

creativity and learning – participatory planning and the co-production of local knowledge

Joanne Tippett surveys the state of the art and prospects for community participation in the light of recent experience with the development and use of a hands-on toolkit for engagement



Photos: Joanne Tippett

Left

Participants using Ketso in community planning with the Fellside Forum, a neighbourhood group in Kendal

There is now little debate as to whether participation in planning is important. From the 1960s and the Skeffington Report¹ onwards, we have seen many initiatives to increase participation and civic engagement,² which in turn have led to an

interest in 'co-production' of service delivery. The Coalition Government's current emphasis on localism in planning and public services is based not only on the case for efficiency, but also on effectiveness and social justice.



Above

Fifty participants explored the social and cultural costs and benefits of migration to Scotland at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)

The last decade of research at CURE (the Centre for Urban and Regional Ecology) has explored ways to improve the quality and effectiveness of participation. 'Real' participation needs to involve as broad a range of stakeholders as possible, and should take place early in the decision-making process so that ideas actually can be taken on board (and so that people feel they can have a real influence on outcomes).

The nature of the participatory process itself has a great impact on whether community members and participants from different sectors and areas of technical expertise are able to learn from each other and efficiently develop ideas together. In particular, it helps to have a way to blend ideas together, where everyone is able to make an input and see their ideas develop into a larger picture. It is important to allow space for non-experts to explore their own understanding, and to see how this fits with other people's knowledge and perceptions, including differences of opinion. For instance, residents in a flood risk area might have very different perceptions of risk than those of water engineers, and effective solutions need to take these into account.

We have learned a lot about making participatory processes more effective. Unfortunately, however, the participation often still does not 'add up'. Efforts rarely build on earlier work. People get frustrated when they feel they are being asked again about the same issues that they have already talked about, leading to consultation fatigue. Engagement

is still often carried out in silos, with little attempt to 'join up' ideas and actions between sectors. Participation is not only about technical details, but also about building 'adaptive capacity' – an essential component of resilience in the face of change. Participation also needs to be seen as part of a larger process, which seeks to address inequalities and the influence of vested power and wealth.

Effecting these changes is not simple, and current policy dilemmas such as the 'fracking' debate are highlighting the gaps and barriers in the system. However, there are over 40 years of experience that we can learn from, in both urban and rural planning, and from high-level strategies to local projects.

Research focus and results

During the last decade, the research focus has moved from 'Why engage?' to 'How to make engagement really effective?', and in particular to a more critical view of power, recognising that community engagement can often be manipulated or misused, or can even deepen existing inequalities. Doubts that any change will result from engagement are heightened by worries that participatory processes can be abused and manipulated by vocal or politically savvy stakeholders and lobbyists. We need to develop new tools and approaches that mitigate these tendencies.

In response, CURE researchers are engaging with Greater Manchester as a 'living laboratory' for

Box 1 KETSO - an award-winning, hands-on kit for creative engagement

Each component of the Ketso toolkit is designed to embody a key principle of community engagement or creative thinking, identified through action research with 51 stakeholders and residents.ⁱ Uniquely, the form of the toolkit guides the facilitator through the process. For instance, in recognition of the value of metaphors in encouraging different ways of thinking, and of starting with the positive rather than problems, different-coloured 'leaves' embody these metaphors visually.

Ketso is now used in community and environmental planning at all levels, from parish councils to national government, in workshops with over 8,000 people in 27 countries. Further research into co-production of knowledge (in Peru) has demonstrated that the physicality of Ketso helps to give everyone a voice.ⁱⁱ It allows blending of technical and lay information, which generates innovation and knowledge that 'sticks'. In 2011, Ketso was the main engagement tool for over 450 people in Renfrewshire's Annual Community Planning Conference, and is now used in engagement and strategy meetings across Renfrewshire Council. In 2013 Ketso was awarded a commendation for its 'contribution towards positive community engagement' by the Royal Town Planning Institute North West.

It has to be remembered that Ketso is just a tool, and does not replace the need to plan a broader engagement strategy in order to get a wide range of people involved. What it does allow, however, is a creative and non-threatening exploration of ideas and insights that might not otherwise be heard. A 2013 public sector and NGO workshop produced a shared agreement that Ketso is unique in its ability to 'not only surface new thoughts but also to provide a credible and traceable evidence base for recommendations that emerge from consultation'. This led to Ketso being used as the key tool for engagement in the Refugees in Scotland's Communities project, looking at integration across the public sector.

Further information is available from the Ketso website, at www.ketso.com

- i B. Willis: 'This land is our land'. *Source*, 2003, Issue 2, 12-15 (Mersey Basin Campaign publication). www.ketso.com/sites/default/files/docs/Source_Ketso_in_Irk_Valley_article_only.pdf
- ii C. Furlong and J. Tippett: 'Returning knowledge to the community: an innovative approach to sharing knowledge about drinking water practices in a peri-urban community'. *Journal of Water, Sanitation & Hygiene for Development*, 2013 (in press – doi:10.2166/washdev.2013.071). www.iwaponline.com/washdev/up/washdev2013071.htm

developing and testing ideas (see, for example, <http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/architecture/research/ecocities/>). The value of such interaction is shown by research on 'non-structural responses to urban pluvial flooding'.³ Exploring the social factors that impede people's take-up of household-based flood resilience measures threw up some crucial issues overlooked by 'top-down' policy processes: for example, flood resilience measures could make it obvious that the house is liable to flooding, thus impacting property values and insurance costs; and any visible measures that have to be put in place in advance of flooding highlights that people are away from home, increasing the risk of burglary.

These and similar findings were taken forward into further collaboration: the EU FP7-funded SMARTeST project looked into 'smart' flood resilience across the EU. This research resulted in a simple yet robust six-step process for implementing flood resilience measures, underpinned by community involvement.⁴

CURE conducts research in a collaborative fashion, with researchers working in partnership with stakeholders to ask fundamental questions.

This has led to novel findings and insights. An action research project into community engagement in ecological planning, undertaken as an ESRC-funded PhD with the Mersey Basin Campaign and the Irk Valley Project in Manchester, showed that the *form* of participation had an important influence on both the results and the perceived value of the participation to stakeholders.⁵ A striking finding was the value of starting with the positive, and asking people 'What works?' and 'What do you like in your area?', rather than 'What are the problems?'. This leads to an atmosphere more conducive to creative thinking, and it also shifts the dynamics of power. Instead of the planner or facilitator being the 'expert' who is there to solve the community's problems, everyone is engaged in working out how to make the most of what the community has.

This research led to the development of a new, hands-on tool for engaging with community members and citizens, which has since launched as the social business Ketso (see Box 1). This new form of community engagement is a physical product to complement the online innovations represented by the GRaBS and Synergy Forum online tools, discussed

elsewhere in this issue. In this hands-on way, CURE research has contributed to shifts in our understanding of community and stakeholder engagement.

Prospects

Despite the progress outlined above, we often lack the means to learn from participation, both over time and between different types of consultation (neighbourhood planning, health and environment, for example). There is also a lack of integration – between local and larger levels of scale, across sectors, across geographical areas, and among different types of professionals. The barriers to

understand the dynamics of turning participatory data (often qualitative, subjective, and even contradictory) into trustworthy knowledge that can promote action.

The next great challenge is to get this learning more widely incorporated into planning procedures at every level.

Conclusions

Given the challenges facing public services in an era of austerity, and the need to enhance resilience in the face of climate change, economic austerity and social tensions, we need to apply what we have learned over the last few decades and continue developing new approaches to participation.

New participatory approaches could help break down the ‘silo’ mentality currently holding back integration of local planning, environment, health, social services, education, energy, the economy, housing and transport. Meanwhile, with current social trends, we cannot assume that a ‘local community’ is a coherent body with clear views – many urban neighbourhoods, and some rural, are more like crossroads of overlapping social/cultural groups and networks, and this can only increase the challenge of effective participation. The next decades of research and innovation in participation and engagement give us a chance to reconsider approaches to social learning and community resilience, to develop both new ideas for the future and practical actions to achieve them.

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Notes

- 1 A. Skeffington: *People and Planning*. Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning (‘Skeffington Report’). HMSO, 1969
- 2 T. Ray: *Community Planning and Community-Led Development: The Impact of the ‘Localism’ Agenda on Learning and Teaching*. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Team. The Higher Education Academy, 2012. www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/disciplines/built_environment/Community_Planning_Report_2012.pdf
- 3 I. Douglas, S. Garvin, N. Lawson, J. Richards, J. Tippett and I. White: ‘Urban pluvial flooding: a case study of cause, effect and nonstructural mitigation’. *Journal of Flood Risk Management*, 2010, Vol. 3 (2), 112-25
- 4 I. White, P. O’Hare, N. Lawson, S. Garvin and A. Connelly: *Six Steps to Flood Resilience: Guidance for Local Authorities and Professionals*. SMARTeST project report. University of Manchester/BRE/Manchester Metropolitan University, 2103. www.bre.co.uk/page.jsp?id=3187
- 5 J. Tippett, J.F. Handley and J. Ravetz: ‘Meeting the challenges of sustainable development – a conceptual appraisal of a new methodology for participatory ecological planning’. *Progress in Planning*, 2007, Vol. 67 (1), 9-98

‘New participatory approaches could help break down the ‘silo’ mentality currently holding back integration of local planning, environment, health, social services, education, energy, the economy, housing and transport’

effective engagement, as discussed earlier, are very real, and are being exacerbated by ‘austerity’ cuts. In response, the next frontier of research is likely to involve more joined-up models of participation, to develop synergistic solutions that cross traditional boundaries. We urgently need to understand how best to learn from participatory processes not just as one-off events, but over time, building a dynamic repository of knowledge, in at least three interlocking dimensions:

- knowledge about place – outcomes from participation in local planning and service delivery should be built into a learning resource, which in principle should cover every neighbourhood in the land, available to professionals and the public;
- knowledge about innovations and solutions – across geographical areas and sectors (this suggests a social media type of ‘good practice database’, linked to the contextual factors that need to be taken into account for successful adaptation); and
- knowledge about participatory processes – developing knowledge and skills about effective and equitable processes for engaging with communities and stakeholders.

We need to explore the interaction of face-to-face communication (enabled by physical toolkits such as Ketso) with online tools and resources, particularly social media. Such research would help us better