What is the value of the community-based partnership approach?
Lessons from the New Deal for Communities and beyond
Shared Intelligence 16th July 2007

Just been part of a study looking at community engagement in some NDCs. Report should be available shortly and have already reported back some findings at an earlier SI event. Use this brief time to think more discursively and raise some questions.

My starting point is that the term community engagement is sometimes used in an over-simple way – both suggesting that it is simple and straightforward and inevitably desirable *and* without really thinking about why it should take place and what it is hoped to achieve.

Looking first at the word 'community'. The assumption behind it is that something is held in common. But what is it and of what relevance is it to the regeneration exercise? The rationale for community engagement (apart from the fact that it figures prominently in government guidance!) is the premise that local people are the real experts about problems in their communities and about why previous policies have failed. This is fine but it perhaps suggests more homogeneity in a local area than actually exists. We know that there are communities of interest as well as communities of place. However in government speak and sometimes in local ABIs, not enough thought is necessarily given either to the nature of the community or communities that it is proposed to engage or to the purpose of engaging them.

Residential proximity in NDCs gives some commonality - but there remain competing interests: between different neighbourhoods within the area; on grounds of tenure; between ethnic groups; between age groups.

Then there's clearly a range of potential purposes of engagement. It's important to clarify these –
- partly because it's important that everyone concerned has the same expectations – it's all too easy for residents to have a quite different view about why they are there and what powers they have. Imparting an understanding about the constraints on local choices is one aspect. Managing expectations is a critical facet. And not just expectations within the community or amongst involved residents but also amongst staff, board members and other practitioners and policy makers. There is an engagement spectrum (ref Sherry Arnstein) and as you travel along it to the higher intensity participation end of the spectrum, fewer people will be involved. Danger of setting yourself up to fail if not realistic about the proportion of people who will want to have different degrees of involvement.

- partly because the mechanisms adopted need to be tailored to the purpose – again, it's all too easy to jump into setting up structures or launching into public meetings, roadshows or newsletters without thinking about what is to be gained, who is being targeted and why, or considering the best use of time and resources. Similarly, there is a need to review aims and appropriate ways of meeting them as the NDC programme progresses. In the NDC study, we indicated that there has to be an evolving agenda, recognising that there is an engagement lifecycle.

So, what are the purposes? There seem to be three broad ones:

☐ One purpose is to make room for local people to influence the programme and its priorities: this can produce real dilemmas. For example, what relative weight should be given to different types of information – local perceptions versus secondary data. Another challenge is how to ensure that the voices heard are representative and not just the loudest ones and that representatives are not a distorted sample of the wider community in terms of age, etc. NDCs have variously addressed all this through different types of engagement catering for different groups and needs, (e.g. youth forums) and not just issuing passive invitations but using intensive outreach. Another issue is the a need to balance continuity and stability in the organisation with the introduction of new blood and the capacity to create a growing pool of participants – and avoid the danger of a handful of activists becoming a blockage rather than a conduit to and for others There is also the longer term challenge of mainstreaming: trying to embed this approach into the working practices of service deliverers so that there is continuing influence after the lifetime of the programme.

☐ A second aim of engagement is to enable the regeneration to have a 'softer landing', that is, to generate local ownership and understanding of the programme. Again, this is not straightforward. It may have to be pursued through a variety of means and is particularly difficult in programmes – for example, where housing features prominently - impacting very immediately and directly on individuals.

To a certain extent, both of these purposes tend towards mechanisms that focus on linkages with the NDC. However, a third has also to consider the linkages (or lack of them) *across* different groups or neighbourhoods:

☐ This is where the purpose is to advance the aims of the regeneration, in particular, to lead to a community better equipped to shape its own destiny and determine its own future.

There can be added value as a result of all of these, but I want now to focus on the last one, particularly because it is of increasing relevance at this point in NDCs' life. It connects with ideas of building social capital – not a concept I'm entirely easy with and especially not when it is used as though it is inherently a good thing – but it is worth using it to unpack further something about community dynamics insofar as they are relevant to the goals of area-based regeneration.

Most often when social capital is referred to, the focus is on 'bonding' capital – that is, the strength of local ties. This is important and, arguably, trust and neighbourliness are necessary dimensions of a functioning community. But equally significant are first, the weaker ties across diverse and possibly competing neighbourhoods and groups – what's known as 'bridging' social capital and second, 'linking' capital that gives the routes into decision making structures. A distinction has been drawn between 'support capital' provided by friends and family and 'leverage capital' which helps people change their life chances. It's the difference between 'getting by' and 'getting ahead'. Strong bonding that is very inward and exclusive can inhibit change because the stress is on local embeddedness rather than on links to wider social and economic activities. And this is something often discerned in ABI areas where it is

perceived, for example, that if a paucity of aspiration is accepted and taken for granted, a change in that culture is a necessary prerequisite of raising educational attainment. On the other hand, wider networks can help towards people's personal development by giving them access to wider resources - information, opportunities, etc. The opportunities for volunteering often provided by NDCs exemplify this.

Recognising the significance of all this indicates that community engagement needs to be allied to community development and to capacity building. It is interesting that sometimes there appear to be differences of view between community liaison staff on NDC teams and the rest with the former wanting to take up a wider and more detached role, acting less as the link people with the programme and more as development workers.

The community development dimension has also led some NDCs to support the development of the VCS infrastructure in their area. It's interesting to ask how far NDCs audited their communities at the outset to look at their composition and also develop a baseline of the size and nature of the sector. Some have done this but often belatedly either because it was an issue that only emerged as the programme proceeded or because the appropriate staff were not in place early on.

It is also worth asking how far the strength of the sector is an expression of the existing social capital in the area, how far it contributes to building up social capital and/or how far it is a product of it. Then there are other questions: What is its role relative to more informal networks? Again there are distinctions to be drawn and balances to be struck between sectoral development and that of specific organisations and that of local residents.

Against a background of concern about the health of representative democracy, 'citizen engagement' – participative democracy – is currently coming up the political agenda. There is a danger that the debate is muddied because the terms and purpose of engagement remain unclear and because we start creating new structures without asking why the old ones are deemed to have failed. NDCs have valuable and relevant experience to impart.