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Community participation: 'activists' or 'citizens'?

by JACKIE HAQ

An activist is born...

In the late 1970s, as a young first-time mother, I moved to an inner-city estate in north east England. I felt lonely and isolated from my family who lived some distance from me. When my second daughter was born, I met a paediatrician at the local health clinic. I became involved in a local child health project he had established. Here, incidences of perinatal mortality and childhood ill-health were much higher than the national average – partly due to relative poverty, in terms of low income, long-term unemployment and a subsequent lack of resources and choices.¹

The pioneering doctor set out to address the health inequalities by bringing together a diverse team of medical staff, including health visitors and doctors, who were based initially in empty classrooms at a local school. From here, the staff provided healthcare in clinics across the area. Local people met regularly with the staff, to identify community health concerns and critically assess service provision from a local perspective, to increase accessibility and take-up of services.

Even small changes could make significant differences to the quality and accessibility of service delivery. Pregnant

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women had reported opting out of pre-natal care at the hospital because it did not meet their needs. The uncertainty of length in waiting times meant some women had to leave before being seen, to pick up older children from school. Mothers-to-be who attended the clinic with very young children found the waiting times stressful. Children became increasingly tired, cross and bored. In the consulting room, there were no changing facilities, so women had to undress in front of (often male) doctors. The regime produced anxiety, embarrassment and distress for many women, which prohibited their interaction with the medical team.

Women from a pre-natal group held a series of meetings with the midwives and a senior consultant obstetrician from the area's maternity hospital. Subsequently, the clinic provided screens for more privacy before and after examinations. A more appropriate appointment system was estab-

¹ Throughout the 80s, parents and their adult children in many local families were unable to find paid work.

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lished and a designated play area with toys was provided in the clinics. One midwife told us that her staff had always been to afraid to bring these matters to the attention of the consultant, who was held in high regard by patients for his approachable manner, but who also had a reputation for striking fear into colleagues and staff. She was relieved that we had spoken out.

Community development and collective action

In the estate where I lived was another community project. It was firmly grounded in principles of community development, working from the people’s agenda, the so-called ‘bottom-up’ approach, and committed where necessary to taking collective action in pursuit of locally identified priorities. Although members of the community development staff were local authority employees, they were seconded to the management committee of local residents, who were responsible for the day-to-day management of the workers and the direction and implementation of the work programme.

The project was the hub of many campaigns and initiatives directed at improving life on the estate. The critical principle underpinning the work was our commitment to collective action. Local residents met regularly to identify and prioritise our concerns and explore possible solutions, including locating resources we needed to create positive change. As members of the management committee, we brought a range of existing skills in planning, budgeting, organising and time management that came directly from raising our families, and from various paid jobs. We augmented this expertise with training on project management and committee skills.

Successes included setting up the first credit union in the region.² Before, loan sharks regularly preyed on the community, lending money at exorbitantly high interest rates – we found one woman who was charged in excess of 1000% interest. Legal moneylenders also operated on the estate, and charged very high interest rates. The credit union charged, by law, 1% per month on outstanding balances and was open to anyone in the community who saved with us, regardless of any previous bad debt record.

Local people also formed an action group, SCARE (Stop

² A credit union is a cooperative financial institution, privately owned and controlled by its members.

Crime Against Residents). They demanded and gained more beat police and initiatives that targeted police resources at specific crimes. Through regular planning and action meetings, the community achieved more respectful and effective policing of the neighbourhood.³

Developing appropriate practical action: the vital local perspective

At its best, this intense, locally-led, hands-on and sustained community development approach reignited a strong sense of community spirit and of belonging, and a pride in the area that overcame the negative stereotypes of outsiders.⁴ Many campaigns started on the estate were taken up city-wide, and at times nationally.

However, those achievements were, at times, hard fought for and hard won. Community priorities often encountered opposition from those in power, including local government officers and elected members. Many of us were mothers: when we asked the local government authority to allocate funding for childcare support so that we could hold our regular planning and committee meetings we were met with disbelief.⁵ Despite possible funding being available, we were told to fundraise by holding pie and pea suppers, or to wait until our children were grown up! Instead, we initiated a sustained, citywide crèche campaign and continued to raise the profile and value of quality childcare to enable community participation until it became commonplace.

The campaign began locally: women took their children to council meetings open to the public. As the children ran around, talked loudly and at times requiring food, water and toilet facilities, the public officials quickly recognised that childcare was a valuable asset when conducting meetings. The community project subsequently employed someone to work with residents and childcare providers to develop a strategy for childcare at local and citywide levels. This promoted the benefits of good quality childcare and set out policies and standards which were adopted by the city.

At first, local community activists adopted a piecemeal approach, responding to issues as they occurred.⁶ Later we

³ Previously, many residents at community meetings talked about very limited or non-existent police responses to reported crime, due in part to a lack of officers allocated to the area. A significant number of residents who contacted the police recounted being met with abusive and contemptuous comments and attitudes from some police officers.

⁴ The local area was portrayed in a very negative manner in the media.

⁵ The ‘local government authority’ is also referred to as ‘the council’.

⁶ Issues included poverty and high unemployment; loss of shopping facilities as local stores were closed by national food suppliers who opened out of town, out of reach hypermarkets; crime, including burglary, vandalism and arson. Stolen cars being raced around the estate led to the death of an eleven-month-old child.

developed a locally-led area strategy, bringing together local individuals and groups, senior local government representatives, statutory and voluntary organisations and the police, to deliver co-ordinated and targeted initiatives to regenerate the area socially, physically and economically. The main strands of this strategy tackled crime and fear of crime, increased access to jobs and training, and working with young people to provide legitimate alternatives to the prevailing negative street culture. It initiated major improvements to housing and the environment, and opened a number of out-of-school clubs for children of working parents. Some of this was funded (after persistent community representation) by mainstream local government funding, and some by the then newly-announced, central government City Challenge fund. The advent of City Challenge was to signal a new era of government-sponsored 'community engagement'.

Government-funded 'community engagement'

The 'old style' community development with which I was familiar throughout the 1980s was based on the struggle for social justice, and for equality of opportunity, led by local people, supported by community development workers. The approach was, necessarily, confrontational, given the initial and often sustained resistance by those traditionally in positions of power and decision-making (see also Clay, article 14, this issue). In demanding change, from our own unique 'community' perspective, we challenged existing power bases, most often within local government. At times we challenged central government policy – e.g. on privatisation of school meals provision – which, when implemented elsewhere, resulted in poorer pay and conditions for workers and lower food hygiene standards. We challenged disrespectful policing. We confronted negative media representation of our neighbourhood and community. We rejected repeated attempts of passive 'consultation' as insulting and demanded active participation in decision-making and policy formation.

But with City Challenge, and other subsequent state-funded regimes, the emphasis shifted from working on community-led, community-identified priorities to funding-led, local and central government-themed priorities, such as reducing council housing stock in favour of housing associations and private housing.⁷ The local government authority set up a decision-making committee of councillors, private

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and voluntary sector people and community representatives, but the balance of power remained firmly with the local authority, despite the political rhetoric about partnerships.⁸

The commitment and hard work of the community representatives on that board was notable. All dedicated time and efforts freely. However, I was concerned that the balance of power and decision-making remained firmly with local and central government. The potential for collective community representation on the board was subverted by competing claims between community board members for limited resources for each representative's own community: the community forum sub-group spent many hours haggling over the allocation of a few hundred thousand pounds in a 'community chest' fund while millions were allocated on the nod of the local authority and private sector (see also Blakey, article 10, this issue). The effect of the so-called 'partnership' model was to divide and rule, limit and sanitise community participation (Haq and Hyatt, 2008).

Later, as subsequent funding regimes emerged, aimed at inner city regeneration, attempts were made to take on board some of the lessons learnt.⁹ Funding allocation became more flexible as programmes rolled out, to take into account changing priorities, but still the chance to incorporate new, responsive projects decreased. Some efforts were made to hold elections for board members, although as always the issue of accountability to the wider community remained. Community representatives still had little or no time to disseminate information between the board and the communities, and potentially became gatekeepers holding the community at bay from the boards and strategic partnerships. Timescales for regeneration initiatives increased, providing the opportunity for continuity and sustained community participation. But in reality, the programme of initiatives was still, frequently, meeting the priorities of local government rather than community agendas, not least

⁷ Council housing was owned by the local government authority, which was responsible for repairs and maintenance of housing stock and allocation of properties. Councillors on the authority were, therefore, accountable to the local electorate for decisions affecting housing. Government policy removed that level of accountability and further reduced available council housing stock.

⁸ See Davoudi *et al.* (1994) at www.ncl.ac.uk/guru/assets/documents/ewp13.pdf

⁹ These included Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) and New Deal for Communities (NDC).

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because the politicians on regeneration boards were still immersed in the local authority decision-making infrastructures and support mechanisms such as secretarial support, attendance allowances and a civil service of council officers preparing briefing papers on up-to-date policy documents. The unpaid representatives from the community sector could not match these resources: they were still on the periphery of policy- and decision-making.

Citizens' jury-type processes and 'community engagement'

Recently, another form of 'community engagement' has emerged: citizens' juries.¹⁰ In 2007, I conducted a small-scale evaluation of the long-term impact of two citizens' juries (CJs) and another type of community engagement process (community x-change) facilitated by PEALS (Policy, Ethics and Life Sciences Research Centre) at Newcastle University during the past five years.

The stated principle underpinning these processes was 'the conviction that non-experts can make informed and important recommendations on issues concerning the current and future well-being of their fellow citizens.'¹¹ As in the previous examples, local people showed a determination to bring about positive change, not only for themselves but also for others within and beyond their own communities.

The two CJ-type processes focused on and debated a particular issue – one on service provision for elderly people experiencing repeated falls; the other case I studied, genetically-modified crops. In each, there were observable outcomes from this form of community engagement. These included resources on how to run a citizens jury, reports on the resulting discussions, with recommendations and topics identified for further deliberation (PEALS, 2003).

Local participants in the CJ-type processes viewed the experience positively, but were frustrated by the absence of political engagement in order to pursue the outcomes of their deliberations. The following remarks are from a local activist on a jury debating genetically modified (GM) crops:

Well, the GM one, that was a report that went out, but we've no idea of what or where it happened. The report went in, it was sent off to government – it was their way of saying they are 'consulting the public'. There were no mass meetings anywhere but this is how they say they are consulting the public about GM foods. And the report went in, we had this Professor from Argentina, we had this farmer from Canada and the people from RSPB [Royal Society for Protection of Birds] put their views on it. Well many people were against it [genetically modified crops] and the report reflected that. But we never heard what happened with that report.

Many jurors I interviewed voiced the desire to take direct action to ensure their recommendations were acted upon. Yet there did not seem to be a mechanism whereby community leadership could emerge among the participants to pursue this goal. Without any developed community structures and without links to regional or national social movements, there was a lack of direction and a passive reliance on the activities of a PEALS researcher to initiate and lead. When facilitators, by necessity, moved on to pursue funding for other projects, the loose network of participants became frustrated and immobilised, still keen but without a sense of direction, structure or resources.

In contrast, resources for a two-year follow-up process allocated after an initial five workshops in the Rural Community X-change project, (run in Cumbria and County Durham, UK) ensured that local people continued to work on a wide range of issues and making peoples' voices heard.¹² They contributed their perspectives to a European Citizens' Panel, and are exploring ways to influence policy and practice at local, regional, inter/national levels.¹³ However, it was evident from my study that, just as in the days of old-style community development projects and subsequent funding-led regimes, many politicians continue to regard themselves at the sole legitimate conduits for, and guardians of, political action and social change.

Some Panel delegates expressed frustration about how issues would be prioritised at the European level. Representatives from all the countries present had to agree upon 10 European priorities to feed into the European Union Commission. The British and Irish both wanted housing to be a priority, but this was not included. A senior European Minister for Rural Development said she would listen to recommendations but would not comment or ask questions. The British delegates felt they were not listened to (they became the

¹⁰ All the articles in Theme 1 of this special issue cover various versions of citizens' juries. See also the online resources section.

¹¹ See www.ncl.ac.uk/peals/research/completedprojects/dijjury.htm

¹² See www.citizenspanel.eu/images/partners_docs/2007-06-11_eep_uk_citizensreport.pdf

¹³ See www.citizenspanel.eu and article 7, this issue.

'invisibles'). Then the legitimacy of citizens' panels was questioned by politicians in the European Parliament on the basis that the system of elected members of Parliament was superior and already in place to act on the will of the people. However, as one young participant said:

Half the people in our group aren't old enough to vote, so how could we feed into this process?

Young British delegates pointed out that no youth or young people's issues were prioritised. They felt that the European agenda appeared to only agree and prioritise recommendations that fitted into previously agreed funding streams and that fitted into current policy.

Any form of community involvement/participation highlights inherent power dynamics within civic society. Who are the appropriate representatives and decision makers? How are decisions made? A superficial parallel could be drawn between community development and CJ-type approaches. The stated starting point is that community involvement is both valued and promoted. However, there are significant differences between them. An integral tension in all the approaches outlined surrounds the role and status of the local people involved: are we obliging citizens or activists?

Activists or citizens?

To date (and despite repeated debates), there is no compulsion in Britain for citizens to become active in their communities. Citizens may choose to engage or ignore political processes and structures. For those who do bring a community presence into deliberative and decision-making processes, one critical question remains: who sets the agenda? Here lies the paramount distinction between the 'old-style' community development and subsequent 'community engagement' approaches. Community **activists** choose to work on issues affecting them and their community on a daily and often long-term basis. They establish parameters of debates and seek action by a variety of means to achieve their aims and objectives.

A citizens' jury deliberates crucial issues, but the agenda is often set elsewhere – by those in positions of power, be it government, business or universities. The terminology of the CJ process also provides a clue to the preservation of the *status quo*: 'expert' witnesses present diverse opinions, which are then interrogated, debated and evaluated by the 'citizens'. In comparison, the community activists view themselves as experts.

As the jury process runs its course, there is a veneer of

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engagement, but how do we determine success? Without structures to ensure accountability, funding or commissioning bodies retain the power to accept or reject recommendations. Consequently, the **process of 'engagement'** takes centre stage rather than a focus on **outcomes or continuity**. Because the CJ process is time-limited, and in the absence of a long-term commitment by funders, there can be no expectations of sustainable relationship-building leading to refined decision-making in response to evolving circumstances.

When the carnival comes to town...

A citizens' jury risks merely being an island of activity. In effect, it becomes theatre, illusion. It is carnival – for a short time, roles and power bases are reversed. The experts are scrutinised, the 'audience' become interrogators. Participants enjoy taking part in the carnival. There is food, a convivial atmosphere, new experiences and places visited. Opinions are sought and for a while 'citizens' voices are heard. In the exuberance of the moment, there may be bonds of friendship experienced, and promises made in the holiday atmosphere. Expectations, and spirits, are raised.

Then the carnival leaves town. Both experts and citizens go back to their daily routines. The long-term impact, if any, of CJ-type processes is undocumented or uncertain (though some, such as Kuruganti, Pimbert and Wakeford, article 2, this issue, feel they can point to some). Without a strategy for achieving this impact, they offer no more than a veneer of participation and theatrical consultation. It is perhaps ironic, then, that the new UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, when indicating a wish for more citizen involvement in democratic processes, cited citizens' juries, rather than community development, as a preferred way forward.^{14 15}

¹⁴ 'Government [is] putting our trust in the people – and we will renew people's trust in government. And our local democracy [will be] strengthened by citizens' forums and new citizens' juries where citizens and their representatives have the chance to fully debate the concerns that matter to them.' See www.labour.org.uk/leadership/gordon_brown_s_leader_of_the_labour_party

¹⁵ This is despite other UK government reports advocating the value of a community development approach. See www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/153241.pdf

The over-arching commonality between all genuine forms of community engagement or deliberative democracy that I have encountered is the determination, commitment to community and to others above self-advantage, and a passion and sense of social justice from the people involved. This is a resource beyond compare and beyond price. However, the key issues, as always, are **how, by whom and for whose advantage** this is encouraged and utilised. What long-term impact will result from each model of community participation? Of course, it is legitimate to run citizens' juries as a means of contacting and sampling the views of individuals. The advantages are that it may engage a wider sample of people than the 'usual suspects' i.e. those already involved in grassroots politics. To a certain extent, the process brings together a broad spectrum of knowledge bases to the discussions.¹⁶ However, it is surely dubious to formulate 'evidence-based' policy on this basis, if agendas are set by funders, if dissemination is controlled by commissioning bodies, and there are no structures or resources to pursue alternative perspectives or facilitate longer-term, more nuanced debates and actions.

Without links from the micro/local level to the macro/socio-economic political levels, the potential for long-term change must be in doubt. The community development approach fosters the politicisation of activists. It facilitates the collectivising of issues leading to collective action. It may lead on to repercussions far beyond the original geographical location or community of interest. At its best, this approach will challenge the *status quo* and existing power bases. It is therefore potentially risky for participants, policy makers, practitioners and politicians, although the benefits to communities may be great.

In contrast, the notion of 'evidence-based' policy formulated on the basis of findings from citizens' jury-type processes may well be more attractive to those in power. The 'community engagement' is short-term and stage-managed. Although based on the adversarial jury system in practice the outcome appears to be a sanitising of the process of engagement, rather than the (at times) more confrontational community development approach, which demands sustained interaction between politicians and communities.

Over the years, successive waves of 'engagement' have ebbed and flowed and sometimes crashed upon local communities. The citizens' jury is merely the latest model proposed, largely by politicians, for so-called 'community participation'. In practice, the CJ process may contain or even stifle community participation when it precludes proactive, community-led agendas. By their very nature, time- and resource-limited CJs cannot accommodate broad, long-term community direction and participation.¹⁷ While it may be possible for participants of a CJ to organise beyond the public hearing, this has resource implications, not only in terms of finances for childcare or carers' support, but also access to political and administrative structures. Currently there is no legal obligation upon government or other funders of citizens' juries to act on the recommendations or findings from the process. With no legal status, and without a collective sense of identity or cause, the jury may produce little more than a wish list or record of deliberations. Rather than engaging the dynamics and power of a social movement, the jury process may become little more than a series of interest groups, whose voices will be noted, but the existing institutional and political power bases will remain untouched and intact.

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¹⁶ See discussion at <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU37.html>

¹⁷ For further discussions on deliberative democracy, see www.nanojury.org.uk/pdfs/nanojury_is_out.pdf and also article 4, this issue.