Applying the lessons learnt: community involvement in regeneration.

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Abstract

The relationship between learning and regeneration is complex. In this paper I draw upon examples of community involvement in regeneration policy and practice to provide a discussion of some elements of this relationship. The popularity of community involvement is outlined and some of the key lessons that can be drawn from recent and past research on the topic are highlighted. I suggest that many of these lessons are not being applied and provide some suggestions for why this may be the case. The paper concludes that central Government could examine mechanisms to enable the application of both individual and organisational learning.

The popularity of community involvement

The issue of community involvement in regeneration has received considerable attention in England (and elsewhere) since the 1980s (Robinson & Shaw, 1991; Atkinson & Cope, 1997). The issue has been of importance to regeneration since the 1960s and the deployment of the Urban Programme, however, it was the analyses of the Thatcher government's neo-liberal market-led experiments in urban regeneration during the 1980s that focused our attention clearly on the 'community' and their 'role' in regeneration processes and outcomes. Indeed, a plethora of critiques highlighted the travesties in policy that were "not about improving the lives of disadvantaged people and communities" (Robinson *et al*, 2005:13), but more about promoting physical redevelopment, economic leverage of private sector monies for public sector investment, and with claims that such benefits would 'trickle-down' to local people (deprived communities) in the longer term (Brownill, 1990; Imrie & Thomas, 1993). There were numerous calls for community-based regeneration initiatives, bottom-up approaches to counteract the perceived failures of the top-down market driven approaches that dominated the 1980s (Smith & Schlesinger, 1993).

The Government responded to such calls with City Challenge in 1991 and the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) in 1994, both of which stressed the role of local communities in the development of regeneration strategies, in partnership with local government, the private sector and voluntary bodies. SRB was also characterised by an emphasis upon the allocation of funds in a competitive manner, leading to criticisms of the programme as a 'beauty contest', with inherent geographic bias and limited equity (Oatley, 1998). In addition, whilst there were efforts to engender community engagement, these often amounted to little more than consultation with affected communities (Atkinson & Cope, 1997; Colenutt & Cutten, 1994; Davoudi & Healey; 1995).

Towards the end of the 1990s, the newly emergent Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) significantly influenced regeneration policy and practices. The SEU was established by the 'New Labour' Government in 1997 in order to reduce 'social exclusion'. There was a recognition that previous approaches had failed to set "in motion the virtuous circle of regeneration" (SEU, 1998:9). Upon election the Government set about undertaking a comprehensive review of regeneration policy, which was largely led by the work of the SEU (Tiesdell & Allmendinger, 2001). In 1998 the SEU published *Bringing Britain Together: A National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal*, which stressed the need to learn key lessons, including the need to involve communities and not 'parachuting' in solutions. This is a theme that has become a mantra for neighbourhood renewal policy,

> *"unless the community is fully engaged in shaping and delivering regeneration, even the best plans on paper will fail to deliver in practice" (Tony Blair in SEU, 2000:5)*

It was considered necessary to build the confidence of communities and encourage residents to 'help themselves' (SEU, 2000). Policies and initiatives, developed under New Labour, such as New Deal for Communities (NDC), reflected attempts to tackle

some forms of social exclusion by 'empowering' certain communities, groups or individuals to have a more 'inclusive' role in society (Duncan & Thomas, 2000). There now exists a distinct focus upon the enabling of 'governance', working in partnership with community and local institutions to deliver initiatives, and a move away from controlling 'government' (Tiesdell & Allmendinger, 2001). Yet evidence suggests that regeneration initiatives (and other aspects of local governance) are not adequately involving local communities (Anastacio *et al*, 2000; Banks & Shenton, 2001; Hattingh Smith, 2006; Lucas *et al*, 2003; Robinson *et al*, 2005; Taylor, 2003). Have we failed to learn *something* important? Do recent analyses of regeneration policy and practice point to key lessons that should be applied, and if so, why are they not being applied?

Some key lessons to be learned

Numerous authors have highlighted some key lessons that should have been learnt in terms of regeneration management and community involvement over the past 40 years. Perhaps one of the most important issues, highlighted by a number of authors, is that of definitions: what is a community? what is involvement? 'Community' is a very slippery concept (Cochrane, 2003), and may be thought of as groups of people defined by geography, identity or interest (Robinson *et al,* 2005). Thus, communities can be rather diverse, and in many instances conflictual and perverse (Banks & Shenton, 2001), not all members of the community hold the same beliefs or have the same needs. This makes the issue of community *representation* a difficult one, if the community is considered to be a homogenous mass then its diversity is ignored and true *representation* is not really achieved (Kearns & Turok, 2000). The problematics of defining 'involvement' can further muddy the waters, ranging from information provision to citizen control (Atkinson & Cope, 1997). In current regeneration policy, community involvement is largely regarded as being about governance and the participation of residents in decision-making in local partnerships (Robinson *et al*,

2005). However, achieving community involvement in governance is fraught with difficulties. Here, I would like to explore two interrelated themes from recent research findings: exclusionary structures and languages; and participation fatigue.

Robinson *et al* (2005:16) suggests that members of the community who do get involved in regeneration governance find it a frustrating and thankless exercise, and that most people,

> *"are unwilling or unable to spend their time in a seemingly never-ending series of meetings trying to make sense of bureaucratic jargon and procedures".*

Elsewhere I have highlighted the problematics of discourse disjuncture between regeneration managers and local people (see Smith, 2004 and Hattingh Smith, 2006). I found that local people spoke passionately about wanting to be involved in regeneration but that they found it hard to understand the structures and languages of the (regeneration) games they were involved in. They were frustrated by the need to move quickly in order to get bids in, demonstrate achievement or spend funding, as this often meant their views were sought by regeneration managers in a consultation process rather than a fully engaged participatory way which fostered community ownership. And this was not necessarily the fault of the managers but rather the structures imposed by central Government which provide limited (or frequently no) funds for engaging communities in project planning during the bidding process and have, more recently, introduced the 'straight-jacket' of performance management criteria by which managers have to manage, and demonstrate success and 'best value'.

The various structures, partnerships and networks that regeneration initiatives are delivered via provide limited 'space' for local people to engage or be engaged, with so many others already at the table (Hattingh Smith, 2006). Furthermore, the proliferation of initiatives (one regeneration manger referred to this as *'initiative-itis'*) over time has often left communities confused and increasingly suspicious or

fatigued (Diamond & Southern, 2007). Community representatives face considerable pressures, they are often unpaid, unelected and required to *speak for* their 'community'. This is problematic, as noted above, because they may not necessarily be representative. In addition, the more they learn to play the game (come to understand the structures and languages) the more likely they are to be viewed with suspicion by their fellow community members (Skidmore *et al*, 2006). Getting involved initially can be difficult due to numerous barriers, such as timing and location of meetings (often set for the convenience of paid practitioners) (Robinson *et al*, 2005); childcare provision (one manager told me of a practitioner who would not provide childcare as he assumed there were sufficient 'single-mums' in the community to provide this on a free basis); access and transport (often the needs of disabled people, those on low incomes or in remoter areas are not considered). One community activist told me that 'confidence' is a key barrier but even if that is overcome people are concerned about many other issues, such as how their state benefits might be affected if they participate. The same person also complained of meeting overload, being constantly sought as a representative by other partnerships (as a known entity) and acting as an on-site 24 hour, 7 days a week consultant for neighbours.

All of these points, plus the many others highlighted in recent literature (see for instance, Robinson *et al*, 2005) present key lessons to be applied in current and future policy and practice. But most will recognise these points as nothing desperately new or enlightening, many regeneration managers and researchers have known about these issues for some time. So the question becomes why is it taking so long to learn from the lessons not only of the past (specifically the disasters of the 1980s) but also current policy contexts? In order to provide some, albeit tentative, explanations for this schism in learning it is important to first consider how 'learning' takes place or might do in the context of regeneration.

How do we learn?

The educational literature provides a substantive critique of the various modes of learning, such as the experiential learning cycle, 4-stage learning cycles, learning styles, the learning curve, situated learning and cognitive dissonance (Kolb, 1984; Juch, 1983; Honey & Mumford, 1982; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Neighbour, 1992 Ramsden, 1992; Race, 2005; Reynolds, 1965). It is not the purpose of this paper to engage in debates over the merits (or disadvantages) of such models, I intend to accept the notion that there are roughly four stages (ordinarily running in a cycle) to the processes via which we individually learn (in regeneration practice):

1. Doing- deploying a regeneration project.
2. Observing- obtaining first hand experience of how the project runs.
3. Reflecting- considering the highs and lows, where things could be built upon, changed or improved. Action planning for change.
4. Applying- implementing the carefully considered changes.

Furthermore, organisations have the capacity to learn, by maintaining or improving their performance based upon experience (DiBella *et al*, 1996). The relationship between individual and organisation learning is complex, and I will return to this shortly. The points here to note are that learning can be positive (even where outcomes are negative) and that whilst it is the individual who learns, they may be able to impact upon the group culture and the overall organisation (Dodgson, 1993). Organisations may be able to invoke a double loop in learning, where,

> *"single loop learning denotes the correction of errors and modification of action in pursuit of known existing goals. Double loop learning indicates that the learning process itself is turned back on goals and assumptions with the possible outcome of organisational transformation" (Fenwick & McMillan, 2005:44)*

In terms of regeneration this could lead to experience based learning that transforms not only regeneration policy but also cultures.

Failure to apply

Given the key lessons in community involvement that would *seem* to have been learned since the 1980s, as outlined above, it is concerning to find so much evidence that the lessons have not been applied- the fourth stage of the learning cycle is missing. The aim here is to provide some tentative explanations for this apparent lack of application. Firstly, when taking into account individual learning we must consider the capacity of that person to learn. For instance, regeneration managers increasingly take on new roles and responsibilities in increasingly more complicated networks, with varying scales and territories. Diamond & Liddle (2005) question whether they have the relationship management skills necessary for such work, particularly in terms of enabling communities to tackle some very entrenched neighbourhood problems.

Secondly, and related, the structures and languages within which the managers have to work can hamper learning. As noted above, community involvement can be diminished due to the overly complex exclusionary structures and languages imposed upon regeneration initiatives (usually by central government) this may also have an effect on learning. For instance, the short-termism and proliferation of many initiatives has left regeneration managers with limited time or space to actually reflect upon what they have done before they need to be preparing new bids to secure funding for their posts or the various projects. This reflection is an integral part of the learning process. Furthermore, the managers may learn what works best in their locales but the de-contextualised nature of recent policy (Diamond & Southern, 2007), whereby funding is provided on a 'needs' basis, with those needs being defined by external agencies (usually central government), means that there is limited opportunity to apply any lessons that have been learnt. This has further hampered attempts at community involvement. In addition, regeneration managers may face opposition at the local level when trying to implement their 'learning',

especially given the multitude of networks and other organisations involved in regeneration processes.

Maintaining the *status quo*, continuing to do things as they have always been done is attractive in risk adverse environments, which are common when policy contexts shift so frequently. There may also be cultural barriers to implementation or even rivalries, between individuals and/or organisations. All of which hinder learning at the local level on an individual and organisational basis, for instance,

> *"individuals within an organisation may feed their 'learned' conclusions into the life of that organisation, but the results of this are not predictable: they are mediated by the individual's place in the hierarchy, their relationships with superiors or subordinates, and the existing culture of the organisation" (Fenwick & McMillan, 2005:45)*

In terms of organisational learning we must consider not only the local organisations but also the national ones that have such influence on policy and initiatives. Indeed, I would, perhaps controversially, question whether it is central Government that is largely failing to apply the lessons? This is a somewhat simplistic response to a very complex situation, however, there may be some merit in it. I outlined above that regeneration managers are working in exclusionary structures of legitimacy that have been largely imposed by central government and that these are stifling community involvement and individual learning. Furthermore, regeneration managers are constantly engaged in systems of performance management and evaluation, which may allow for lessons to be learned as they will *force* reflection (given that evidence must be gathered and performance leagues are often published) (Fenwick & McMillan 2005), but can they bring about change when so many of the targets are centrally set?

Central Government has been particularly concerned about learning and skills development for residents and regeneration managers and published the *Learning Curve* a strategy to address these issues in 2003 (NRU, 2003); it states that:

> *"Formal training programmes need to emphasis the new knowledge and skills for working effectively in deprived areas. They need to create opportunities for people to learn across boundaries and to recognise the importance of learning from real life experiences. **But once lessons are learnt, they must be applied**." (NRU, 2003:8 emphasis added)*

However, the strategy says very little about how central Government will learn lessons and then apply them. Since the 1980s we have seen successive governments employ major public service reform strategies, with limited consideration of "'what public services should change into…meaning that many government strategies have either resulted in an inordinate amount of repetitive legislation or attempts to rectify the failings of previous legislation" (Fenwick & McMillan, 2005:51). Perhaps it is time to stop *'throwing the baby out with the bath water"* and attempt to apply some of the significant lessons that have been learnt in terms of community involvement. Furthermore, central Government could consider ways of enabling the local level to break down the exclusionary structures of legitimacy.

Summary

In this paper I have suggested that the relationship between learning and regeneration is complex and that, in terms of community involvement, lessons are being learnt but invariably are not being applied. For instance, the key barriers to involvement tend to derive from the complex and exclusionary structures and discourses of regeneration, such as the funding initiatives, jargon, short time scales and so on. Furthermore, it is the very same structures and discourses that are hindering both individual and organisational learning. It would appear that central Government are imposing regimes upon localities that make it difficult to apply lessons learnt. There is limited space for reflection (an integral part of the learning process) and application of lessons in an environment dominated by short-termism, initiative-itis, de-contextualised initiatives, multiple networks, risk adverse

environments, cultural barriers and performance management. In terms of community involvement, the inability to apply lessons learnt means that a vicious cycle of distrust, disengagement and general apathy are perpetuated, and this is surely in direct contrast to the aims of regeneration. Central Government should examine mechanisms to enable the application of both individual and organisational learning at all levels to prevent any further deterioration in community involvement. Furthermore, by exploring learning in regeneration and the application of lessons the overall impact, and not just community involvement, of regeneration will improve.

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