at the expense of substantive justifications which in turn eschew

empirical testing; and the practical difficulties of designing appropriate evaluations of the extremely complex phenomenon of community involvement in ABIs.

The procedural justification of involvement needs no empirical testing, although the practical expression of the principle can and should be described empirically in order to be able to judge the extent of its realization. Although the substantive claims made of community involvement can be investigated empirically, it is not easy to design appropriate research to evaluate these claims. In this article we have attempted to develop a more robust evaluation framework based on the principles of theory-based evaluation and to this end set out some of the claims or logic of community involvement and the underlying theory of area-based interventions. We suggest that while there is likely to be some scope for using quasi-experimental designs in testing the claims of individual and social benefit that come from greater involvement, the substantive instrumental benefits of greater legitimacy and better decision-making are more amenable to case-study designs, perhaps longitudinal, in which complex relationships can be explored intensively using mainly qualitative methods. We are comfortable with this degree of methodological pluralism which is consistent also with Cook's (2000) conclusion that experimental and theory-driven evaluations can be harnessed together in a productive manner. Moreover, this flexible approach is sensible in the light of two other important aspects of community involvement in ABIs: complexity and context.

Complexity stems from at least two factors. First, ABIs are designed to be complex by virtue of their ambition to join up many strands of action into a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Second, community involvement is not straightforward in principle or in practice and thus exhibits conceptual complexity. Furthermore, involvement is not a fixed entity, nor is it a substantive intervention in the same way as building advance factory units or renovating poor quality housing. Rather it embodies a procedural principle and hence is an approach to decision-making that allows and indeed encourages great variability. More or fewer people can be more or less involved in the many aspects of decision-making and the value of their contributions will vary. The particular rules of engagement of any particular episode of involvement will also vary and the nature of the decision to be taken will differ according to whether it affects many or only a few people. Burton (2004) has argued at greater length that any effective analysis of involvement must take the interaction of these three dimensions as its starting point in order to move beyond the simplistic assumption that more involvement is unquestionably a good thing.

By applying the principles of theory-based evaluation we have the potential to bring to the surface the key assumptions about how involvement is expected to make a difference. In the spirit of more participatory or democratic approaches to evaluation (e.g. Fetterman, 1994) we might also allow these key assumptions to be debated by stakeholders, including those people who are presumed to be the ultimate beneficiaries of the intervention.

As evaluators we need to draw on our skills of interpretation and judgement in reconciling the different views of success or failure that are likely to be expressed by different stakeholders. But, whether in discussion with these stakeholders,

or by analysing written policy statements or by conducting extensive surveys of local conditions and opinions, the effective evaluation of public involvement in ABIs must be rooted in the scrutiny of underlying theories or programme logics. It is likely that in surfacing these theories the picture will be complex and inconsistencies and logical flaws may become apparent. So too will fundamental disagreements among stakeholders. As evaluators we cannot ignore these or wish them away. Nor should we ignore the political realities of power differentials among the different stakeholders advancing these claims. However, in evaluating the success of programmes that claim to advance democratic governance, we can only hope that some of the underlying democratic principles of deliberation and open debate are allowed to structure our own work as evaluators.

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Notes

1. Chanan is not entirely correct in this as measures of community involvement or similar expressions are now included in the performance indicators (PIs) used by bodies such as the Audit Commission to monitor the performance of local and health authorities. Of greater significance is the fact that these PIs typically measure only the extent and not the impact of greater involvement.
2. Further details on the methods, inclusion criteria, sources and results from this review can be found in the annexes to the main report, Burton et al. (2004).

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