

Articulating the rural voice – a case study from Northern Ireland

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Rural networking

The Rural Community Network (NI)–(RCN) is an independent, voluntary organisation for rural communities in Northern Ireland. As such, it has a unique and distinctive role in rural development in Northern Ireland. It is committed to a community development and networking approach to planning and development of local communities in order to address poverty, social exclusion, equality and reconciliation issues. It promotes civic society where citizens play an active part in the planning, decision-making and implementation processes within their own communities and within wider society. It seeks to build linkages between participative and elected democracy and to build respect for diversity within and between rural communities.

An integral part of this work is RCN's involvement in organising and facilitating consultation exercises with rural communities across Northern Ireland. Amongst other issues, in the past RCN has consulted on regional planning, rural housing, rural health care and rural transport provision. Such exercises help to inform RCN's policy responses to Government. They enable RCN to accurately and effectively articulate the voice of rural communities at the policy level ensuring that rural issues remain on the policy agenda.

'More of the same'

A clear message emanating from these most recent exercises is the consultation overload experienced by many groups and the decreasing interest among community groups around the 'more of the same' consultation exercises. Such exercises are characterised by their extractive nature and by the recurring failure on the part of policy makers to engage in actual consultation on the ground and to feed back on inputs. Additionally these 'more of the same' exercises start from the presumption that people have gathered in a room for a public meeting and do not take into account physical and social barriers to involvement, such as access to transport and lack of confidence/capacity. In an effort to counter this and to ensure that the voice of rural communities is adequately heard in the change process, RCN embarked upon a six-month feasibility study which examined the potential use and benefits of participatory research techniques to policy change and conflict resolution.

The feasibility study was undertaken in the context of the new political and institutional arrangements stemming from the Belfast Agreement (changing Regional Government Structures, the development of a Civic Forum and changing local Government structures). In addition the feasibility study represented a practical response to the increased emphasis on community development, civic participation and social inclusion imbedded in recent policy documents – see for example *'Shaping Our Future'* (Department of the Environment Northern Ireland, Regional Strategic Planning Framework for NI, {December 1998}).

Conflict resolution and policy change

Conflict resolution

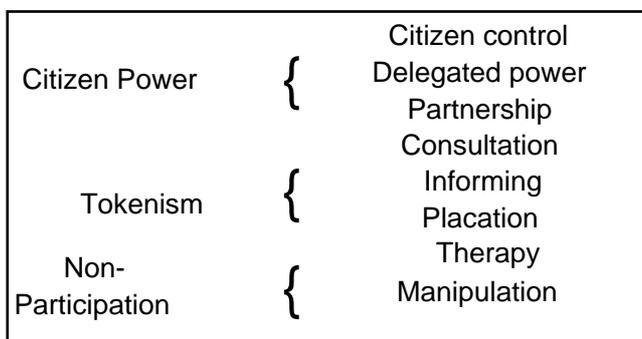
The initial research looked at a range of participative techniques available and used in UK and abroad; these included PRA, Planning for Real, Future Search and Citizen's Juries. The research confirmed that the use of participative techniques cannot resolve conflict per se and because of this, it is important that they are not presented as some kind of panacea that can be used to resolve conflict situations. Misuse of the techniques can lead to expectations of potential achievements being raised unrealistically. Many other factors have to be considered and thus have an impact. For example, foremost in any conflict situation, there is first a need to recognise that a problem exists and once identified what the key issues are (is action needed to tackle an issue or is the conflict situation based on a clash of personalities?). Most importantly there must willingness on behalf of the parties involved to work together towards developing a programme aimed at resolving the identified conflict. The use of participative techniques does however represent a mechanism through which the following can be achieved.

- As a stepping stone, participative techniques can begin the process of resolution by helping to bring people together.
- Skills transferred to the community (inherent in participative techniques) can help to provide the confidence and capacity to engage in participative processes enabling people to develop pro-active measures which may lead to the development of programmes aimed at reducing community division;

For the purposes of this time-bounded study, it was decided that it would be unfeasible to explore this topic in a meaningful way. The key finding emerging from the feasibility study in relation to conflict resolution was that whilst participative techniques have a valuable contribution to make in this type of process, they are restricted by the complexities surrounding conflict.

Policy change

As a starting point to examining the potential benefits of the use of participative techniques to policy change it was felt that there was a need to establish a baseline against which their usefulness could be measured. Initially this involved identifying the location of current consultation procedures in relation to Arnstein's Ladder of participation¹. The ladder helps to explain what is meant when we talk about participation or involvement and poses the challenge – is it possible to move one step higher on the ladder?



Arnstein's ladder identifies three key levels of participation. The lowest rung of the ladder is characterised by manipulation and is classified as non-participation. Citizen control is identified as the optimal position and represents full citizen power. The nature of current consultation procedures, characterised by tight time-scales, extractive information gathering and only limited information, locate them within the consultation rung of the participation ladder. However consultation represents an acknowledged level of participation and as such its value should not be underestimated. Consultation represents an important foundation upon which to build towards increased participation. On the back of these initial findings a qualitative survey was undertaken in order to evaluate current perceptions of existing consultation procedures.

Key factors contributing to consultation fatigue

The findings of the feasibility study identified the following as the key factors contributing to consultation fatigue.

- Techniques used are boring – more of the same exercises.
- Techniques used are extractive – one way process only.
- Little or nothing gained from the experience – no capacity building.
- Limited prior information – restricting the ability of participants to make informed submissions.
- Perception that the policy makers do not listen to the community input.

- Failure to recognise relevance of proposed policy to the local situation.
- Consultation for consultation's sake – consultation exercises are often little more than 'rubber-stamping exercises'.
- Usual suspects constantly turning up for meetings – not actually reaching those most excluded.

The study also identified the following as those who traditionally are most excluded from participating in consultation exercises:

- Women;
- members of the protestant community;
- travellers;
- long term unemployed; and,
- farmers.

In moving the feasibility study forward, a seminar was organised to identify the weaknesses in the way in which consultation processes had been organised and facilitated in the past, gauge the usefulness of various consultation techniques and to work-up measures to improve the way in which consultations are undertaken.

The seminar identified several issues as being the key weaknesses in the way in which consultation exercises have been organised in the past.

- Consultations, to date, have not been deep enough – those who take part are cynical of the process, many are disempowered by the barriers we have identified (the jargon and lack of prior information), not to mention the fact that they fail to engage those groups which are most excluded.
- Policy makers have not been seen to engage directly in consultations – in the majority of cases, policy makers don't attend consultations.
- Present consultation methodologies are not sufficiently robust – they have a narrow base of respondents, they currently lack feedback and accountability, there is a dearth of experimental techniques.
- There is a limited number of key facilitators.
- There is limited awareness of the differing consultation techniques which currently exist.

Consultation practice – the way forward programme

Taking account of these limitations, the feasibility study concentrated on establishing a practical way forward to help to widen and deepen the consultation process. The report highlighted the need in the future to;

- encourage full and meaningful participation and engagement across all community divisions and sectors;
- actively seek the engagement of policy makers in consultation processes; and,
- develop ways in which consultation methodologies can be enhanced;

¹ In *Participation Works! 21 Techniques of Community Participation for the 21st Century*. New Economics Foundation, 1998, London.

- collate and disseminate information on consultation processes; and
- 'Skill-up' facilitators, making them proficient in the use of these techniques and subsequently to transfer these skills to others in the community.

In June 1999 on the back of this feasibility study, RCN received confirmation of funding for an action research programme aimed at addressing some of the issues raised above. The main outcome from the programme will be the development of a comprehensive facilitative consultation manual. The resulting 15 month Programme, 'Consultation Practice – The Way Forward', which is funded under the Community Based Actions measure of the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, (EUSSPPR) involves investigation into, and the identification and testing of, the most appropriate mechanisms through which maximum engagement in consultation processes can be encouraged.

The feasibility study confirmed long-held suspicions about the shortcomings of consultations as they have been carried out in the past. From a very practical perspective, RCN felt it important to develop a programme aimed at redressing these issues to ensure that it continued to deliver on its mission, to provide an effective voice for, and support to, rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged. The Way Forward Programme thus aims to deepen and widen the consultation process allowing for full and meaningful participation and engagement across all community divisions. The partnership nature of the programme is designed to encourage the involvement of policy makers, initially in the development of the programme and ultimately to actively seek their direct engagement in future consultation processes. In addition, the programme will begin to redress the shortage in the availability of skilled consultation facilitators, through providing training for up to 20 individuals in the proficient use of the facilitative consultation manual.

The manual itself will be designed to provide facilitators with a menu of traditional and innovative consultation techniques which the facilitator can choose the most appropriate for use in any given consultation situation. It is likely that this menu will include details and instructions on the effective use of techniques such as Participatory Appraisal, Citizens Juries, Planning for Real, Future Search, Visioning, Facilitative Leadership etc. and will signpost other innovative techniques. The manual will present various alternatives to the pre-advertised public meeting and may include suggestions on holding consultation events, in local pubs, in office canteens at lunchtime etc. In this sense the manual will not be prescriptive but will present a range of options from which the skilled facilitator can select, adapt, and mix and match to suit the particular requirements of a consultation event.

It is planned to test the effectiveness of the manual through a series of 'live' policy consultation exercises. If you require

any further information or are interested in working with the Consultation Practice Partnership in identifying appropriate/possible 'live' policy case studies please contact the author.

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