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Changing governance

How are civil society organisations in the UK and overseas experiencing the shift from government to governance?



Non-Governmental
Public Action
Programme



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This report is a summary of the presentations and discussion at the seminar which took place on 9 October 2008 at NCVO.

The seminar was the second in a series of seminars jointly organised by NCVO and the ESRC Non-Governmental Public Action (NGPA) research programme at the Centre for Civil Society (LSE).

The seminar series aims to:

- Promote dialogue, exchange and learning between academics and practitioners bringing the findings of the NGPA research programme closer to civil society organisations in the UK
- Promote international dialogue, exchange and learning bringing lessons from abroad closer to civil society organisations in the UK
- Promote learning drawn from examples of civil society in the Global South.

It brings together practitioners, academics and policy-makers and provides them with the opportunity to share insights and take part in a stimulating discussion.

In a nutshell

Key points from the first presentation

- New forms of governance and partnership working across the globe have brought new opportunities for civil society organisations. However these opportunities have also brought new challenges in relation to autonomy, legitimacy and resources.
- Both the opportunities and challenges vary from country to country according to: the welfare mix; the nature of democratic processes and the political culture. So the countries studied in this research project – Bulgaria, Nicaragua and England and Wales – faced quite different challenges in making new governance opportunities work for them.

■ In Bulgaria, civil society could be described as subjugated – for civil society organisations there the challenge is to achieve agency.

■ In Nicaragua, there is a strong social movement legacy and a history of contention – for civil society organisations the challenge is to build a workable relationship with the state.

■ In England and Wales by contrast, the relationship between civil society organisations and the state is increasingly institutionalised. Here the challenge is to maintain their autonomy and an independent voice.

■ It is important that partnership working is not 'the only game in town'. Civil society organisations need to maintain

their own independent forums for discussion and debate.

Key points from the second presentation

■ It is important at the design stage of any participatory initiative to consider the following questions: What is participation for? Whose agenda is it? Who participates? People need to be able to shape the processes and come with their own agendas rather than being involved in a purely reactive way.

■ Participatory spaces are increasingly professionalised and this may move civil society representatives further away from their communities.

Introduction

In various countries including in the UK, the shift from government to governance has led to the emergence of new decision-making arenas in which citizens and civil society organisations have been invited to participate. These new spaces offer new opportunities for those previously excluded from decision-making processes, and could ultimately lead to greater democratic accountability and improved policy-making. However, these spaces are often complex and present a number of significant challenges for non-governmental actors.

This seminar aimed to:

- Explore how civil society organisations in the UK and other countries are experiencing the shift from government to governance.
- Share insights on the implications of changing governance structures and processes for civil society organisations.

The speakers were:

- **Marilyn Taylor** and **Joanna Howard** from the University of the West of England, who explored the ways in which civil society organisations experience and 'navigate the tensions' of working in new governance spaces in Bulgaria, Nicaragua and the UK.
- **Heather Blakey** from the University of Bradford, who reviewed a range of municipal innovations in public participation and policy-making in Latin America and the UK.
- **Karin Gavelin** from Involve, who drew out implications for policy and practice.

Dr Karl Wilding from NCVO chaired and facilitated the seminar.

Civil society organisations can enhance participation because they bring people together but they can also be a barrier to direct engagement where organisational interests differ from community interests.

The deliberative dimension of participatory budgeting in Latin America is currently not a feature of participatory budgeting in the UK. Can more deliberation be introduced without producing a new 'elite'?

Participation is complex: the more we understand it the better chance we have of successful participation. However, we must not assume that participatory procedures and techniques are enough to 'deliver' results.

Key points from the policy and practice response

Participatory processes that have been successful in a specific context cannot just be replicated elsewhere.

In the UK, there is still a lack of appreciation of the constraints affecting the third sector¹ in terms of time and resources, and a poor understanding of what the third sector actually is and what it does.

There are major concerns on all parts about the implications of more consultation on the quality and the value of engagement.

Engagement requires resources: investments are needed to match the UK government's ambitions.

¹ In the UK, the term third sector is increasingly used to refer to a particular subset of civil society organisations. In general it covers voluntary organisations, community groups, cooperatives and social enterprises. Civil society and non-governmental public action include a much wider range of organising, institutions and actors.

Changing governance structures and processes: comparing responses across countries

Marilyn Taylor and Joanna Howard, Cities Research Centre, University of the West of England

■ Introduction

The new opportunities that have emerged for citizens and civil society actors to participate in governance, not only in the UK but across the globe, can be seen as the answer to decades of lobbying and protest. At last, civil society players have been given a place at the table alongside policy-makers and the opportunity to have voice and influence over how services are provided and how policies are made, especially in relation to marginalised groups.

Although this might have been what many civil society organisations had wished for, there is an element of 'beware of what you wish for' in this current shift. Research on partnership working in the UK in recent years suggests that civil society organisations have not always found it easy to work with government in these new partnership forums and government spaces. These new opportunities have clearly brought new challenges and raised a number of key questions:

- Would increased opportunities to engage in service delivery compromise their advocacy roles?
- How should civil society actors deal with the challenges of legitimacy, representation and leadership?
- Would greater formalisation of the relationship between state and civil society organisations allow for the continued independence of civil society?
- Would it create new forms of inter-dependence which would generate new potential? Or would it simply represent a form of state capture of civil society?

■ About the research project

Our NGPA research project explores these opportunities and challenges and looks at the ways in which civil society organisations have addressed them. It has allowed us to see how far the concerns and preoccupations about partnership in the UK are shared further

afield and examine what could be learnt from other countries, about working in these new ways and about the factors which enable or restrict non-governmental actors from having an active role and influence in these spaces.

The research was carried out over a period of two and a half years in four countries: England, Wales, Bulgaria and Nicaragua. In each locality four to six organisations, mainly working on community development and health issues were chosen. A number of people at different levels within those organisations were interviewed at least once and often twice. People from civil society infrastructure bodies and from government institutions at local, regional and national level were also interviewed. In total approximately 60 interviews were carried out in each locality. A series of enquiry groups bringing together participants in each locality, both within civil society and across sectors, were organised and at the end of the project participants from all of the countries were brought together in a video conference.

■ Some theory

One school of theory which was of interest to us was governmentality theory. It argues that despite the appearance of shared power and governing at a distance from the state, existing power relationships continue to operate in these new partnership and governance forums, partly because the rules of the game are determined by the state and partly because of much more subtle, taken for granted assumptions that underpin the ways in which partnerships operate. Theorists like Stephen Lukes and Michel Foucault describe for example, how people internalise assumptions about the way power works and become willing subjects, complying with the status quo rather than questioning existing patterns of power.

However John Morrison, in his analysis of the Compact, considers that, although this is true, there is scope for non-governmental actors, not only to collaborate with the

exercise of government but also to shape and influence it. Social movement theorists have shown how cracks and uncertainties in the system can be exploited. Even Pierre Bourdieu acknowledged that at moments of extreme crisis, existing patterns of power can be disrupted. Nick Crossley argued that Bourdieu's analysis underestimates the continued and persistent impetus in contemporary society to question and critique. He describes how a history of contentious politics and the cultural capital that it creates in the form of know-how, shared values and assumptions can generate what he calls a *radical habitus of individuals*. He also draws attention to the ways in which this is fostered in particular fields, through support networks, social events and learning opportunities which promote knowledge, commitment and the capacity to reflect, learn and act on that learning.

■ The importance of context

Nick Crossley's ideas applied to individuals. What this project wanted to do was to explore the importance of country context and how this might shape individual dispositions to engage critically and independently with the state in the new spaces and forums that had emerged. Three sets of factors which seemed to be important in explaining how civil society organisations respond to governments' opportunities were identified:

The welfare mix – the role of the state vis-a-vis the private and not-for-profit sectors in meeting basic needs and the influence of external actors (such as the EU or international NGOs) on the local situation.

- In Bulgaria the state dominates welfare with little space for non-governmental actors to either debate or deliver services. NGOs tend to deliver services that are either not prioritised or not funded by the state (e.g. HIV Aids or disability services).

- In the case of Nicaragua there is a lack of welfare provision for basic needs by the state. The gaps in welfare provision tended to be met either by local and national NGOs through international funding, or by remittances from family members working overseas.
- In England and Wales, third sector organisations² have increasingly been drawn into delivering services.

The nature of democratic processes – the degree to which government and resources were decentralised in each country, the way that party politics operated and how it related to civil society activity and whether or not there were rights for citizen participation in each country.

All three countries had a highly centralised state. Nevertheless, there were important differences with regards to citizen participation and rights.

- In Bulgaria, there is little commitment to citizen participation in governance.
- In Nicaragua, power has swung between opposing ideologies but participation rights have been enshrined in law since the beginning of this decade and are an important mobilising theme. However, following last year's change of government, citizen participation processes are much more tightly constrained through political party mechanisms, rather than being open democratic processes.
- In England and Wales, the environment is much more politically stable and the shifts between Left and Right tend to take place within narrower parameters. There is a strong commitment to citizen engagement. The emphasis is on more efficient public services and user satisfaction rather than on citizen rights. However, there is also a

discourse about enhancing democracy and more recently about community empowerment through engaging citizens in decision-making.

Political cultures – what citizens expected of the state and how much of a sense of collective agency they had.

- Bulgaria has a long history of authoritarian rule. It has been invaded and subjugated by different powers over the centuries and has not yet entirely cast off its Soviet past. As a result citizens manifest a strong distrust of the state which they consider corrupt and self-seeking. The memory of obligatory participation under Soviet rule is still a deterrent to participation today. There is also a strong dependency on the state with an expectation that the state will take responsibility for delivering services.
- Nicaragua on the other hand has a history of high political participation, both in overthrowing a dictator and in support of the revolutionary government that took power. Combined with that is a strong imperative of necessity – if the state is not providing then it is up to individuals and communities to find a way of feeding their family, legalising their property, accessing clean water etc. This has brought about a deep sense of individual and collective agency.
- England and Wales have a strong history of collective action too, with numerous advocacy organisations and community organisations emerging in response to gaps or perceived needs in the welfare state. In recent years Government's firm commitment to citizen participation has resulted in many opportunities for third sector organisations through, for instance, neighbourhood renewal initiatives and local strategic partnerships. However, the alternative spaces for engagement that were traditionally a means of generating independent collective action, are in decline.

Disposition to engage critically?

There are, of course, variations within each country but the disposition to engage critically in each setting can be described in the following way:

Bulgaria: subjugated

Civil society players have little capacity or disposition to think of themselves in a proactive way vis-a-vis the state. For them, the concept of governance is almost unimaginable in terms of working as a partner on a level playing field or even engaging in dialogue.

Nicaragua: contentious

There is a much stronger sense of being able to engage with the state, but there is a feeling that it is difficult to have a productive dialogue. It is more about drawing up battle lines. Adversarial politics and a strong social movement tradition are still evident today. The dependence on institutions such as the church and political parties is sometimes problematic for the autonomy of civil society organisations.

England and Wales: institutionalised

There is a sense that the institutionalisation of the relationship of third sector organisations engaging with government has made it the 'only game in town'. If organisations are not able or interested in working through the partnership setting, there are few alternatives for engagement. Dependence on state funding has also made some organisations highly vulnerable.

Conclusion: challenges for the future

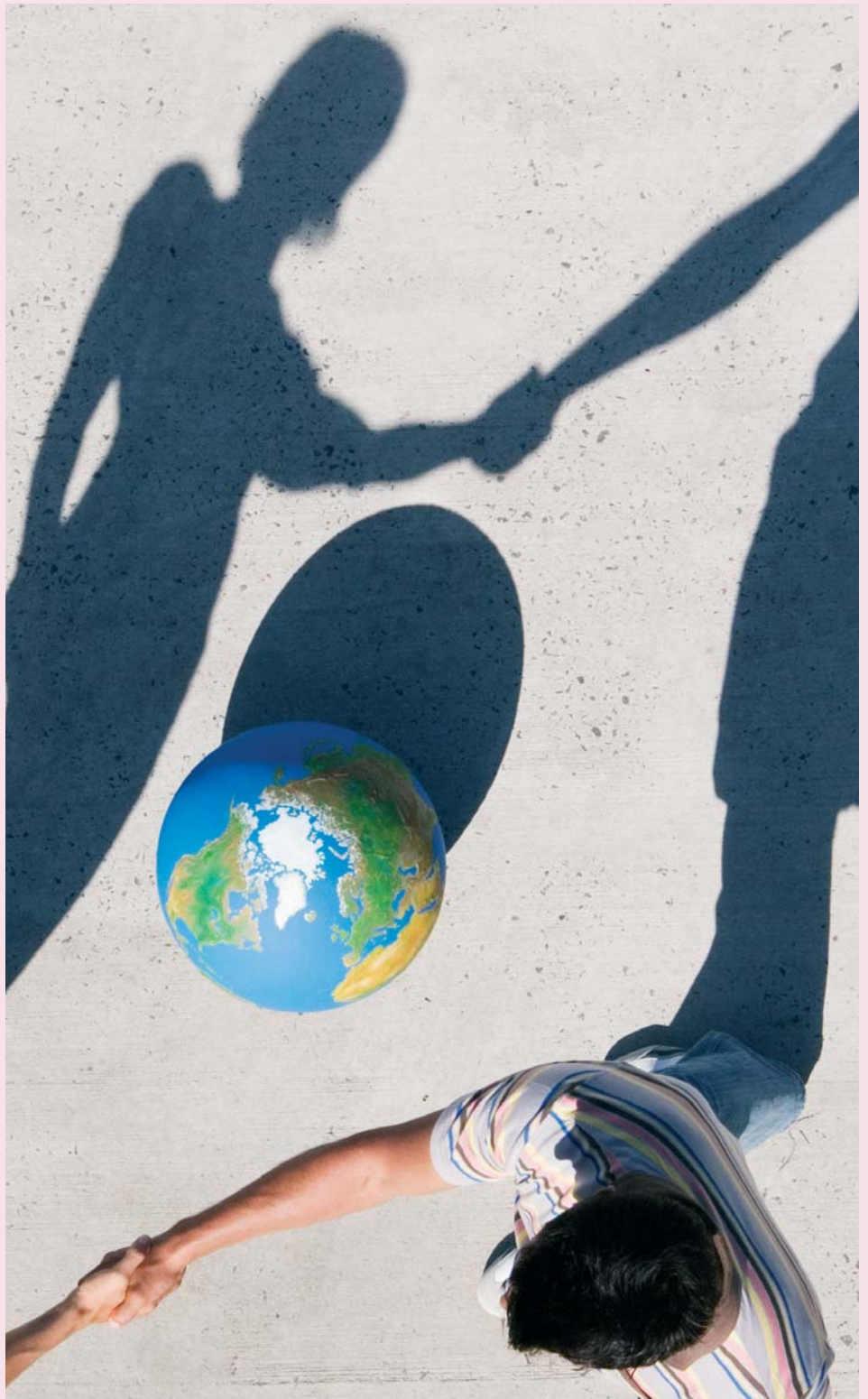
Each country is faced with a different set of challenges:

- In Bulgaria, the challenge is how to achieve agency; how to overcome this passivity and disbelief in politics. The research shows there are already organisations that clearly do believe in being engaged. The main

² See footnote on page 3.

challenge is finding ways to develop a critical mass of organisations who feel that they can put pressure on government to open up and invite their views.

- Achieving a workable relationship with the state in Nicaragua is a tall order, as the state radically alters the goal posts when the party in power changes. Towards the end of the research period, there was a change in national government. As a result, the governance spaces that had been developing reasonably well were closed down or colonised by government via political party mechanisms, which meant that participants were either marginalised in them or co-opted. Civil society organisations are now looking for a greater formalisation of partnership working and governance so they are less vulnerable to changes in party politics.
- In England and Wales, in an increasingly consensual climate, where third sector organisations are often dependent on funding from their local authorities, the research raises questions about whether dissenters are able to have a voice and whether the sector is able to engage in dialogue as a critical friend rather than the co-provider of services.



'Here, the people decide'? New forms of participation in the city

Heather Blakey, University of Bradford

■ Introduction

The NGPA research project 'Municipal Innovations in Non-Governmental Public Participation' covered the UK and three countries in Latin America: Brazil, Columbia and Venezuela. The project was led by Professor Jenny Pearce and included researchers in the UK and in Latin America. It looked at six cities: Bradford, Manchester and Salford in the UK; Porto Alegre in Brazil; Medellin in Columbia and Caracas in Venezuela.

The project explored how administrations at city level engage with people. Our aim was to see whether there was a common thread amongst the participatory experiments that were taking place in these cities and examine to what extent they were meaningful channels for change. More specifically the project aimed to find out:

- Whether people were able to use these new participatory spaces to press for real changes to their lives and their communities and develop new political visions; or whether these new spaces were merely mechanisms for, at best improved service delivery, or at worst more control and co-option, while the real decisions which shape our lives are made elsewhere.
- In the context of this project, our understanding of non-governmental public action is wider than formal civil society organisations. In many cases the actors were individuals or much looser coalitions within communities.

■ A case study approach

The approach looked at a number of case studies within each town and had a local field worker in each city; some were academics and some worked within civil society organisations. For example:

- In Bradford we followed one of the new pilots for participatory budgeting in this country.

- In Manchester and Salford we looked at how civil society organisations engaged with the state.
- In Caracas one of the case studies was called the Technical Tables of Water, which brought together community members and people from the local water company to solve the problems of access to water. It was very much focused on solving specific problems in practice.

■ Differences in context but some common points

This presentation draws out some of the common themes that cut across all the case studies:

1. What is participation for?

There were clearly some differences in motivations not just between countries or innovations but between different actors within each case study.

People who were part of the planning group for these participatory initiatives had different objectives and this influenced the kind of process they designed.

Although many conversations around designing the process were quite practical, it was clear that people were pushing in different directions. For any initiative, it is very useful to be able to verbalise these potential differences at the design stage and clarify the goals of participation. Is it about better services? Or is it about community development or transforming power?

2. Whose agenda?

The question of who controls and sets the agenda in participatory spaces has a significant impact on whether they are meaningful. Participatory spaces in general discuss and work with existing agendas

(often originating at local and national government level). In other words, they are often reactive spaces to government agendas. In both the UK and Latin America there seems to be a lack of space and support for participants to develop autonomous agendas. In Bradford there was a real frustration at the absence of those autonomous agendas and a desire to create them. However, people lacked the time and possibly the experience to take this forward.

3. Leadership and representation

How people, organisations and institutions relate representative democracy to participatory democracy is important. Different actors use the tensions between the two in different ways. Statutory officers who are not themselves elected and at times take quite far reaching decisions, can feel threatened and challenged by the different dynamic of participatory spaces, possibly even more so than politicians in some cases.

4. Bridge or barrier?

Civil society organisations can help bridge different communities or can be a barrier to engagement. Interestingly, in the participatory budgeting process at Porto Alegre, civil society organisations helped shape demands but people participated as individuals. The organisations facilitated, but did not mediate. It is very easy for the state to see civil society as a voice for communities but the agenda of civil society organisations might be quite different from the communities that they serve, particularly in the context of increasing public service provision by civil society.

5. Professionalised participation

Spaces are increasingly professionalised and this suits the state well. Civil society organisations are learning to operate in ways similar to state institutions. This may move civil society representatives further away from their communities. During the project, it was interesting to note that, in private, civil society representatives spoke quite radically but used a far more neutral and safe language in participatory spaces.

6. Deliberation in participatory spaces

Building experience of deliberation in participatory initiatives can enhance the value of participation for both non-governmental and governmental actors. Often in participatory budgeting initiatives in the UK, there is very little space for people to deliberate. The deliberative dimension of the participatory budgeting experiences of Latin America is so far absent. However, it is also important to think about how people's journey of participation in a deliberative process changes them and the impact this may have on the relationship they have with their communities and 'constituency'.

7. Who is participation for?

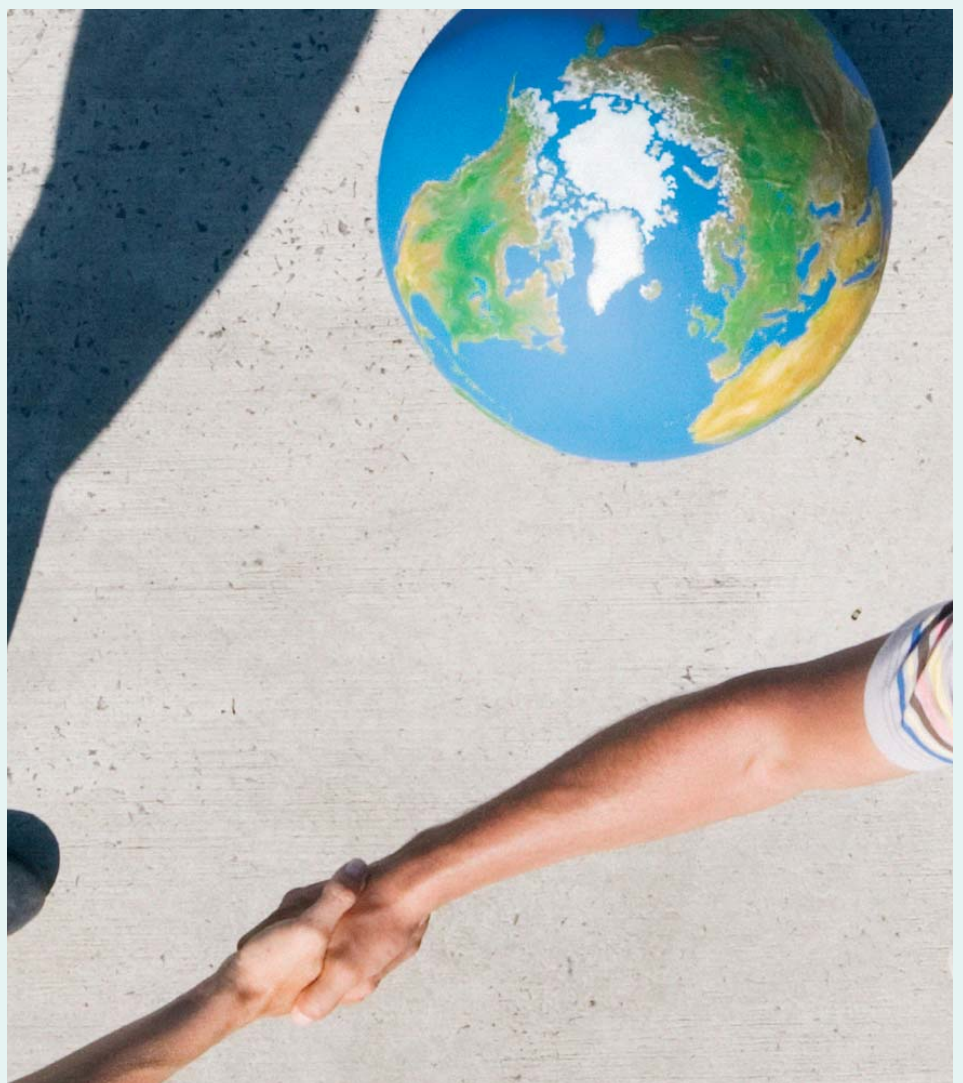
In the UK, participation initiatives are often aimed at the poor. This is in contrast with what we saw in Caracas or Medellin where the emphasis is on everybody participating.

representing. We should definitely be wary of an uncritical focus on techniques (e.g. participatory budgeting) and the assumption that because they have worked in Latin America they will work in the UK too.

Concluding comments

One of the key lessons of the project in thinking about the UK in relation to Latin America is the importance of involvement in the participation process design. Currently in the UK the idea of participatory budgeting is proving popular but there is a tendency for local authorities to invite communities to be involved simply by voting. It is critical that these processes and the people participating in them are supported. People need to shape the processes and be able to come with their own agendas rather than being involved purely in a reactive way.

Our project showed that in the UK people involved in participatory initiatives are often afraid of being political. They think being political will undermine their position within the partnership. Perhaps a more political vision of participatory spaces would allow communities to feel that change could take place. More deliberative processes would be a positive step, but the challenge is to build deliberation into processes, without taking the people involved in those processes away from the communities that they are



Policy and practice response

Karin Gavelin, Involve

Involve is a non-profit organisation based in London that specialises in public and stakeholder engagement and helps institutions and organisations from all sectors to engage with members of the public. It recently carried out a project for the Office of the Third Sector looking at how public bodies consult third sector organisations and more broadly at the different ways of bringing third sector perspectives into policy. The findings from the two NGPA research projects really resonate with some of the findings of our project, particularly those relating to the challenges that public sector and third sector organisations face when trying to work more closely together.

It is very interesting to hear about what is going on in terms of public participation in other countries, although as both presentations showed, participatory processes that have been successful in a specific context cannot just be replicated elsewhere. People's motivations for getting involved are so different in different situations. In the UK, people are bound to have different motivations for getting involved than people in Colombia or Bulgaria.

In the UK, policy-makers at times struggle to make participatory initiatives seem relevant to members of the public. They can be perceived as too far removed from the real life issues that people are experiencing. What government and local authorities often do is turn to third sector organisations as facilitators of dialogue because they are seen as having better access to communities, in particular to specific and marginalised groups. A common assumption is that third sector organisations represent the voice of the people; that they know what people think, need and want. Third sector organisations are also often valued by the public sector because they are viewed as being more trusted by the general public than public sector institutions and representatives.

■ A positive account

Both presentations focused on third sector organisations and looked at participation from their perspective. Our findings focus on the public sector and its experience of and motivation for engaging third sector organisations. One of the most common reasons people in the public sector gave us for doing consultations, apart from it being a statutory requirement, is that they saw third sector organisations as bringing this very unique down-to-earth, practical view and understanding of people and of social issues.

There were many very enthusiastic responses from public officials who had been working and consulting with third sector organisations about how much they had learned from speaking to third sector organisations.

It had helped them to understand different perspectives on the policy issues they were working on and to identify existing gaps in terms of public service provision. What the project found was that the most enthusiastic responses tended to come from workers in the public sector who are actually involved in the consultation processes at the local level or at central government level within dedicated communication and consultation teams. Public sector workers directly involved in the delivery of services had a more arm's length relationship to consultation and tended to be far less enthusiastic.

■ Many challenges remain

Despite this fairly rosy picture there are nevertheless numerous challenges:

- There is still, amongst some public sector workers, a lack of appreciation of the value that third sector involvement can bring to policy-making. The shift in culture that

third sector involvement implies is lagging behind on the ground.

- People working in the public sector still have a poor understanding of what the third sector actually is and what it does. Many public sector workers have not yet understood that the third sector includes a very broad spectrum of organisations – community organisations, voluntary organisation, charities but also social enterprises, cooperatives etc. They also struggle to understand the sector's different roles and fail to realise that some organisations can play a number of roles. Some organisations can, for instance, deliver services and campaign. Public sector workers often saw that as a potential conflict of interest.
- There is still also a lack of appreciation of the constraints affecting the third sector in terms of time and resources. And yet, this is a major barrier for third sector involvement. To a certain extent these constraints also affect the public sector; public sector workers are often not allocated sufficient resources to engage properly either.
- Research participants mentioned the difficulties of working within a political context and trying to consult and engage while following a political steer at the same time. Third sector organisations were often very conscious of the power relationships in place and felt opportunities to really influence policy making were limited.
- Unsurprisingly, there was much scepticism and mistrust on both sides about consultation and engagement, generally founded on bad experiences. Public sector workers were sometimes frustrated by the hostile and critical reactions they received from third sector organisations despite their efforts to engage more. And vice versa, people working in the third sector felt that they were at times held at arm's length and perceived as 'being difficult', especially in a local context or when exploring contentious issues.

Open discussion

MT Marilyn Taylor

HB Heather Blakey

JH Joanna Howard

KG Karin Gavelin

- There were major concerns from all the different groups we spoke to about the implications of more consultations on the quality and the value of engagement. There was a sense that the growing number of consultations would dilute effectiveness.

■ Moving forward

A number of measures can be taken to address some of these issues:

- **Better understanding of the third sector:** through secondments and more direct experiences (rather than outsourcing) at all levels (including leaders and people in positions of power).
- **More innovation, flexibility and openness:** fixed models do not work well; processes need to be more creative and adapted to circumstances and stakeholders.
- **More engagement is not necessarily better:** increasing the number of consultations and other participatory initiatives can seriously stretch resources and affect the effectiveness and the quality of engagement
- **Engagement requires resources:** investments are needed to match the government's ambitions and to engage effectively.
- **Goodwill and patience:** a culture shift in both the public sector and the third sector is needed and this requires a willingness to forget, forgive and move on.

Key points from the open discussion

- The drive for participation in the UK comes from central government; how people at the local level implement it and view that participation is then really critical as to whether it is successful or not. If they view it as a burden imposed by government it is unlikely to work.
- There are competing agendas in any participatory process but providing people the chance to talk to each other and building in safeguards so that the process is considered a fair one does move things forward.
- Deliberation makes the difference between a space that is instrumental and one that is not. It is also important to have learning spaces that build people's capacity to engage.
- It is important to understand the role of civil society organisations as being a voice for communities but there needs to be opportunities for individual voices to be heard.
- There are numerous practical constraints and structural tensions that make engagement difficult for both individuals and organisations.
- These have been identified many times. We now need to look at what will really make culture changes happen, which means talking about power and how it is distributed in society.

Question: In your typology of relationships between the state and civil organisations, you had subjugated, contentious and institutionalised. Is one better than the other or are they just different?

MT The feeling that we got from Bulgaria was that there was no room for manoeuvre. There was an ingrained sense that participation was not an option. In Nicaragua, when there was no space available for them, they created one. In our English case study, resources had been withdrawn from the networks through which many organisations had been engaging and it is not yet clear whether these networks will find a way of continuing independently or whether they will just accept the situation as it is.

Comment: In your presentations there were two key themes: on the one hand instrumentalism or managerialism and on the other side something much more fundamental about the redistribution of power, which is not very easy to be upfront about. People can feel threatened by it.

Question: Did you see anywhere a system where that element of political threat has been successfully removed and there has been a conversation about what these participatory structures might deliver?

Comment: It has been successfully done in Berlin in the district of Lichtenberg which has about 200,000 inhabitants. The way they managed to bring in participatory budgeting was a power sharing deal between politicians and the citizenry, which included a written agreement that allowed politicians to veto any participatory budgeting decision made at any stage of the

process. To this day no decisions have been vetoed but the clause unlocked the process.

Question: How did your studies address the question of who at the end of the day decides?

HB On the tension between how much you own-up to wanting to redistribute power, I think it is a fear constraining the people within the state who are trying to create these processes with a reasonably radical agenda. It is understandable but the alternative is not engaging communities. It is dangerous to focus too much on what will upset the powerful if you want to bring people in. The line of the Local Strategic Partnership in Bradford was very much about people actually wanting the same thing – better services. It is about convincing the powerful that participation will help them do what they want better.

The other thing is maybe about the potential for learning from the process; how communities learn to use the spaces. In Latin America, in Porto Alegre, the state recognised that they could not do what people wanted them to do. It was about the state admitting its own powerlessness and saying, “where do we go from there together?” I do not think it is impossible, but it is difficult!

If you are just looking to get a snapshot of what people want, there are going to be a lot of competing agendas but giving people the chance to talk to each other does often move people forward. This was definitely the case with the Water Tables initiative in Caracas; those who were involved got a much broader understanding of the need for water across the city and not just in their neighbourhood. This wider knowledge was really important and helped them to think more critically about the issue. People can take thoughtful decisions if they are given the information that existing decision-makers have.

In Keighley near Bradford there was a lot of fear that participatory budgeting would open up huge tensions between the South Asian communities and the white communities. But, people did not always vote in a partisan way and they listened to each other, even with the very minimal opportunity for deliberation that was available, hearing the needs of the other communities moved people’s thinking forward quite significantly. Because participants were given the space to listen to each other and safeguards were built into the system to take into account the needs of these different communities and to address how the money would be distributed, they saw that actually it could be a fair process.

KG Whether the arguments for participation are normative and about shifting power and giving people the right to make decisions that affect them or more instrumentalist and about participation as a means to an end depends a great deal on context. When I first became interested in participation, I was very much looking at the Brazilian examples in which there is more of a power shift happening. In the UK, there is not such a big appetite for participation. Participation is seen much more as a complement to the existing traditional forms of making decisions and allocating resources.

JH Deliberation makes the difference between a space that is instrumental and one that is not. A space may end up being instrumental because there is no dialogue within it to make it otherwise. According to our research it depends on individuals within that space who can work across the boundaries between the public sector and civil society. It is also important to have learning spaces; something for example within civil society, perhaps something like this seminar that builds up capacity so that when people go to partnerships or engage with government they are better prepared.

On the point about removing the political threat, you cannot remove it completely because it is about power. However, you can

perhaps change people’s perceptions so that they do not see engagement necessarily as a zero sum game. This is very much the challenge people face in Nicaragua; how to transform local governance into something, where if people all pull together, they can bring about local development rather than everybody just trying to get their piece of the pie.

Question: Several of you have described civil society organisations as the voice of the people. To what extent are organisations seen as if they are the people who should be participating, and to what extent is their role in facilitating wider participation acknowledged?

Comment: *The focus of the seminar has mostly been on what the public sector is going to gain from engaging with third sector, but I wanted to go back to the point about the partnership between government and third sector organisations being the only game in town in England in Wales. If it is not going to be the only game in town then individuals need to be able to get together and communicate with each other. There are many things stopping that from happening. For instance, if you do not have free access to wifi it can be a problem. Actually finding physical meeting spaces to meet can be difficult; in most cases they are not free. How do people get together and how do they afford it in terms of resources and time? These are essential things and then the challenge is what can you do about it in the current system we are in? If you actually need funding to do some of those things then you are probably pressed to be a charity. In order to be a charity you then come up against the charity law and political focuses. Once you become a charity, you then have to compete with other services and other companies to get the funding to employ staff and to have a continuous presence. Thirty years ago when feminism, which is the field I have been involved in was more of a social movement and managed to do some of these things through cooperation – for example, by people meeting in each other’s homes. As one was successful and managed to get state funding, one then gets drawn into the “don’t offend the government too*

Open discussion

much or you won't get next year's funding to keep organisation going". There are all these structural tensions that need further exploring.

Comment: I just wanted to raise the point about how important the human rights legislation has been. For example, in the last year children's rights have scored some really dramatic and significant victories which would not have happened without that legislative backdrop. So participation yes, but legislation has to be available.

Question: To what extent do you think human rights are affecting governance structures and processes? Where human rights have changed have governments tried to keep up?

JH In places like Nicaragua, the Human Rights Convention has been hugely important. However, many countries sign up to it but then do not act upon it. Legislation is very important but there has to be something else that makes it then become a useful tool rather than just a piece of paper. Social movements have mobilised around human rights and citizen rights as well as women rights and children rights. They have taken international frameworks, then mobilised and influenced government. The Human Rights Convention is a way of putting things onto the agenda but it is helped on through mobilisation.

MT It is easy for councillors and officers in the public sector to see the third sector organisations they are in contact with as the 'people' rather than going further. However, we also have to acknowledge there are gatekeepers in the sector that are quite happy to play that role. There were some very interesting differences between voluntary sector respondents and community sector respondents in our study. Voluntary sector respondents often thought the partnerships they were involved in were working quite well, but it was often because they were in service delivery partnerships where their legitimacy was based on expertise. It seemed much more difficult to exercise real influence in the more generalist

and political regeneration partnerships where the agenda was less clear. It was also less clear what people were supposed to be bringing to the table. Your question about the barriers and the practical constraints was interesting. If we have lost the unions and other mass organisations at local level that used to provide alternative spaces for people to find their voice, what takes their place? There are organisations such as London Citizens in this country that do provide this role, but there seems nevertheless to be a huge hole there.

KG We certainly found in our work in the UK that there was a tension between the different roles the third sector might play. Whether the third sector is considered as a voice or a facilitator is not a problem in itself, but you have to explore the assumptions opinions are based on.

Comment: When talking about redistribution and power there is more than one way of looking at power. To be more positive, let's not forget that there are examples of participation that have actually generated more power.

Question: Did you look at the kinds of people who participated in the different countries? In this country there seems to be a lot of emphasis placed on income and paid workers.

HB Who participates? We found the opposite to what you are describing. Many of the innovations we looked at were focused on including the poorest. Participation was seen as something that the poor have to do: "you don't have to do it unless you've got problems". It then creates an imbalance.

Comment: The decline of the churches is said to be an important factor in this country. Was this different in Latin America?

JH In Nicaragua, the Catholic Church is so bound up with the state. Power sharing goes on with the church at every national election. The Catholic Church has a say in

how some state funding is allocated, and significant foreign donations are channelled through the evangelical churches, particularly from North America.

MT I have been very interested in the history of dissent in the UK third sector and the role of the churches, particularly the role of non-conformist churches. When I was talking about the loss of unions I could also have talked about the loss of churches and chapels. However, I am aware that an organisation like London Citizens is essentially a church-based organisation, so actually there may well be seeds of change coming from that direction.

Comment: One of the things that I have not heard today is some analysis of where the drive for participation and consultation comes from. One of the problems in looking at participation in this country is that the drive for participation comes from central government, but then that has to be implemented at a different level. From my experience, how those people would implement it and view that participation is then really critical as to whether it will succeed or not. If they view it as a burden imposed by government it is unlikely to work. If they see there is some purpose to it then it is different. We tend to talk about participation in generalisations when in fact it needs to be disaggregated; we need to look at participation in a particular locality.

Comment: I am very uncomfortable with the use of the term community as if there is an undifferentiated set of people who have the same interests and the same power relationships. There are hugely different interests in every community. Who finds these participatory spaces, who finds the time to take part, who has the money to do it, who can learn to speak in public is very important. From my experience which is mainly in Africa, gender is one of the main determinants of whether or not you get access to any of this or not. Within this country I think there is a whole raft of factors related to education and wealth.

MT I talked earlier on about the difference between voluntary organisations that are more professionalised and more service oriented, and community organisations that were often not professionalised. One of the real problems at the end of the study was that the local authority decided to rationalise its funding and give it to one organisation rather than to several which represented different parts of the community. So funding of two of the networks we studied had been cut. There are now real question marks about how the groups they used to support will be represented in the future. This relates to the point made about central government. Central government told local authorities that they must involve people and provided funding for different parts of the community to engage. But it has now devolved this funding to local authorities and so a number of networks that used to get community empowerment funding have been cut.

This is an enormously complex topic. Participation – it is easy to talk about it, but it is enormously difficult to find ways of supporting communities to speak with a single voice when it is important that they do so, and to speak with very many diverse voices when it is important that difference is recognised. It is also very difficult to balance that with the desire of local authorities to find simple manageable solutions. It feels very managerial at times.

Time and time again the problems with participation have been identified. We really need to go further than that and look at what will really make culture changes within the system. This is going to be a very uncomfortable discussion. Let's be realistic about power; not many people want to give it up. The next thing we have to do is convince people in the public sector that they do get empowered by engaging with other people.

HB There is the fundamental point about people participating as individuals. It is about really getting to grips with the role of organisations as being a voice for other people, the value of the individual voice and also about space for deliberation. Looking at the opportunities for individual voices within each process is really important.

Regarding the role of central government – one of the very interesting things about participatory budgeting in this country is that it began with about ten pilots at a local level. Then national government got excited about it and now wants to develop a participatory budget model. There is quite an interesting dynamic going on between central government and the more experienced practitioners at a local level who are saying "it's really good that you're very supportive but actually local innovation is important too".

KG In response to the question about where the drive for participation comes from and who implements it – as I see it that is one of the big gaps in the Government's thinking on participation at the moment. There are these huge ambitions, many requirements and duties but very little thought seems to have been put into the fact that people, especially in local councils, are going to have to find a way of building all these new practices into their work. When ideas and processes become models and duties, they invariably become burdens for some. I do not know how that can be sorted before April when these requirements and duties come into force.

Biographies

Marilyn Taylor University of the West of England

Marilyn Taylor is Professor of Urban Governance and Regeneration at the University of the West of England in Bristol. She has been involved in research on community engagement, neighbourhood renewal, the third sector and partnership working for many years and is the author of *Public Policy in the Community* (Palgrave 2003). Relevant research in recent years includes the evaluations of the CLG's Community Participation Programmes and of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Neighbourhood Programme, as well as jointly leading early research on the Compact between government and the third sector. She has also led two ESRC funded research studies on the role and experience of third sector organisations in governance and policy, the second of which is the subject of this seminar presentation. She was a Trustee of the Urban Forum for six years and is now a member of NCVO's Advisory Council.

Joanna Howard University of the West of England

Joanna Howard is a Research Fellow at the University of the West of England, Bristol. Her work focuses on the third sector, citizen participation and local governance. She has carried out research in Latin America and Europe as well as within the UK, on citizen involvement in partnership-working and neighbourhood renewal. She has worked on the national evaluations of Neighbourhood Management, Local Strategic Partnerships and New Deal for Communities, with a particular interest in community participation in partnerships. Prior to her academic career, she worked in international development in Central America, with a focus on capacity building projects with local community organisations.

Heather Blakey University of Bradford

Heather is a researcher with the International Centre for Participation Studies (ICPS) at Bradford University. The ICPS takes a participatory approach to research, seeking to bring together different kinds of knowledge, from communities and practitioners as well as academics. She is particularly interested in thinking about how communities and community organisations can act on their own agenda in decision-making spaces (rather than responding to pre-existing agendas) and in participatory research. She has worked on the Bradford case study for the 'Municipal Innovations in Public Participation: UK and Latin America' research presented at this seminar, and is currently following developments in Participatory Budgeting in the UK. As well as working at Bradford University, she is active in local environmental and community-based organisations in Bradford.

Karin Gavelin Involve

Karin is a project manager and researcher at Involve. She currently leads on Involve's research on effective consultation with the third sector, and she is the project manager for Involve and NCC's Principles for Deliberative Public Engagement. Other recent projects include a study of the relationship between public participation and community cohesion, a citizens conference on the ageing population in Jersey, advising Ofsted and the Food Standard Agency on their public engagement strategies, and a research project on attitudes to public engagement in the civil service. Her practical experience of participation includes facilitating Westminster City Council's Area Forums and Involve workshops.

Karl Wilding NCVO

Dr Karl Wilding is NCVO's Head of Research. His research interests include mapping the changing third sector economy and the relationship between new technologies and philanthropy. He is a trustee of the Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector (ARVAC), a trustee of St Albans CVS, and an Honorary Senior Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Charity Effectiveness, Cass Business School in London. He is also a co-investigator for the ESRC/OTS Giving and Philanthropy Research Centre.

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The director of the NGPA programme, Professor Jude Howell, is based at the Centre for Civil Society, in the department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics. For more information about the Centre, go to www.lse.ac.uk/ccs



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