

Community Engagement — Explanations, Limits and Impacts

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Abstract

Community engagement and citizen participation have long been important themes in liberal democratic theory. But managerial and elitist versions of liberal democracy have typically been dominant. In the past two decades, however, many countries have seen a shift away from a managerial or top-down approach, towards a revitalised emphasis on building institutional bridges between governmental leaders and citizenry.

This paper outlines some of the main explanations for this shift, and notes the variety of levels requiring attention — including local, regional, national and international. Explanations for the increased attention to community engagement have drawn attention to several factors, including international trends in governance and political economy, the availability of improved communications technologies, the need to share responsibility for resolving complex issues, and the local politics of managing social/economic projects.

The literature on community engagement includes a wide range of approaches that document and promote both the increased usage and the possible benefits of community engagement. Indeed, much of the literature on this topic is enmeshed in advocacy for particular models and solutions. This paper, by contrast, attempts to steer a course through both the descriptive and normative analyses, and to suggest some key distinctions and questions about context, purpose, process and benefit.

Some critical perspectives are also raised, suggesting a degree of scepticism about the intentions of government, and implying serious limits on the potential influence of the citizenry. Some distinctions are drawn between the viewpoint of the governmental elites (in relation to purposes, limits and benefits) and the viewpoint of the community groups and NGOs on these matters. Some other distinctions are drawn between policy arenas, in terms of the different dynamics and opportunities in different policy fields. Above all, the importance of building effective capacity for citizens and NGOs to participate is emphasised.

Introduction: terminology

The term 'community' is notoriously vague and value-laden. It is often a euphemistic term which glosses over the social, economic and cultural differentiation of localities or peoples. It often implies a (false and misleading) sense of identity, harmony, cooperation and inclusiveness. Its symbolic value explains much about its widespread usage in political

discourse. Many years ago, the discourse of 'community' was aptly criticised as a 'spray-on solution' for a range of social and economic issues (Bryson and Mowbray 1981). This problem has intensified rather than been overcome. New variants of 'community' programs and 'community' engagement continue to multiply, encouraged by politicians, policy-makers, and even those social organisations usually identified as grassroots and 'community-based'.

Citizen participation and involvement have long been important themes in both the normative and descriptive forms of liberal-democratic theory. In particular, the reformist and developmental orientations in democratic theory have championed the notion of 'active citizens' who participate in a range of policy or institutional settings. The managerial or realist orientation in democratic theory, by contrast, has drawn attention to the inherent elitism of professional bureaucracies and representative government, and has urged us to accept the inevitability of the 'democratic deficit' – the gap between democratic ideals and managerial reality. Although the managerial and elitist versions of democracy have typically been dominant in all democratic countries, it is noteworthy that there have been significant shifts away from this model in many countries during recent decades.

The terms 'engagement' (which suggests an ongoing and active relationship) and 'consultation' (which could perhaps be seen as more episodic) have been used in a variety of social, political and program contexts. There has also been much critical commentary on the inadequacies of the managerial or top-down approach, both in industrial societies and in developing countries.

There has been a revitalised emphasis on building institutional bridges between governmental leaders and citizenry (Lovan et al. 2004; Vigoda 2002). These institutional relationships between the governmental and non-government sectors are generally mediated through organisations and institutional forums, rather than being directly expressed in face-to-face relations between large numbers of people. 'Inclusiveness' is therefore often seen in terms of interests and viewpoints, mediated through groups and associations; rather than seen in terms of direct and comprehensive social involvement. Any useful typology of social involvement needs to register this range of forms and differences.

In this discussion, I have adopted the conventional threefold classification of 'sectors', distinguishing between the government sector (based on law, public authority and public finances), the private business sector (based on private investment and purchasing power), and the community or third sector. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, the 'community' sector does not include all of the 'non-government' sector. In particular, major business groups are not included in this discussion of 'community engagement', because their power base is quite different from the social interests represented by the third sector.

Types of community involvement

Participation by citizens in processes to identify and resolve social problems may cover a wide range of topics and include many different organisational forms. A large number of processes are potentially available. On the one hand, *governments* may show initiative and encouragement by providing rich and diverse information to groups, undertake surveys of group and public opinion, consult with key players, establish forums and advisory boards, delegate powers and funds to community bodies, and outsource implementation responsibilities. On the other hand, *citizens*, business and community groups may decide to take independent or additional actions outside the formal channels established by public institutions, e.g. lobbying, protesting, establishing new forums for dialogue, establishing coalitions of support, developing community action plans, etc. (OECD 1996; Bishop and Davis 2002).

The structured opportunities for *participation*, whether provided through official channels or created through direct group action, may be weak or strong, narrow or broad, episodic or continuing. It is widely recognised that there is a continuum or 'ladder' of possible participatory forms. These forms of participation range from information-sharing, to formal consultation on proposals, through to various types of partnership, delegated power and ultimately citizen control (Arnstein 1969; Walters et al. 2000; Ross et al. 2002). Advocates of stronger forms of participation draw attention to the dangers of tokenism and manipulation that may be found in some of the weaker examples of consultation.

Utilisation of participatory processes will also depend on the organisational *capacity* of citizens or the community sector to become involved. The community sector (as with the business sector) comprises a shifting range of unorganised, partially organised and well organised stakeholders. Their capacity and interest in interaction and engagement will vary widely. Organisational theories concerned with interest 'structuration' (e.g. Atkinson and Coleman 1989) draw attention to whether the overall system of NGO interests is either fragmented or is centralised in a few large organisations (Casey 2004). In view of the diversity and inequalities among groups, it would be unrealistic to expect equal capacity for participation in new participatory governance arrangements across all sectors of organised and unorganised interests.

Organised representation of interests through NGOs and advocacy groups is an inevitable feature of social organisation. Thus, a key issue is whether the NGOs themselves are seen as legitimate and democratic by their membership (Papadopoulos 2003), i.e. whether they are fairly representative of members and whether the NGO leaders can speak for them. It is incumbent on public interest watchdogs and NGOs themselves to practise sound techniques for keeping in close touch with the people whom they represent.

Scope and scale

The challenge of implementing effective community involvement is radically different under a range of geographical and political/institutional situations. There are hugely different issues in developing effective approaches for various *spatial scales* — thus, what is useful and effective for a local or micro level may not be easily transposed to a broader provincial or sub-regional level. Similarly the national forms of community involvement in policy and program issues may be quite different from the dynamics of supranational arrangements (e.g. in the European Union), and in international and global forums. The role of international agencies in foreign aid and peace-keeping programs adds another layer of complexity.

A second challenge is to recognise and respond to the diversity of *problem/policy arenas* and the organisational forms that cluster around these arenas. For example, the relevant policy and administrative arenas might be divided into social, health, agricultural, industrial, transport, environmental, defence, internal security, etc.. These policy arenas will typically vary in terms of the openness or closure of group processes. Social policy has generally been open to many (though often weak) players, whereas industry and defence policy has tended to be the preserve of much tighter circles of influence.

One of the problems for participatory governance is the rigidity of traditional bureaucratic 'silos' (regulatory and organisational) that tend to dominate the public sector in each of these arenas. For the government sector, there are particular challenges around whether the public sector has sufficient capacity to coordinate its *own* behaviours across different policy/regulatory domains, and how effectively it can pursue 'joined-up' government coordination (Head 1999; Jackson 2003; MAC 2004). Yet, many of the new complex problems demanding attention actually span several issue arenas and agencies. The emerging strategies to address these challenges have increasingly taken a holistic view of policy problems and have involved a wide array of stakeholders who need to be part of the broader solutions. In a complex public sector there may be added requirements to achieve improved multi-level (vertical) governance coordination, e.g. between two or three levels of government.

Explaining the causes

Why has there been an international trend toward more participatory governance? Why has there been a renewed focus on *dialogue* between government and citizens, and deliberation among stakeholders in the process of deciding priorities and actions? Whereas governmental decision-making has always taken account of organised elites, the new approaches seek to emphasise a need for *inclusion* of broad constituencies and disadvantaged groups.

At the global level, the impetus for this reorientation comes from several sources, including a more 'society-centred' rethinking of social democracy in the late 1980s and the emergence of

so-called 'Third Way' approaches especially in the more advanced industrial countries (Giddens 1998). In Eastern Europe a major stimulus has been the debate over the institutional and cultural requirements for effective transition to democratic regimes and efficient market economies following the collapse of former communist regimes (King 2000; Kopecky and Mudde 2000), and consideration of the specific conditions on which new member-states would be admitted to an expanded European Union. Even before the fall of communism, some authors discerned a trend towards the rediscovery and revitalisation of civil society (Keane 1988a, 1988b), participation and partnerships. Moreover, international organisations such as the OECD (e.g. OECD 2001, 2003) and the United Nations (e.g. UNDP 1997; UNDESA 2003) have strongly espoused the benefits of participatory frameworks for good governance and for achieving enduring social benefits. Many writers assume that the inter-relationships between the governmental, business and community sectors are also becoming closer as a result of the globalisation of communications, technology, trade and commerce (Giddens 2001; Held and McGrew 2003). The availability of improved communications technologies is certainly an enabler, if not a driver, of the changes.

At a regional and national level, a more participatory approach has been linked to a growing awareness of the complexity and inter-connectedness of many problems, and the need to share responsibility for resolving these complex social and environmental issues (Luke 1992). At the local level, there is an increasing appreciation of the benefits of involving local citizens in identifying problems and contributing to the solutions.

Explaining motives and purposes

Community engagement is supposed to help solve community problems. But a broader understanding of community engagement requires some consideration of the motives, intentions and purposes of the three sectors — government, business groups, and the community sector — in participating in more intensive forms of participation and collaboration. Firstly, what are the motives of *government* in pursuing more inclusive governance?

- 'better informed' decision-making is often suggested as a rationale for the public sector facilitating deeper involvement of stakeholders
- broadening the base of responsibility for outcomes may allow a partial displacement of blame from the shoulders of the state, thus sharing more widely the responsibilities for success and failure
- devolution of responsibility is consistent with the managerialist doctrine of 'steering' rather than 'rowing' the ship of state
- creating a broader sense of civic involvement may assist in the restoration of 'trust' in the state and reduction in support for possible radical alternatives.

Secondly, what do *community groups* hope to gain from being involved in participatory processes and multi-stakeholder forums? For them above all, perhaps, the prospects of

change are most tantalising. NGOs in the community sector have been strongly encouraged by high-level international forums that have championed community engagement and social participation, such as the UN forums on sustainability beginning with Rio '92 and the decade of Agenda 21 aspirations culminating in Johannesburg 2002 (Lafferty 2001). Community groups hope through their participation to pursue several objectives:

- the prospect of greater voice and influence for the interests they represent
- seeking to fulfil the equity principle that people should be involved in issues affecting them
- the hope for better outcomes for ordinary citizens and disadvantaged groups
- possible opportunities for NGOs to obtain revenue growth to fund organisational growth and expansion of their influence.

Thirdly, it is important to understand the roles and motives of large *business groups* insofar as they become involved in participatory governance processes. The distinctive and often dominant nature of business involvement in public policy and in major projects has not been substantially undermined or displaced by the rise of community engagement politics, but multi-sectoral processes may change the pace or direction of change in some policy areas. Business interests remain very important for framing an analysis and understanding of community or third sector dynamics because: (i) business interests are often competitors with not-for-profit NGOs for publicly-funded service delivery contracts; (ii) business groups often sit alongside community groups in many types of multi-sector forums; and (iii) business involvement may indeed be essential for achieving solutions for many of the complex problems facing societies. Business groups may choose to become part of a broad multi-sectoral engagement process because:

- where new forums are established there are strong incentives for business interests to participate in order to maintain their positional influence and veto power, or to take a proactive role in shaping policy debates
- in particular, business may wish to suggest material incentives and voluntary industry codes (rather than enforceable regulatory standards) as the primary means to facilitate any necessary changed behaviours
- for some business interests there is value in demonstrating their belief in corporate social responsibility through involvement with other social interests in finding agreed solutions.

Explanations about benefits and impacts

Democratic values attribute positive outcomes arising from participatory involvement, with benefits for individuals and for society at large. 'Third way' ideology, with its scepticism about the primacy of government, attributes a positive democratic value to citizen empowerment and the revitalising of civil society (Reddel and Woolcock 2004). According to some commentators, 'managing for inclusion' could potentially achieve a helpful 'balance' between participation and control (Feldman and Khademian 2000).

The benefits of state involvement in the creation and sustenance of new forums are potentially substantial, providing that these important state powers of legitimacy and material resources are used wisely and benevolently (Akkerman et al. 2004), and without unintended effects that could undermine the spirit of the collaboration. But this perspective can still be somewhat technocratic or paternalistic, characterised by careful managerial control over the nature and extent of NGO input. There is also the danger that community input can be ‘co-opted and captured’ rather than accorded independent vitality (Singleton 2000).

At a practical level, there is a growing literature documenting the positive outcomes arising from the direct involvement of citizens in the assessment of needs and in deliberation about practical solutions (Adams and Hess 2001). Broader civic participation in ‘deliberative’ processes to consider important social issues is recommended for addressing deep and complex problems (Dryzek 2000; Warren 2001; Fung 2003). Citizen involvement, including the collaboration of groups across a spectrum of interests, can be vital for resolving community-based issues (Hemmati 2002; Innes and Booher 1999, 2003), such as the micro-politics of conflict over service provision, land-use planning, and infrastructure projects.

The consequence is that ‘new governance’ approaches have become more common, adopting the goals and rhetoric of devolved decision-making, community partnerships, and working across boundaries between sectors and levels (Lowndes and Skelcher 1998; Sullivan and Skelcher 2002; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000; Lasker et al. 2001; Mandell 2001). There is some enthusiasm for welcoming a possible future era of participatory and collaborative networks (Kooiman 1993; Kooiman 2000; Foreman 2002; Weber 2003).

But there is some room for doubt, in assessing this participatory governance literature, as to whether the enhanced participation is an expression of the growing influence of citizens and NGOs, or whether the new processes are largely the result of state-directed outsourcing and state-controlled devolution (Rhodes 1997, 2003). If community engagement is largely at the discretion of the state — and indeed is largely organised, shaped and subsidised by the state (Head and Ryan 2003; Head and Ryan 2004; Reddel 2004) — there must be some questions raised about its robustness and independent strength. Moreover, some unsuccessful experiences of ‘participation’ may be a result of poor management or bad faith by governments — e.g. in cases where people enter an apparently participatory process, only to find there is an absence of genuine devolution or meaningful involvement because the governmental sector is unwilling to forego control over processes and the shaping of results.

Evaluating effectiveness and limits

Community engagement and participatory processes clearly span a variety of practices and possibilities. This is no doubt part of the reason for the widespread lack of clarity over criteria for judging the effectiveness of participatory processes. This problem is exacerbated by the

(perhaps deliberate) vagueness of the terms under which many community engagement exercises are established.

Moreover, there are some serious unresolved issues in evaluation methodology concerning how to measure the effectiveness of multi-sectoral or network processes (Provan and Milward 2001). The first issue is to be clear about the purposes of evaluation — e.g. to promote learning and improvement, or to ensure procedural compliance (Behn 2003). The second issue is to find an appropriate balance of indicators that focus on both: (a) the quality of participatory and cooperative processes; and (b) program and service delivery outcomes. The third issue is to take account of organisational factors such as inequalities, capability-building, the time-scale for expecting results, funding arrangements, and the choice of specific structures for interactions.

Recognition of inequalities (power relations) is fundamental to understanding the dynamics and limits of organisational forms. This perspective is important in understanding the true character of recent governance literature that gives prominence to third sector 'partnerships' (Osborne 2000) and 'collaboration'. Concepts such as 'community partnership' are notoriously vague entities. In considering the actual relations embedded in new governance arrangements, it is useful to distinguish the relative power of the actors, the extent to which they bring resources to the shared forum, and the extent to which they agree to be bound by the outcomes (Kernaghan 1993). The evaluation process therefore needs to consider such issues, but seldom does so.

Capacity building is crucial for the overall success of participatory processes. Individuals and groups have very different starting points in terms of the knowledge and experience that contribute to effective participation (Cavaye 2004). Capacity building is necessary to improve the effectiveness of the processes, identifying and improving the informational and skills gaps of the weaker NGOs, thus enabling them to contribute more effectively to broader processes of discussion and deliberation (whether at local, regional or national level).

The time-scale for building results can be a very important dimension in collaborative exercises. Building capacity in organisational terms may be as important in the early years of a program as ensuring some tangible on-ground benefits for communities. Moreover, building *trust* and confidence among key participants (Alford 2002; Selin et al. 2000) can only be generated over time. This requires substantial effort and commitment as well as good faith.

NGOs and business can be as fractious and uncooperative as any other player. However, there is a particular obligation on government, as representative of the public interest and fairness, to ensure that its own role does not undermine the spirit and substance of inter-sectoral processes. There are some inherent costs arising from state control and sponsorship

of inclusive or participatory governance processes. This is because state agencies and political leaders usually:

- prefer to secure quick tangible wins (as against longer-term and less certain outcomes)
- seek to retain ultimate control through funding
- impose detailed reporting and compliance obligations on other stakeholders where public funding is provided
- demonstrate (covertly) their low trust of community NGOs when the latter are involved as managers or decision-makers (Yang 2005)
- pay little attention to learning from experience on 'why implementation fails'.

At the international level, similar points might be made about the dynamics and structuring of foreign aid programs in developing countries, whether sponsored by specific national governments (e.g. USAid, DFID, AusAid, etc.) or by large international institutions (e.g. World Bank), foundations and charities (e.g. Oxfam). At this level, effective outcomes are also jeopardised by the evident lack of coordination, and even competition, among the donor agencies.

Decisions about program design and organisational structures are vital to success in participatory processes (Curtain 2003). There are important issues about selecting an appropriate organisational form (with all its implications for leadership, resources, accountabilities, deliberative protocols, etc). It is useful to understand the key differences between specific forms of interaction among stakeholders. Some writers have drawn attention to a continuum, ranging from short-term voluntary cooperation around specific tasks, through to the longer-term relationships and commitments that are necessary to tackle intractable or complex issues. In brief, there are important differences between voluntary *cooperative* relationships, more formally *coordinated* joint activities, and long-term integrated *collaborative* activities that involve sharing power, resources and decision-making. Each type is suitable for addressing certain tasks and challenges, but not for others.

Table 1. Networked arrangements

Integration relationship	Duration	Goals/ perspective	Structural linkages	Formality	Risks/ rewards
Cooperation	Short term	Independent outcomes, participating organisations remain autonomous	Movement in and out by members, loose flexible links	Informal	Low risk/ modest reward
Coordination	Medium term; depends on previous working relations	Joint planning and programming, but members remain autonomous	Some stability of members, medium links and often central hub	Informal/ formal	Increase in risks and benefits up to a point
Collaboration	Longer term	New systems and operations Highly interdependent with sharing of power	Members move outside traditional functional areas, tight links	Formal	High risk/high reward

Source: Based on Brown and Keast (2003)

The complex literature on community engagement, partnering and collaboration suggests there are several important lessons to be drawn about the factors underlying successful community engagement and collaboration among diverse groups. These can be framed as learning challenges:

- Learning how to develop and refine common *directions and objectives*
- Learning how to build *relationships and trust*
- Learning to value the provision of *sufficient time* for building these directions and processes
- Learning how to make mutual adjustments and give up some demands
- Learning how to deal with reform fatigue
- Learning how to deal with the 'two hats' problem — members learning to reconcile their role inside the shared partnership and their different role inside their 'home' organisation.

While these are challenges for all participants, it is argued in this paper that the governmental sector has a special obligation to respond positively to these challenges because of its

significant role in structuring and sponsoring the broader forms of participatory governance (Edwards 2003).

Conclusion

There is little evidence that the widespread advocacy and adoption of 'community engagement' and 'partnership' approaches have yet involved substantial power-sharing. Consultation is endemic, and multi-stakeholder forums are common. However, it would certainly be premature to announce that a new era of democratic partnership and collaboration is about to replace the old era of hierarchical control, state regulation, and unresolved conflicts among interest groups.

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