

What is the added value of the community-based partnership approach? Lessons from the New Deal for Communities programme and beyond. Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, 16th July 2007.

RECOGNISING THE LIMITS TO COMMUNITY-BASED REGENERATION

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Introduction

- Emphasis of New Deal for Communities on 'community-based partnership' approach reflects a growing emphasis on the need for community-based approaches to local regeneration
- Early examples (1990s) included City Challenge, Rural Challenge and Market Towns Initiative (funded through the Single Regeneration Budget)
- Later examples are Communities First (Wales) and New Deal for Communities (England)
- Political parties, journalists and much of the voluntary sector express great faith in the potential for community-based approach to reverse the fortunes of deprived areas
- The history of the community-based approach does not support this belief
- We need to recognise that community-based regeneration can only bring about limited change

The historical record of community-based approaches

- Involving local people in decision-making can make local authorities and other service delivery agencies more responsive to local needs and circumstances
- Opportunities for local participation can also improve positive-thinking, trust and co-operation – the so-called 'soft outcomes'
- Community involvement has only brought, at best, modest improvements in material circumstances of local communities
- Improvements are frequently not self-sustaining; the termination of regeneration funding and other support often leads to the collapse of regeneration efforts
- Evidence from mid-term evaluation of New Deal for Communities does not suggest any dramatic break with this trend:

The national evaluation of the New Deal for Communities suggests that the programme has produced both 'soft' outcomes and improvements in quality of life. The majority of those who are aware of NDC initiatives think that they have improved the area. Satisfaction with quality of life in NDC areas has increased, as has fear of crime. Fewer people want to move out than at the start of the New Deal, and changes of mind have often been influenced by perceived improvements to an area. The percentage of households with incomes of less than £100 has fallen. Some

aspects of crime have reduced. There is evidence of some improvements in employability.

Valuable though such gains are, however, they tend to be, at best, modest. Indeed, 'modest' is the term that recurs throughout the different elements of the national evaluation of the New Deal. The percentage falls in negative aspects of quality of life and the percentage rises in positive aspects of quality of life are small, often under 10%. The most major changes have occurred in relation to attitudes rather than concrete behaviour and material outcomes, such as more jobs, less crime, and higher educational attainment.

There has been no dramatic change in the relative position of NDC areas on the national index of multiple deprivation. In some respects, such as use of personal computers, New Deal areas are falling further behind the national average. There is some doubt as to the extent that some of the improvements in NDC areas can be attributed entirely to NDC and to what extent they can be attributed to other factors. There is evidence that in some areas rates of improvement are slowing (2004-6 compared to 2002-4), even though these areas remain well below the national average. A report on change notes that "There is...generally a tendency for change to be more evident between 2002 and 2004 than between 2004 and 2006." The achievements of the New Deal are modest, despite it being, as Paul Lawless has put it, 'arguably the most interventionist ABI [area-based initiative] launched anywhere in England'.

The Value for Money strand of the national NDC evaluation notes that a large number of projects have no view of where funding is going to come from beyond the lifespan of NDC, and expresses concern that "high levels of uncertainty about long term funding persist throughout the lifespan of many projects." Future funding had been secured for only 17 out of a sample of 117 projects, despite less than a fifth of projects anticipating that they could become self-financing. Two thirds considered that they would need mainstream funding if they were to continue.

- What does this tell us? Or rather, what *should* this tell us?

It might tell us that the failure of community involvement to deliver more than modest and short-term improvements is a result of bad practice: that the route to progress in regeneration is greater and better forms of community engagement, greater and better forms of partnership working, greater and better agency-involvement. Certainly there is room for improvement across these dimensions. However, just identifying and disseminating good practice on community-based regeneration is not the answer. The British Urban Regeneration Association (BURA) best practice awards for innovations in community-based regeneration have repeatedly gone to some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Britain, yet the neighbourhoods in receipt of the awards have shown rather less than dramatic improvements across the major indicators used to measure relative deprivation.

What the historical record should tell us is that community involvement in community regeneration is only ever going to bring about modest gains in the fortunes of deprived areas. Why? There are three broad reasons, each of them reflecting a different dimension of the regeneration process:

The three dimensions of community-based regeneration

- Most community engagement is issue-driven, shallow and ephemeral; this is the *behavioural* dimension of community-based regeneration.
- Local views can be parochial, illiberal and ill-informed, inhibiting rather than facilitating social cohesion and wider regeneration; this is the *cognitive* dimension of community-based regeneration.
- Local action can only ever partially compensate for inequalities rooted in wider economic and social geographies over which local people have little power; this is the *environmental* dimension of community-based regeneration.

The behavioural dimension of community-based regeneration

- Expecting high levels of active community engagement with local regeneration over the long-term is unrealistic.
- In most areas there will be a small core of people with a deep and sustained interest in regeneration. Community leadership in this sense tends to be concentrated rather than dispersed.
- Deep and sustained interest in regeneration is untypical of most people. Most people, if they engage at all, engage for short periods, engage shallowly, and engage with particular issues that attract their attention rather than with any broader 'regeneration process'.
- 'Short periods' means anything from as little as a hour to a long as a year. 'Shallow engagement' (a descriptive rather than a derogative label) means engagement such as reading a regeneration newsletter, attendance at public meetings, filling in a consultation form, attending an exhibition and signing a petition – behaviour that falls short of participation in face-to-face dialogue and power sharing between regeneration 'partners'. Compare the idea of 'shallow engagement' with the first five steps of Sherry Arnstein's 'ladder of participation' (www.partnerships.org.uk/guide/ideas.htm).
- Regeneration initiatives, which offer the lure of money and involve community development workers and other 'experts' actively stimulating community action, tend to increase the level and depth of local participation. Once programmes come to an end, levels of engagement tend to return to pre-programme levels.
- Barriers to deep and sustained involvement in regeneration include lack of time, other commitments, lack of self-confidence and belief that short term, shallow and single-issue engagement is sufficient to gain significant improvements.

The cognitive dimension of community-based regeneration

- Community-base programmes need to be more aware of the complex web of attitudes and interests of local people.
- Advice on community-based regeneration emphasises need for regeneration programmes – and wider service delivery agencies – to be sensitive to local difference and value local knowledge. However, 'over-valuation' of local knowledge fails to acknowledge difficulties and limitations.
- Attitudes and interests are shaped by a range of factors, including age, gender, ethnicity, class (structural factors), individual life-course / biography, and the local environment. Geographical communities represent sets of diverse attitudes and interests embedded in people, times and places.
- The heavily 'embedded' nature of local knowledge means that attitudes and interests are often parochial, illiberal and ill-informed. Local people tend to blame

obvious proximal factors for difficulties and lack an appreciation of wider issues and interconnections. Awareness of local problems is not the same as knowing how to solve them.

- 'Community leaders' and other activists sitting on local partnership boards are not necessarily representative of the community at large. Difficult for any partnership to reflect the full demographic and socio-economic spectrum of a locality. Local 'representatives' may not actively seek to represent the full range of views and interests within the wider community. Equally, community interests may not be actively represented even by a socially and demographically 'representative' partnership. Dominant voices can drown out those on the margins.
- Local knowledge and community representation must be balanced by wider strategic viewpoints and expertise in particular policy areas. The emphasis should be on involving local people rather than devolving power.

The environmental dimension of community-based regeneration

- Community-based regeneration can never wholly compensate for the wider processes causing uneven development.
- Community-based' initiatives such as the New Deal for Communities inject resources (most obviously money and expertise) into local trouble spots in the hope of stimulating social and economic recovery. The approach is akin to the shots of adrenalin, the electric shocks and the carefully-monitored care given to patients whose hearts have stopped or are failing. The patient is 'the community'. In place of doctors, nurses and ancillary staff are the professional experts, local authorities and other agencies involved in the regeneration process.
- This 'patient-based' approach can only ever result in a partial and temporary 'recovery', because it doesn't address important root causes of local deprivation. Community-base approaches such as NDC tend to 'internalize' the problems of areas that in reality are the result of wider geographies. Of key importance here are economic restructuring, ineffective redistributive policies and a deficient planning system:

The circumstances of particular areas are embedded in wider economic geographies over which local actors have relatively little power. The North-South divide persists and is growing. De-industrialization of the economy has had a particularly heavy effect on the regional economies of Wales, the North and the West Midlands, whilst the growth of the financial services sector and the so-called 'knowledge economy' has been of most benefit to London and the South, particularly the South East. The service economy of other areas tends to be largely composed of low-paid routine jobs. Foreign capital investment has also disproportionately benefited the South. Changing patterns of tourism have benefited historic towns whilst disadvantaging many traditional coastal resorts. Economic restructuring has led to the concentration of well-paid jobs in an ever-decreasing number of locations.

Decades of regional policy have failed to close the North-South divide, in large part because there has been no serious, concerted attempt to shift the centre of economic gravity away from London. London is an economic success story, and policy has been to keep that success story going. Since the mid 1990s, regional policy has focused less and less on redistribution and more and more about helping regions become more 'competitive'.

Deficiencies in planning policy and practice have helped to create and sustain the geographical patterns of deprivation evident across Britain. Many geographical areas communities are still living with the unintended negative consequences of post-war urban policy. Although slum clearance, large-scale house-building programmes, new towns and industrial zoning helped, in concert with other aspects of the welfare state to improve standards of living, they also helped to undermine community cohesion, by breaking up working class neighbourhoods and relocating people in low-quality, and often isolated, residential estates. A focus on housing which largely ignored the question of where people were going to work helped to localise joblessness in particular areas. The acquiescence of local and national planners to out-of-town and edge-of-town retail developments has encouraged people to take money out of the local economy, with corresponding growth of local service deserts.

- Persisting in the community-based approach without a parallel emphasis on wider redistribution runs the risk of implicitly – or even explicitly – blaming the victim, attributing local problems to the weaknesses or even pathologies of local communities.
- Unrealistic and morally unfair to expect community-based interventions to bring about radical improvements. At best, community-based regeneration can provide limited and temporary relief.

Conclusion

- Community-based regeneration has brought only, at best, modest improvements in the absolute and relative position of deprived areas.
- Most community engagement is issue-driven, shallow and ephemeral; expecting high levels of active community engagement over the long-term is unrealistic.
- Local views can be parochial, illiberal and ill-informed; successful regeneration means tempering community representation with wider viewpoints and expertise.
- Local action can only ever partially compensate for inequalities and other problems rooted in wider economic and social geographies.
- This isn't to say that we should abandon the community-based approach, but it is to say that we need to be realistic about its potential, and pay more attention to the wider structures and processes helping to create and maintain the inequities of our society.

Notes

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Recent research, undertaken with colleagues at UWA, includes a major project on community leadership, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of their Democracy and Participation Programme; a review of the roles and potential of community and town councils in Wales, commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government; reports on community regeneration, capacity building, the characteristics of rural households and the significance of the public sector in rural areas for the Wales Rural Observatory; and a review of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme for the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.