Post Party Politics
Can participation reconnect people and government?

Involve

Involve exists to put people at the heart of decision-making.

Who…

Involve consists of a small team of permanent staff, a UK wide network, a board and a group of associates.

What…

Involve operates at the UK national level, interacting on a daily basis with senior decision makers. Involve undertakes four core activities:

Influencing decision-makers: making the case for substantive not superficial participation

New thinking: improving understanding of the political and practical implications of participation, including what works

Better practice: supporting institutions to do participation better

Networking: bringing members of the UK participation field together

Why…

We believe public participation can help solve some of the most pressing challenges facing society and lead to the genuine empowerment of people.

How…

Involve provides a focus in the UK for discussions around public participation. Involve works by involving large numbers of people in all our activities, opening up our projects and strategy to Involve network members and to wider involvement.

We also hope to act as a platform, from which other initiatives and partnerships independent of Involve can develop and flourish.

Involve does not aspire to be a large organisation but to expand its impact and influence by working with associates and partners as appropriate.

Get involved…

Involve is a networked organisation which explicitly seeks high levels of involvement in all our work. We try and achieve this through events and online processes. Get involved by becoming:

a network member – www.involving.org/network
an associate – www.involving.org/associate
a volunteer – www.involving.org/recruitment

www.involving.org

Acknowledgements

About the Authors

Andrew Acland has worked as a mediator, facilitator and trainer in contexts ranging from the political, social and environmental to the legal, corporate and organisational for nearly twenty years. He is a founding Director of Dialogue by Design Ltd, which provides electronic stakeholder engagement and consultation processes.

Edward Andersson works at Involve on projects researching Service User Empowerment and the Economics of Participation.

Lee Bryant is a Co-founder of Headshift and an on-line communication and community specialist with a focus on knowledge development. Lee has a strong belief in the empowering potential of the Internet, and a commitment to the development of an international knowledge-based society.

Lindsey Colbourne is a professional facilitator and Chair of the Communications and Engagement Steering Group of the UK Sustainable Development Commission.

Ian Cook is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Birmingham, Department of Geography.

Archon Fung is an Associate Professor of Public Policy at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. His research examines the impacts of civic participation, public

deliberation, and transparency upon public and private governance. He has authored three books, three edited collections and over fifty articles on these topics.

Michelle Harrison is a Director of Henley Centre and an Honorary Research Fellow of the University of Birmingham's Department of Geography.

Mike King is the Chief Executive of The Environment Council where he is involved in participation and decision-making projects on some of the key environmental issues of the day. He has previously been involved in environmental volunteering and community engagement.

Charlotte Lacey is an Associate Director of Henley Centre.

Geoff Mulgan is the director of the Young Foundation. He worked in government between 1997 and 2004 in a variety of roles including director of the Government Strategy Unit and head of policy in No 10. Before that he was the founder and director of Demos.

Anthony Perret is Corporate Relations Manager and Director of the Corporate Partners programme at The Environment Council.

Perry Walker heads the democracy and participation programme at Nef (the New Economics Foundation). He has pioneered many participative techniques, including Democs, an innovative debate game.

Diane Warburton co-founded Shared Practice in 2002 (www.sharedpractice.org.uk), is an Honorary Fellow at the University of Brighton School of Applied Social Science, and is a founder member of the Involve Board with special responsibility for research projects.

David Wilcox, a former journalist, aims to promote collaboration through workshop games, online communication and other ways to help people work together. His main interests are community engagement, cross-sector partnerships and networks. You can find him at www.partnershipsonline.org.uk.

Richard Wilson is a co-founder of Involve. Richard has written and spoken widely on public participation and democracy at home and abroad. Currently he works with various partners locally, nationally and internationally in the public, private and community sector.

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Foreword

It would appear, although history may judge it differently, that we are living in politically interesting times. The rise of David Cameron from an unknown in early 2005 to leader of the opposition by Christmas of the same year has been well documented as remarkable. It sent panic through the Labour Party and encouraged the Liberal Democrats to oust their leader. What appears to mark Cameron out as different from other conservative leaders in recent times is his focus on winning the election, as opposed to providing a clear alternative to Labour. Cameron's compassionate conservatives are not defining themselves by how different they are from Labour but, more often, by how similar. Indeed, on January 30th 2006 Cameron outlined his prospectus for Modern Conservatism as a natural progression from 'centrist' New Labour and 'the alternative to fighting for the centre-ground is irrelevance, defeat and failure'.

Is this not just the inevitable ebb and flow of politics? Not quite. Not since the post war political consensus of the 1950s, achieved between Richard Austen Butler (familiarly known as Rab Butler) the then Chancellor and the Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell, have we seen an opposition so openly supportive of the incumbent government's policies and track record. And never before have we seen a party explicitly attempt to position itself as 'non-ideological'. Academics and others have long since challenged the ideological premise of party politics, claiming that the social distinctions of manager and worker that form the basis of the Conservative Party and Labour movement are no longer relevant. The Labour Party learnt this lesson, as political parties appear to, the hard way, through years of painful opposition and reflection on how to balance principles and political expediency. The Conservatives appear to be following a similar path but taking it further. Where Blair and Brown dismissed the traditional left and right distinctions, Cameron rejects any kind of ideological basis for party politics. History may well judge this to be a passing trend. But right now, at the start of the 21st century, this thinking has both resonance with the public and political traction.

But with all three major parties scrambling for the election winning centre ground and diminishing ideological differences, what does this mean for political choice at the ballot box? Does the idea that governments should consist of competing parties with distinct policies and principles make sense anymore?

A crisis of legitimacy
Never has the phrase 'it doesn't matter who you vote for the government always get in' rung so true. A phrase that once applied to the seemingly static civil service also now

seems to apply to political parties. A politician will explain at length how the parties are different, but they are the wrong people to ask. For one, they have invested so much personal energy in achieving their position and secondly, if anyone understands the differences in the policy agendas it should be those who wrote them.

More important is what the public think. Following the 2001 election, MORI found that 58% of people thought that 'there was little difference between what the main parties were offering'. Whether there is actually a clear choice between the parties or not, the voters can't tell and that's a problem, and that was before Cameron arrived on the scene.

Traditional political parties have provided two central, but very different, pillars of Britain's democratic life. The first is to provide the general populous with the ability to remove the incumbent government from office and replace them with something different. A blunt but clear democratic instrument, which focuses politicians mind's and gives them a mandate to represent, i.e. make decisions on behalf of the electorate. Without a clear choice at the ballot box politicians are not chosen by the people, but they do still win elections. However, it is being explicitly chosen by the people, not just winning, that provides a mandate from the people and hence legitimacy. If people can't tell the difference between the parties they can not make a real choice, and there is no democratic legitimacy.

The second pillar is to act as the main interface and conduit between people and government. This process goes way beyond MPs surgeries to involve all people who act to support government, giving their spare time to community initiatives or simply behaving as responsible citizens by recycling their waste or reporting crime. The more people who feel that they are part of or support a political 'project' or initiative, the better its chance of success. Historically this has been achieved through the wider social movements that both the Conservative and Labour party represented, which spread their reach and connection through a nationwide network of community activists, members and social events hosted and run through their clubs. Then politics was not so much about representation but connection.

Just 30 years ago political parties had a critical role in providing social capital – the social glue that creates communities and brings different and diverse people together. Then every town had vibrant Labour and Conservative clubs, where people went to meet up and have fun, as much as support a the party. The relationships fostered by these institutions helped people to create supportive communities and without them we are poorer. Andrew Acland argues in his piece that 'social immune systems' are still in

place, for which we should be thankful, but he gives the credit for this to informal civic action not formal politics.

With political clubs left virtually deserted, we are left to consider a new politics for a new age and a new society. In 2005 Involve concluded a piece of research into the state of political participation in Britain. Among other things, the research found that formal democratic mechanisms, principally political parties and voting, no longer fit into modern society or promote policy solutions to major challenges, such as climate change, migration and poverty alleviation. These issues are further explored in this pamphlet, as Geoff Mulgan critically examines the way in which democracy is being remade in light of these challenges. Archon Fung cautions against assuming that democracy is no longer fit for purpose and examines the deficits of the current model and the ways in which participation can address them.

Connecting people

Involve believes that for government to maintain its democratic legitimacy and efficacy it must go back to basics and start with the people. Whether they are community activists, strategic operators, time poor housewives or disenfranchised students, the government must be able to connect with these people, wherever they are.

It is only through this process of connection that government can understand its citizens and serve them properly. Too often the method of establishing a connection, e.g. party reform, has been prioritised over a wider discussion of the politics for making that connection meaningful and effective. Lee Bryant and David Wilcox discuss the challenge in reference to the oft heralded savior of democratic renewal, e-democracy. They make the point that simply providing technology to do old government online is inadequate. But what does work is understanding what relationships (connections if you like) are required and seeing if technology can support them.

Different people will always want to be engaged and connected differently. Some prefer meeting in church halls or conference centres some community centres, the pub or new digital spaces online. What is important is to start with the people wherever they are. Perry Walker takes a personal look at this issue through the lens of a local planning dispute and the practical challenges of including citizens' voices in decision-making.

Involve was established in June 2005 to take stock of the phenomenon of participation and citizen politics. We aim to explore whether it offers a real solution to the challenge of democratising 21st century governance and whether participation can, or should, fill the democratic deficit exposed by the decline of political parties.

The changing role of the state

At Involve we believe that the state must enable people as well as provide services. In health care, for example, this would mean that as well as providing the NHS free at the point of delivery, the state would seek to support people in learning how to achieve and maintain their health, whilst having the desire to do so. Similarly, in education there must be a greater emphasis on providing skills and inspiring people with the desire for life-long learning, as well as providing the basics of numeracy and literacy.

An enabling state cannot, however, be imposed through macro level policies and structures. It has to be developed in partnership with all of those involved, many of whom are already highly engaged with arenas outside that of traditional politics. The only way to do this is through ensuring that people are connected with each other and with the institutions that affect their lives. Diane Warburton takes a look at the personal and political connections (and conflicts) that arise in community participation.

This volume

This pamphlet is the first in the series about this process of connection and how it might be achieved. Over the series we will consider four aspects of connection:

— **Level of connection** – be it global, through events such as Live 8 and Make Poverty History, or local community projects
— **Approaches** – the different media and methods of connection and involving people
— **Substance** – what subjects and issues (collective or individual) inspire people to get engaged
— **Media and information** – what is the role of media in a more connected society? If information is the currency of deliberative democracies how do we manage its exchange?

At this point we are putting forward an initial look at some of these questions as the founder members of Involve consider the broad picture and some of the many forms that connection and participation can take. This volume also takes a look at some new research directions, which raise interesting questions for the practice of participation.

In the spirit of Involve, we see this simply as a contribution to the ancient, but no less important debate about where politics should go and what forms our democracy should take. These debates are continued on our website, which anyone can contribute to. If you are interested in our work please do get in touch.

Richard Wilson, Involve — February 2006

1 The Remaking of Democracy

The Remaking of Democracy

Although Democracy is the preferred mode of government, many people lack faith in it. *Geoff Mulgan* **looks at how new conversations and new ideas about representation and decentralisation are recasting an ancient ideal.**

Preferred but not trusted

A remarkable series of global surveys have been undertaken over the last few years which show that, with remarkable speed, democracy has now become the preferred system of government right across the world. According to a Gallup International survey in 2005, for example, 79% of respondents now believe that democracy is the best system of government (10% more than 2004) – including figures of 93% not just in Denmark and Norway, but also in Ghana and Ethiopia.

For democrats that is the good news. The bad news is that in many countries the principal democratic institution is also the least trusted. Overall, Parliaments and Congresses score a net trust level of minus 13, a result which will not surprise seasoned observers of the US or UK scene. Globally, the same majorities which favour democracy also see political leaders as untrustworthy and unethical. The other bad news is that not everyone who favours democracy believes that their country is ruled by the will of the people. In the US only 37% think they are ruled by the will of the people and only 30% in the UK – hardly ringing endorsements of the majority principle.

These findings echo those of the Millennium Survey, commissioned by the United Nations in late 1999. It highlighted large minorities in many of the oldest democracies – including the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands – that favoured democracy but did not believe that their governments were democratic in spirit. These groups, which

tended to be younger and better educated than the average, often see government as bureaucratic, unresponsive and at odds with their values.

These quantitative findings confirm the more familiar problems that have appeared in many democracies, including falling voting turnouts in the most developed countries (though they are still rising in most of the world), falling party membership levels and falling levels of party affiliation.

Understanding why this malaise has set in and what can be done about it is one of the most urgent challenges of this century. At the very moment when democracy is spreading as never before across the world it appears badly in need of a new wave of evolution and innovation. The problem is not that people want autocratic leadership, it is rather that they have become accustomed to taking more control over their lives and exercising more choice. In contrast to this, democracy appears inflexible and, too often, about monologue rather than dialogue.

Part of the explanation for the malaise lies in the recent history of democracy. Much of what we now take to be democracy took shape in the 19th century. Its forms – parties, parliaments, assemblies and manifestos – all appeared within a fairly short space of time and were radically different from the democracy of the ancient world. Yet it was these forms of democracy that were subsequently exported and copied all over the world, in particular after 1989.

Challenging democracies
Compared to dictatorships, these models of democracy are a great improvement. They tend to force governments to act more as servants and, as a mounting body of evidence in political science shows, they are associated with a greater attention to welfare, public services and the environment. However, it is equally clear that these forms of democracy are not the end point of democratic evolution. Instead they are now being challenged – not by political ideologies which seek to reverse democracy, but instead by movements that want to deepen it.

Globally, the victory of democracy over its enemies has been accompanied by a remarkable efflorescence of innovation in and around its forms. The common theme around the world has been that, in almost every case, the primary urge of reformers has been to deepen the engagement of the public in decisions, making democracy less passive and more involving.

Degrees of representation

I want to highlight three overlapping currents of change that are influencing this process. The first current is forcing a reassessment of what we mean by representation. By historical standards the idea of representation is relatively new. In ancient Athens the people represented themselves and until the later middle ages the fact that someone was elected did not mean that they stood for the people who elected them. Rather, this idea steadily evolved from the experience of medieval assemblies. It took shape in the distinctive model of the English parliament which, after the 19th century, became the template for most other nation states as they established parliaments and assemblies.

The impossibility of direct involvement by the public in the affairs of large nations meant that democracy developed through professional politicians who act as intermediaries, with the public as observers and occasional participants.[1] The Greeks assumed that the right scale for democracy would be very small, a few thousand in the case of Athens. The supporters of modern democracy assumed that its natural scale was the nation state, based on a homogenous, self-aware people.

For more than two centuries sceptics have aired their doubts. Rousseau wrote that '*it is against the natural order of things that the many govern and the few are governed… the moment a people provides itself with representatives, it is no longer free*'. The only solution that Rousseau could imagine was '*the obedience of everyone to the law he has prescribed himself*'. But Rousseau was unable to provide a convincing account of how this might occur, although he proposed periodic popular assemblies, as the public could not act as a single agent.

Representation may now be the norm but arguments about it have not subsided. Immanuel Kant had warned that '*the people that is represented in parliament by its deputies finds these guardians of its rights and liberty to be deeply interested in the position of themselves and their families…*' Strong traditions of distrust feed off the assumption that representatives are always at risk of being corrupted. Some countries have even elected leaders, at least in part, because they had never heard of them (including more than one Brazilian leader in the 1980s and 1990s).

More formal delegations through mandates and manifestos have been proposed as solutions, but these can simply empower one set of political professionals relative to another. In the US, arguments for term limits and recalls (successfully used in California to replace Governor Gray Davis by Arnold Schwarzenegger) have fed off populist outrage against elected bodies. Referendums have become more common, not as plebiscites to approve leaders, but as complements to provide additional legitimacy

to representative democracy. Many countries have tried to open up recruitment to political and administrative elites, encouraging more lay people to serve as jurors, magistrates, and councillors, so as to hold in check the excessive professionalisation of representatives or presidents.

Despite these concerns though, government still seems to work best when some people are charged with synthesising complex choices into party programmes and those systems that have replaced representation with ill-conceived direct democracy have generally run into trouble. California's dependence on referendums had disastrous effects over the last 20-30 years, including the demise of what was once one of the world's best schooling systems. What looks certain though is a continued innovation to complement representation with other forms of engagement that depend less on professional politicians.

Moving away from the centre
The second related trend is towards decentralisation. Democracy first took shape in fairly large nation states but it has always contained an assumption that excessive concentrations of power can never be trusted. This is the guiding principle of federalism as pioneered in Switzerland, Europe's first democracy, which was based on a strict devolution of powers both to urban rulers and rural direct democracies. More recently, decentralisation has been advocated as the best way to curb corruption and bring the scale of government closer to that of daily life[2] and many countries have reduced the power of the centre's agents.

France was once the very model of centralised command but in 1982 the Loi Deferre passed power down to departments and some 36,000 communes. In the late 1970s Sweden allowed local areas to opt out of parts of the welfare state and run their own services. Even China has moved away from its highly centralised tax system of allocating budgets to local administrations, towards one with more local discretion (although the centre still controls appointments and dismissals). In Bolivia and Chile decentralisation has encouraged more popular participation in the business of government and redirected resources to meeting the poor majority's needs for education, health, water and sanitation. India's decentralisation to village panchayats during the 1990s had the additional feature of mandated representation for women (a third of all seats), low castes and tribal groups. Everywhere, decentralisation has tended to constrain the predatory character of national governments, which siphon off money intended for local services. One study in Uganda in the early 1990s found that only 13% of grants for schools actually reached them.[3]

The democratic tradition that we trace back to Athens presumes that government works best when it is closest to the people.[4] But there are many other potential virtues in decentralisation. One is that it widens the pool of potential leaders at higher tiers of government, providing a rough training ground in which they can prove their skills. For countries going through a transition to democracy this is likely to be particularly important. It helps to nurture a new group of leaders and gives them the confidence to govern effectively and without corruption. It can also break the dangerous assumption, common amongst publics who have lived under repressive regimes, that all leaders are only in it for themselves.

By contrast, in countries which move directly from dictatorship to national elections it is common for old power holders to dominate the process (Bosnia is a good example).[5]

Decentralisation is not guaranteed to deliver good government. It can lock in greater inequities and undermine minimum standards or it can be a tool for governments that want to dispose of responsibilities rather than powers. The move to federalism in the US in the 1980s was part of Reagan's strategy for slimming government down and many more recent decentralisations, from Russia to Tanzania, have passed responsibilities to local governments that lack the tax bases to fulfil these roles. Too much decentralisation can make it harder for societies to take difficult decisions involving uneven sacrifices (for example responding to a threat like climate change). But overall the shift of decision-making downwards has undoubtedly produced better government, more focused on the things that really matter to people.

A measure of the success of democratic decentralisation is that secession has never happened in a mature democracy. Secessions have often happened in the wake of wars and revolutions or in the face of dictatorships. Many immature democracies also faced successful secession, including the Czech and Slovak republic's mutual secession from Czechoslovakia. But these stand in stark contrast to the successful containment of secessionist movements in Catalonia or Quebec, which can best be explained by the sufficient concessions made to the potential new nation, making secession unattractive. In Spain, for example, the regions now enjoy unconstrained autonomy and virtually sub-contract national government rather than the other way around. Deals are done and stuck to through conversation and negotiation. Norberto Bobbio put it like this: '*Democracy is that form of government whose principal rules, when observed, have as their aim the solution of social conflicts without the need to resort to mutual violence (heads are counted, not severed)*'.[6]

New conversations

The third trend is closely associated with doubts about representation and the shift to decentralisation. This is the invention of new kinds of conversation that replace the monologue of politicians and parties with something more reciprocal, open and engaged. There are long histories of open conversations – notably in the Buddhist traditions of India and Japan – and all democracy rests on conversation, as parliaments are literally 'parlements' and are overseen by 'speakers'. But increasingly the public have wanted to be participants in these discussions, rather than observers, so wider conversations have been institutionalised in local councils, panchayats, assemblies and citizen forums.

Some nations enshrined these much more broad based conversations in their constitutions. Philippines did so in the early 1990s, shortly after Brazil's 1988 constitution asserted that public participation in local services was a democratic right, which gave birth to thousands of councils linking service providers, social organisations and government (over 5000 in health alone). In Bolivia, citizens' oversight committees have the power to freeze municipal budgets if spending veers too far from plans. In Porto Alegre, some 100,000 people, or about one in ten, attended participatory meetings during the course of the initiative to open up the budget setting process in the 1990s and 2000s.[7]

Here in the UK these conversations have taken many forms – citizen juries, deliberative polls, planning for real exercises, consultations of varying degrees of seriousness, through to Labour's attempts to hold a 'Big Conversation' with the public in the run-up to the 2005 election.

All the signs indicate that we will see increasing innovation in this area, even though it remains unclear which forms work best in terms of delivering good decisions and making people feel engaged. There will also be competition between governments, parties, the media and NGOs as to who is best placed to hold such conversations. Involve's role will be to bring much-needed clarity to this experiment – about the tradeoffs between time and decisions; the costs of wider participation and the benefits; how best to construct conversations so that they are not dominated by the loud and aggressive; how to handle differences of fundamental belief and differences of interpretation or judgment.

Without vigorous experiment of this kind the proportion believing that government does not reflect the will of the people will rise and, if this happens, our ability to solve our common problems will diminish. This is why the remaking of democracy is not only an issue of interest to the specialists – it goes to the heart of how we live together.

Notes

1 Political parties, for all their flaws, have come to do the hard work of synthesising programmes that have to be consistent and assembling governing majorities. They also provide a moral discipline that is lacking in polities solely based on individuals because politicians know that the party as a whole will have to account for any transgressions and corruption.

2 Oates W.E. (1972) *Fiscal Federalism* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich is the classic account.

3 Quoted in Bardham P. '*Decentralisation of Governance and Development*' Journal of Economic Perspectives, Fall 2002

4 The theoretical justification for decentralisation is that powers should be held at the level which allows externalities to be internalised (the 'encompassing principle'). The state's role is to see things in the round, but if power is divided into excessively small pockets, the result will be damaging competition between areas. So in this view local government should be responsible for activities and spending that do not impose any externality on others, such as education or fire prevention. Drawing the line is complicated though as e.g. organised crime can be simultaneously very local but global in form. Local authority debts can also still become a burden on the centre.

5 Charles Boix demonstrates that federalism improves the chances of democratic survival. Boix C. (2003) *Democracy and Redistribution* Cambridge: Cambridge UP

6 Bobbio N. (1997) *Democracy and Dictatorship* Cambridge: Polity pp 84

7 Gaventa J. '*Strengthening Participatory Approaches to Local Governance: Learning the Lessons from Abroad*' National Civic Review, Winter 2004, pp16

Participation and the Social Immune System

Communities have social immune systems, which foster progress and prevent their decline. *Andrew Acland* **reflects on the ways in which participation can do much to strengthen these immune systems, as long as it is relevant and accessible.**

There is a temptation, when you earn your living by doing something, to take its benefits for granted. The fact that people seem to find something useful and come back for more suggests, in a free market kind of way, that it is serving some valuable purpose.

As a practitioner in the field of public participation I have found that the daily pressures of designing and facilitating specific processes have taken priority over the need to ask more general questions about participation's place in the broader political context. But these questions need to be asked and answered if the field is to progress, and for this reason any practitioner should welcome the arrival of Involve, with a mandate to explore the many faces of participation and what it can achieve.

It is easy, when your focus is the immediate project and the challenge of getting people to put time and energy into discussing an issue or agreeing a goal, to look no further than this. Marooned in a village hall on a wet Friday evening in February and faced with a room full of angry individuals, each intent upon explaining why their priorities should be the ones that count, most practitioners are happy to get through the meeting with skin and wits intact.

The bigger why of participation is, however, something I have given much thought to over the years, and my answer harks back to the very first work of this kind I ever did some twenty years ago. In the mid-1980s I worked on a conflict resolution project in South Africa: not perhaps the easiest situation in which to begin a career in this field but certainly conducive to rapid learning. At the time it seemed inevitable that the end result of apartheid and its consequent evils would be, at best, a failed state run by local ganglords, at worst, total social collapse and probably civil war.

That this did not happen is due not only to the statesmanship of Nelson Mandela and his interlocutors, but because South Africa had a vigorous civil society and thriving networks of non-government organisations, churches, businesses and voluntary groups all determined to prevent the country descending into violence. In short, every community seemed to have a sort of *social immune system* that prevented it being overtaken by the forces of chaos.

In the years since then, this analogy of the human immune system has hovered in the background of much of my work. In working on environmental and sustainability issues, for example, I often find it useful to imagine what might constitute the immune system of a particular location. What might need to be in place in a beauty spot, for instance, to prevent the number of visitors destroying what they come to see? Or what does a sustainability policy need to contain to guarantee the underlying health of an organisation or business?

A system of defence

It seems to me that every society needs a social immune system to protect it from social breakdown, just as every human body needs an immune system to fight off illness. And an important part of the social immune system is the active participation of people in the decisions that shape their lives. Involved individuals are the social and political equivalents of the red blood cells that defend the health of the human body and, just as the body cannot survive without them, communities and societies cannot survive without the willingness of individuals to defend them.

It is the health of the social immune system that determines whether communities fracture under pressure, as Northern Ireland did in the 1970s or former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, or withstand whatever disaffected insiders or malevolent outsiders choose to throw at them.

The constituent parts of a healthy social immune system vary from society to society. In one it will be an informal network of individuals and organisations who share information and resources; in another it will be a formal framework of values underpinned, perhaps, by religious observance and bolstered through shared ritual and culture; in yet another it will be a vibrant trading community with a web of reciprocal debits and credits that has to be maintained if all are to prosper. In some it will be a mixture of all of these.

Even if the nature of the social immune system differs the results may be similar: low levels of crime, violence, and truancy; high levels of education and volunteering; high degrees of trust in authority based on transparency, accountability and responsibility; relatively little social inequality between those at the top and those at the bottom; and some willingness to sacrifice personal interest in the name of communal benefit.

Social immunity in the UK

How does the United Kingdom in 2005 measure up? Do we have a healthy social immune system? The answer has to be a qualified yes: most of the time, in most places, it provides us with a degree of social and political stability that are the envy of

many countries and would have been unimaginable throughout most of our history.

Two questions arise from this. First, could more participation strengthen our social immune system and, if so, what form should it take? Secondly, if we look at what constitutes the social immune system, which parts would most benefit from being strengthened through more participation?

The first is largely answered: the participation world is awash with examples of participation in practice - we have workshops and dialogue processes and citizen juries aplenty - and all of them are contributing to the social immune system. I think the second question offers another way to come at the subject and I want to look at five areas in which I think participation is potentially important but is either not happening or in danger of being neglected.

Language
The first of these is the relentless professionalisation of language. People whose education stopped at secondary level, who do not have English as a first language, or who are in some way unable to decipher the gobbledegook that infests our culture, are increasingly excluded from participating in aspects of their own lives. I plead guilty in this very chapter – the language that now comes naturally to me is probably death by subordinate clause to others.

The feeling of exclusion, by whatever means it arrives and whomever it affects, is the first symptom of weakness in the social immune system. Just as the mediaeval church excluded peasants by refusing to translate the Bible, so we exclude the bulk of the population from participation by producing too many documents that are far too long and use language that is far too obscure.

The Plain English Campaign is a vital starting point in encouraging participation and strengthening the social immune system.[1] Any document designed for public consumption that cannot be understood by a person who has completed their secondary education should never see the light of day. The same standard should be applied to the literature emanating from banks, building societies, insurance companies and those offering any kind of public service. Active participation has to start with vigilance about language.

Money
If language is the most basic currency of participation, then money and who controls it is the next factor in the maintenance of the social immune system. Societies have to find

a balance between the money taken and used by the state and that retained and used by individuals. When this goes wrong, or is perceived to be in some way unfair, then the social immune system comes under strain. We remember the riots that followed the attempt by the Thatcher government to introduce a poll tax: it was perceived as unfair and the cracks immediately opened.

The first hints of something similar are beginning to appear again. Pensioners are prepared to go to prison because they feel that rises in council taxes, several times that of inflation, is rocking the balance between their interests and that of the state. They feel that they have had no participation in the budget-setting decisions that take their money, and the cracks duly begin to show.

There have been various experiments around the world in which communities have been given the power to set their own budgets, not least in Victorian England. The idea of participatory budgeting is overdue for a more thorough airing.[2]

Dispute resolution

The next aspect of the social immune system that could do with bolstering through more participation is our system of civil justice. The two problems mentioned above, language and money, also play a part here. The language of lawyers deters all but the most committed or – this is where the money comes in – those who can afford to pay more lawyers to interpret what other lawyers are saying. The obfuscation of language encourages the culture of litigation, which in turn complicates the ordinary courtesies of human discourse. Apologise for a minor road accident or a genuine but harmless mistake and you can find yourself hauled into a court and facing the consequent bills.

An effective legal system accessible to all is one of the essentials of the social immune system; its absence, or its restriction to those either rich enough to afford it or poor enough to have their bills paid by the state, is a prime indicator of failing social immunity. The Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) movement provides an alternative for those who prefer not to see their affairs taken out of their control or who are unwilling to subject themselves to the lottery of litigation, but it has still not become established as a natural recourse for those who fall out with others.[3]

A far-sighted government would insist on a local Dispute Resolution Service in every borough to ensure that neighbours who argue over the height of their hedge did not end up in either court or hospital. Active participation in the establishment and running of such services should become as recognised and respected as becoming a magistrate or a local councillor.

Planning

Hot on the heels of this concern about our adversarial system of justice and the culture it encourages must be the operation of our planning system. The fact that it is currently undergoing one of its periodic convulsions indicates that its importance to the health of the social immune system is widely recognised. Meanwhile, anyone who has tried to run participative exercises among the thickets of planning guidance knows that most people are dismayed and deterred by the complexities of structures and languages that they need to master in order to participate effectively.

The evidence that the importance of people participating in this arena is recognised stems from the Statements of Community Involvement currently required of all planning authorities.[4] These have to set out how people should be involved in the decisions that affect them, and one can only hope that they succeed in doing this. If every English home is a castle to its owner or occupiers, then clearly being able to influence who peers over the battlements or can park on the drawbridge is essential.

But the obligation to consult does not involve a concomitant obligation to listen to what is said in response, especially if it contravenes what the consulters think should be the 'right' answer.[5]

It is encouraging to see the idea of public participation becoming enshrined in legislation in this way, but it also highlights the dangers of raising and then disappointing expectations. If public participation is to be enshrined in legislation then clearer guidance on how to do it properly and an awareness that unwelcome results may come back should also be enshrined.

Looking forward

A society that has no sense of where it is going is always vulnerable. It is said that the Aztecs nightly suffered the agony of seeing their god, the sun, disappear beneath the horizon without knowing for sure whether he would return the following day. Little wonder they resorted to the most violent of blood sacrifices to keep him interested in returning to them.

Nobody is suggesting that people will march on Downing Street for a mass disembowelling of the Cabinet if we are not told what the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement will be twenty years' hence, but people do need some sense of where we are going and what it – and we – will be like when we get there. It is not surprising that political apathy, however apparent at election time, is absent when people meet to talk about the future, or when an issue such as the Iraq war, world poverty or fox hunting

catches their imagination.

These are issues that reflect underlying values – the things that people feel touch us as citizens and as members of communities and nations. They are also things that, more than anything, determine the health of the social immune system. People are anxious about the war in Iraq not because they have done an extensive geo-political analysis of its long-term impact on the politics of the Middle East, but because they feel it is wrong in terms of who we are as a nation and as a society – remember the slogan '*Not in my name*'.

We need times and places in which we can debate the things that will shape the future. Public television debates, private sessions in the pub and occasional online encounters with politicians are no longer enough in a complicated world – we need to institutionalise the consideration of value-based questions. Every Member of Parliament should advertise and hold a participative event in his or her constituency at least once a month and their purpose should be to explore where we are heading.

Conclusion

Participation matters, not just because it enables us to affect the decisions made in our collective names, but because it is an indicator that our social immune system is functioning. If we fail to participate, or if the powers that be deny us opportunities to participate, then we will gradually lose this immune system.

We will fail to notice when governments do things in our name that are out of step with who we are, or when planners make bad decisions, or when our courts offer remedies that are worse than the disease, or when our money is used against our interests, or when our language is corrupted so that we no longer understand what is being said.

Participation and the social immune system are each dependent on the other. Without participation the social immune system will weaken; without the social immune system, there will be fewer opportunities for participation.

Participation is not difficult; the challenge is to make it important.

Notes

1 Visit www.plainenglish.co.uk
2 Visit www.iniref.org/conf.html
3 In addition to court-attached ADR schemes (see www.dca.gov.uk/research/2002/1-02es.htm) an

increasing number of bodies offer mediation and other dispute resolution processes (see for example www.mediationuk.org.uk/, www.cedr.co.uk/ and www.adrgroup.co.uk/

4   See www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_planning/documents/page/odpm_plan_032593.pdf

5   See for example www.involving.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=main.viewBlogEntry&intMTEntryID=2570

Citizen Participation in Representative Democracy [1]

Rather than revamping democracy or leaving it behind, *Archon Fung* explores the deficits in the current model of representative democracy and the ways in which participative decision-making can address them.

It is commonplace, almost a platitude, to say that our representative institutions require substantial citizen participation to give democracy meaning and legitimacy. When general election turnout rates fall—as they have in both the United Kingdom and the United States—to around 60% of the electorate, politicians wring their hands about exactly who they can claim to represent. This anxiety has driven a fairly high-brow conversation about how citizens might be politically re-energised and re-invigorated.

These are important and urgent concerns but here I will take a somewhat different approach to the relationship between citizen participation and representative democracy. I contend that even if citizens were much more engaged in elections than they presently are – if, for example, turnout was nearly universal – that we should still vigorously explore ways to engage citizens more deeply and directly in democratic governance using the kinds of mechanisms described in Graham Smith's excellent recent Power Inquiry report '*Beyond the Ballot*'.

Direct forms of citizen participation are important because representative institutions – even when they work well – exhibit characteristic difficulties that cannot be addressed well in the context of representative government. Varieties of direct citizen participation can, however, mitigate the problems that these deficits of representative democracy generate.

To locate these deficits, consider this crude representation of the representative policy process:

Citizens have interests and they develop preferences for parties and politicians to advance those interests. They signal these preferences by voting in elections and these signals confer a mandate to politicians and parties to make policies. Civil servants in bureaucratic agencies, staffed by professional administrators, are charged with executing these policies. The outcomes of these actions – if all goes well – advance the same interests that ground this process in the first place.

Processes of electoral interest representation, however, face four characteristic difficulties.

— There are many public issues on which citizens have no clear preferences or opinions, which means that political and policy choices rest on unstable foundations. Even with clear preferences, elections provide very blunt signals to politicians about
— what people want. Politicians often misunderstand their constituents, especially on issues that are not prominent at campaign time, and therefore cannot represent them well.
  When the interests of professional politicians depart from those of their constituents
— it can be difficult for citizens to use elections to compel their representative to advance popular interests rather than elite ends. Such accountability problems are especially likely where elections are uncompetitive and when the civil service operates at great remove from their would-be political masters.
  Finally, government may lack the capacity to produce outcomes that advance
— citizens' interests. In areas such as economic development, environment, education and public safety, success often depends upon the actions of private corporations, residents and parents, as much as upon competent government.

Participation has the potential to address these four deficits.

Improving preferences
Representative institutions work best when political parties and candidates take stands on issues for which broad public debates in the mass media, town squares, and local pubs throughout the land have produced clearly articulated positions. Most citizens may have clear views, for example, on taxes in the UK or on abortion in the United States. On many other issues – which are remote from immediate interests, where misinformation abounds or where one or a few perspectives drown out the rest – popular preferences may be unclear or unstable. Most public opinion on policy issues, as the political scientist Philip Converse pointed out many years ago, is really non-opinion – they are responses made-up on the spot to satisfy surveyors rather than to express a considered view. The giant of representative democracy has feet of clay when popular preferences are so fickle.

The quality of citizens' preferences results in large measure from the operation of large institutions, such as the mass media and informal practices of public conversation, such as in bars, squares and living rooms. There are a range of more targeted interventions, however, that attempt to directly improve the popular preferences of a select group on a specific issue.

Deliberative Polling, invented by James Fishkin and his colleagues, is the most prominent and well-studied of these. In the UK Fishkin has organised deliberative polls around crime and punishment, the monarchy, the European Union and the 1997 general election. Each of these events employed random sampling methods to select a representative group of voting-age citizens. The participants were given briefing materials and were then brought together for several days to discuss the issue in small groups and plenary sessions, among themselves and also with experts. They were then asked a series of questions to ascertain their knowledge and views about the issue both before and after the deliberative polling event.

According to Fishkin and others who have examined these experiments, participants generally learn from their deliberations and change their opinions as a result. In the event on crime, for example, participants became less likely to think that strong punishments deter crime and more sympathetic to criminal defendants. Deliberation makes participants' views more coherent and stable over time.

Fishkin's work with deliberative polling, as well as with related experiments such as citizen juries, study circles in the United States and town meeting initiatives shows that one principal benefit of participation is that it helps citizens to know the political world and develop their preferences and interests as actors in it. But these initiatives work the magic of deliberation upon relatively small and select groups of citizens, whereas the integrity of representative democracy depends upon the preferences of many millions. Bringing these initiatives in preference development to scale is a large, daunting and, as yet, unmet challenge for democratic innovators.

Communicative representation

Even when citizens have articulated preferences and attitudes, cultural and social differences can create walls of misunderstanding that separate citizens from officials. Elections and campaigns provide quite thin and infrequent indicators of public will that may, for example, fail to illuminate preferences on issues that arise between campaign seasons, those that lack public salience, or those that have been relegated to administrators rather than politicians.

The thermometers commonly used to gauge the public's will – hearings, notice and comment requirements, focus groups and surveys – often produce findings, discussion and argument that fails to elicit the rich sense of public sentiment that would educate citizens and officials. Public hearings and meetings, for example, are typically organised in ways that allow well-organised opposing sides to testify before decision-makers without facilitating exchanges. Deliberative practitioners in civil society

organisations have responded to the shortcomings of deliberative and participatory techniques for reconnecting constituents to representatives by applying insights from fields such as alternative dispute resolution, organisational design and group process facilitation. In some cases, politicians and administrators have adopted their methods to create non-electoral, participatory and deliberative mechanisms that inform and re-authorise their policy choices.

Consider the far-away small town of Kuna, Idaho in the United States. Citizens and officials there have created a two-track process for making local policy. On a rather conventional low participation track, representatives and administrators decide routine matters without elaborate public communication. But on issues that are likely to prove controversial and when public sentiments are difficult to discern, officials and community organisations convene participatory and deliberative meetings in which citizens are invited to learn about the issue in more detail and consider the merits and costs of various options alongside officials. This process utilises the national Study Circles model: participants are given briefing materials and organised into small, facilitated discussion groups that also come together in large group meetings. These discussions are intended to help participants learn about issues, debate options, and prepare questions and recommendations for policymakers. Sometimes, citizens come to understand the reasons for officials' views and support their proposals. Occasionally, however, public deliberations cause representatives and other officials to modify their proposals. Over the past five years Kuna has convened study circles on issues ranging from multi-million dollar school bonds, student drug testing, local tax policy and town planning.

Popular accountability

The democratic policy process is more gravely threatened when the interests and actions of officials in the political or administrative spheres departs systematically from that of their constituents. Electoral mechanisms, especially in places where one party or politician dominates, often prove too weak to compel representatives to act in the public interest or to hold them accountable when they fail to do so. Furthermore, the bureaucratic machinery of government often operates un-tethered from effective political oversight. Career administrators may enjoy substantial advantages over elected officials and civic organisations in information, capability and energy. Such agencies, furthermore, may have agendas rooted in organisational needs or professional habits that depart from public interests and preferences.

The experience of reconstructing the area of New York City destroyed by the September 11th terrorist attacks illustrates how public participation can fill accountability gaps.

Two regional agencies – the Port Authority and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) – were charged with leading the effort to rebuild the World Trade Center site. These agencies developed particular policy preferences that seemed related to their organisational priorities. For example, the Port Authority derived revenue from the economic activity at the site and its directives to planners stressed leasable commercial space.

At the same time, public authorities agreed to join with several civic organisations and convene a series of large scale public discussions on the site's fate. These public-engagement efforts culminated in a large meeting, drawing more than 4,000 participants, held at the Jacob Javitz Convention Center in July 2002 called 'Listening to the City'. The event was organised by a group called AmericaSpeaks according to their '21st Century Town Meeting' methodology.

Instead of the conventional talking-heads or public hearing format, the event created hundreds of more intimate, yet focused, conversations. The main floor of the convention center contained five-hundred tables of ten seats each. On each table was a computer that was in turn hooked to a central bank of computers. Throughout the day, discussions from each table were relayed to a central 'theme team' that attempted to pick out views and themes recurring for the large group as a whole. In addition to recording table conversations, each participant had a 'polling keypad' through which votes and straw polls were recorded throughout the day. The aim of all of this technology was to create a form of public deliberation that combined the benefits of small group discussion with the power of large group consensus.

The consensus of this group rejected key elements of the plans that the LMDC and Port Authority had prepared in favor of bolder architecture, greater priority on a memorial for the fallen, reduced emphasis on commercial priorities and greater attention to affordability and the quality of residential life. The event received substantial media coverage – forty-nine articles in northeast regional newspapers, eighteen of those in the New York Times – almost all of it highly favorable. The combination of public feedback and communicative pressure from media and civic organisations compelled the two agencies to begin the planning process anew and, for a time at any rate, adopt many of the values and preferences articulated. However, the authorities subsequently sponsored no comparable occasions for public deliberation. Critics have charged that the public values and priorities articulated have given way to a narrower politics of bargaining between powerful interests.

Public problem solving

Even when citizens have clear preferences, officials know what they are, and government is properly motivated to pursue those ends, the machinery of state may lack the know-how or capacity to accomplish its tasks. Especially when citizens come from diverse cultures and backgrounds, government often cannot effectively address issues such as public safety, education, and many social services without the active consent, positive contributions (co-production) and even joint-decision-making (co-governance) of citizens themselves.

Opening channels of participation to public decision-making can bring the energies, resources and ideas of citizens and stakeholders to bear on complex public problems. Appropriate kinds of deliberation can generate innovative strategies. Such reforms invite citizens to deliberate with each other and with officials to solve concrete, urgent problems.

In 1994, the Chicago Police Department adopted a series of reforms that brought residents of neighbourhoods into working partnership with police. Every month residents in 280 neighbourhoods meet with police to deliberate on how to make their neighbourhoods safer. These meetings generate plans that involve police action, invite contributions from other city departments, community organisations, local businesses, land-owners and residents themselves.

In many cases, these neighbourhood efforts have invented strategies that would never have occurred to police officers operating according to professional conventions. Often, these strategies have tackled chronic disorder and safety issues more effectively than standard policing methods. Similar participatory and deliberative governance reforms have also emerged in diverse policy areas such as primary and secondary education, environmental regulation, local economic development, neighbourhood planning, and natural resource management.

Conclusion

One complaint about the mechanisms of direct citizen participation in political decision-making has been that they are inconsistent with and can undermine the traditional mechanisms of representative democracy. This defense also often presumes that the representative policy process works well. But for many issues the links in the chain of representation, such as popular preference formation, communication between constituents and representatives, political accountability, or state capacity, are broken. The promise of citizen participation lies in its potential to repair these links and thus to increase the integrity of democracy itself.

Notes

1 For a more sustained treatment of the relationship between participatory and representative democracy, see my 'Democracy and the Policy Process' in Rein M., Moran M. and Goodin, R.E. Eds. (2006) *Oxford Handbook of Public Policy* | Oxford: Oxford University Press

2 A New Politics?

Can participation build community?

Diane Warburton **explores the dangers of being prescriptive about what a 'community' is and who is part of it when promoting community participation, as well as looking at what the implications may be for using participation to 'build' community.**

Everyone thinks they know what community participation means, although it can mean so many different things. Is a community an area on a map that can be defined by drawing a line around it? Is it a particular sector of society (the gay community or the Muslim community)? Is it a particular council estate or rural village? Is community participation about 'involving the community' or about independent local initiatives outside the state's remit? Is it about helping an old lady with her shopping or protesting about a wind farm development?

What is it?
The Home Office defines three types of 'active community participation'[1]:

— **Civic participation** – activities such as signing a petition, contacting a local councillor or attending a public meeting;
— **Informal volunteering** – giving unpaid help to those who are not family members; and
— **Formal volunteering** – giving unpaid help through groups etc. to benefit other people or the environment.

This is useful but it does not fully capture the flavour of all community participation. Of the three Home Office categories, civic participation comes closest to what most

people would call community participation, although that has by far the smallest level of involvement – 3% of the population involved in 2003, compared to 37% for informal volunteering and 28% for formal volunteering. Many people would differentiate between community participation, which is usually seen as a political activity (in the widest sense) and done by people for themselves and their neighbours (mixing altruism and self-interest) and volunteering, which is usually done for someone else, often through an organisation. However you define it though, it is likely that these figures do not take account of what Marilyn Taylor calls the '*thousands of examples where local communities have taken less visible initiatives to improve their own local circumstances at local level*'.[2]

I have been involved in what I would call community politics over the past 30 years – as a resident and part of community groups and activities of varying scale and influence in Hackney, Hammersmith and Brighton; and professionally in programmes supporting, developing and researching community action throughout the UK. This direct experience and research necessarily colours everything written here, particularly how community participation can be defined and understood.

The policy context for this work has changed dramatically over recent years and 'community' has become enormously important in public policy in various ways. It has become both an *aim* of programmes (the cohesive, resilient, sustainable or active community), and the *participants* in those programmes (usually taken to mean local residents and/or segments of local residents). Community is also used to mean *how* things should happen – the process of participation, involvement, local action, self-help – and the location for public policy, where community becomes synonymous with local.

The essential elements of 'community' do remain fairly constant through all the definitions and are to do with people and places, in various types of social relationships that go beyond individuals and form some sense of collectivity that exists at a more local level than 'society', and that have a different quality from relationships with family and friends.

Community participation is equally difficult to define. It can encompass activities ranging from local authorities putting out a leaflet or holding an exhibition (essentially information provision but often described as community consultation), to community-run initiatives that are not only separate but directly challenge public and private bodies. The common thread is that it is about local people, be they residents or people working in or running local businesses, engaging with decisions and activities that affect their lives.

What is community participation for?
There are assumptions in many public programmes that community participation is essentially about tackling poverty and social exclusion: '*involving the community is seen as a particularly formidable weapon in tackling the social exclusion that disfigures the progress of globalisation*'.[3]

Community participation, like community development, has become inextricably linked in some public policy arenas with neighbourhood regeneration and poverty. Community development has been defined as follows:

> '*An activity which confronts disadvantage, poverty and social exclusion, and promotes values of active citizenship, learning and community participation. It is about change based on empowerment, leading to a better quality of community life. While community development is usually local, it needs to be located within broader policy frameworks that recognise its role and understand its contribution.*'[4]

Community development has traditionally focused on challenging the social and political systems and structures that disempower the poorest people, by helping those people create their own groups and activities to reflect and articulate their priorities and needs in their own way. Recently, the emphasis in community policy has rather shifted away from the development of collective solidarity on to ideas that community participation leads to community initiatives. These are seen as providing ways in which poor people can meet their own needs, provide local services and gain skills, confidence etc. and address the problem of their own poverty. Such capacity building has now become a government priority, defined as '*activities, resources and support that strengthen the skills, abilities and confidence of people and community groups to take effective action and leading roles in the development of their communities.*'[5]

To some extent this change of emphasis reflects broader social change, but it also raises two important problems for community participation. The first is that poverty is seen as the problem of the poor and they are expected to solve it by gaining skills and working their way out of disadvantage and exclusion, rather than poverty being seen as the result of structural inequalities, exacerbated by current political and economic systems. The second is a further result of focusing on the poorest people tackling their own problems because this limits both the arenas in which community participation takes place (e.g. regeneration of disadvantaged neighbourhoods) and those who take part (e.g. not including the middle classes, who continue to use their own routes to power and influence) – both these limits reduce the potential of community participation to help create stronger, more cohesive and diverse communities.

Who counts as community?

As the social exclusion focus for community participation has become more pervasive, so has the criticism of the middle classes who become active on local issues. The scorn heaped on 'usual suspects' who often act on a NIMBY[6] basis, characterised as white, middle class, conservative forces against change for the 'common good', is a good example. These are clearly local people, but somehow they are not the 'right' local people, and there is a strong sense that they do not have the right to participate in the same way as poor people. But who decides which local groups have the right to be heard and which should be ignored?

Perhaps it is a sign of the complexities of this issue that even the poor can be classed as NIMBYs when someone else apparently knows better than they do what is good for their community (examples include some wind farm protest groups, made up of hugely disadvantaged ex-mining communities). Paul Kingsnorth has a different take on NIMBYS, calling them the heroes of the fight against homogenising economic fundamentalism that is removing diversity from our neighbourhoods and villages: '*[The heroes] are people in communities all over the country who refuse to lie down before the juggernaut of a spurious progress, or to sacrifice the landscapes and cultures that matter to them for the benefit of a global economy which is built on sand.*'[7] Heroes or villains, NIMBYs present a complex challenge for thinking about community participation.

It is also a common complaint that a community group involved in a participatory process is not representative of the local community – usually if it is saying something that the authorities do not want to hear. Whilst many community groups neither claim nor want to be broadly representative of the whole area, as they often represent a specific interest group or just themselves, there are clearly arguments for more inclusive and equitable community participation than currently exists – but this is to do with the design of the participation process and community groups cannot be criticised for what they are.

Community groups usually exist for their own reasons, not for the benefit of public and private institutions. They are also continuously shifting entities as people may come together to fight an imminent threat but, once hooked, go on to focus on something else, or they may just disappear. For example, the Westway Development Trust brought together the council and some of the groups that had fiercely opposed the building of the Westway motorway through their area to create a development trust carrying out multi-million pound community and commercial developments for community benefit. Community groups change in these ways all the time. They may come and go, but very

often some of the same people will go on to start something else, or get involved in something else, even if the original group disappears. This constant change does not make it easy for the public and private bodies that want to 'involve' them, but it keeps community action alive.

The most successful community groups, as with the most successful 'communities', involve a wide spread of people. The professions may have changed, but Aneurin Bevan's evocation of the value of social mix remains a powerful picture of the ideal community life: '*the lovely features of English and Welsh villages, where the doctor, the grocer, the butcher and the farm labourer all live in the same street. I believe it is essential for the full life of a citizen ... to see the living tapestry of a mixed community*'.[8]

Community participation cannot just be for the poorest people or it will wither and die. Of course, every effort must be made to ensure that participatory processes fully involve all those affected, whatever their background, and special efforts may be needed to bring in those who are traditionally excluded (the poorest people, black and minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities etc). But to focus participatory processes solely on excluded groups marginalises community participation as a whole. And excluding the middle classes risks estranging these people from local level political processes and fuels the 'revolt of the elites', as those who can afford to do so abandon public services and the public realm for the private sector (certainly in health and education). Ray Pahl[9] identified many years ago that '*community ties are negotiable for the middle class*', who could use wider social networks, in contrast to the working class who had little choice.

This social mix in community participation matters because it affects the sense of community created through participatory working. If community means anything, it is to do with the nature of the relationships created through knowing each other. Saul Alinsky said:

> '*Through constant exchange of views and by sharing common experiences there comes not a so-called 'better understanding' between these various groups, but simply an understanding. This mutual understanding is accompanied by a new appreciation and definition of social issues … [through this process] these groups discover that what they considered primarily their individual problem is also the problem of others, and that furthermore the only hope for solving an issue of such titanic proportions is by pooling all their efforts and strengths. … Most important is the fact that leaders of groups that have seemingly conflicting interests get to know each other as human beings by working together on joint programs of mutual concern.*'[10]

The nature of community conflicts

This brings us to the issue of conflict. Community participation is not a soft, easy or comfortable option. It is about politics, which means challenge and struggle. People who care enough to come out of their homes and meet with others to work through or protest some issue will have strong feelings and, usually, widely differing views. Alinsky makes the point that by getting to know people it becomes possible to differentiate between them and their views – knowing someone as a human being means you cannot (usually) caricature them as hateful and stupid, although you may disagree with them on a particular issue. It is well-accepted that national politicians get on well with those from different political parties, but it is somehow seen as the deepest treason to sit down with your 'enemy' at the local level. Perhaps this is because at the local level different interests rarely get to know each other personally. But once they do, they find that '*you can't eat anyone you've been introduced to.*'[11]

Personal relationships change the nature of the conflict, but it is still conflict. Alinsky said '*life is about conflict, and in conflict you're alive … A people's organisation is a conflict group … its sole purpose for coming into being is to wage war against all evils which cause suffering and unhappiness … [it is a] new power group.*' Although not all community groups have such overt political purposes, for those that do, conflict is how things work. Alinsky goes on to say that '*conformity and consensus crush everything that is different*'. It is a particular political philosophy in relation to community participation, but it rings true in many situations in which I have experienced community politics – with frequent conflict, both between groups but also within groups. If we want communities that are based on and value diversity, difference and equality rather than homogeneity, community participation must model that and work through conflicts with positive participatory action.

Participation as learning

That links to the final issue to raise here, which is about learning. Henry Tam[12] has said that communitarianism has three principles:

— **Co-operative enquiry** as the basis for what is accepted as truth;
— **Mutual responsibility** based on common values; and
— **Citizen participation** by all those affected in deciding how power will be exercised.

His summary of communitarianism sees common values emerging from co-operative enquiry, open exchange and deliberative discussions. Thus, the values on which priorities are set are the result of discussions among people – not imposed on the basis of a theory or political ideology. Similar principles can be applied to community

participation. As people grapple with difference and learn to talk openly with each other they learn about other people, about themselves, about the issues they are tackling and about the systems of power and decision-making in which they are getting involved.

Community participation is often about curiosity and questioning, about finding out, challenging, moving from the intuitive to the conscious as we reflect on our experience and using that for the next project, protest or consultation. There is an unavoidable logic linking democratic engagement, community participation and learning – Alinsky argues that popular education is the ultimate implicit objective within democracy, and the centrality of collective learning in social change is now widely accepted. Bernard Crick referred to the learning in terms of finding that '*Participation provides people with the skills and relationships so that they are better able to govern themselves.*'[13] David Marquand has gone further still, arguing for a '*notion of politics as mutual education: of the political domain as a public realm, where the members of a political community listen to, argue with and persuade each other as equal citizens, so as to find solutions to their common problems.*'[14]

Although Marquand's political community is not specifically a local community, the same could apply locally, and this is as good a description of community participation as any. This type of learning is not just knowledge transfer, although participation can ease that sharing and development of knowledge; this learning is what makes community participation transformational. People learn differently in groups, as they work together to make sense of what is happening and what needs to be done. Their values, attitudes and behaviour are affected and they begin to change. In particular, people realise that by working with others an individual can make a difference and, in that way, power can begin to be shifted. This builds self-confidence, trust in fellow human beings and a belief in the potential for changing things for the better. All this applies both within community groups, in relationships between groups and institutions and, ideally, also within institutions if they are to respond flexibly to the fast-changing context in which they operate. People can find their attitudes and values transformed by community participation, often, rather to their surprise.

I have long argued that 'community' is an aspiration, rather than a golden past that can be returned to or a vision that can be achieved.[15] Community is always a work in progress, and the ways in which people participate hugely affects the type of community that results. Community participation is about more than transforming neighbourhoods or quality of life, although this is important, it is essentially about people and their relationships. That is why it is impossible to consult 'the community' – not only is there never one community, but every community is constantly changing

and being re-made as people come and go, get involved and drop out, as relationships develop and alliances shift and change, and as the wider political, social and economic context changes in ways that affect even the most local of issues. Community participation may be entirely parochial, or communities may link up across the country and the world as they find common cause. Nothing is fixed, but community participation may be one of the most positive paths forward for social change in a complex, messy and rapidly changing world.

Notes

1   Munton T. and Zurawan A. (2004) *Active Communities: Headline Findings from the 2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey* London: Home Office
2   Taylor M. (2003) *Public Policy in the Community* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
3   *Ibid.*
4   Barr A. and Hashagen S. (2000) *Achieving Better Community Development Handbook – A framework for Evaluating Community Development* London: Community Development Foundation
5   Home Office (2004) *Firm Foundations*. London: Home Office
6   Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY)
7   Paul Kingsnorth (2005) 'The place where we live can unite us, wherever we initially came from, whatever our politics, class or religion' in New Statesman, 5 September 2005.
8   Aneurin Bevan, quoted in Chris Holmes (1997) 'Faded tapestry', in *The Guardian* 12.2.97. Chris Holmes was Director of Shelter at the time.
9   Ray Pahl (1970), quoted in Taylor M. (2003) *Public Policy in the Community* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
10 Alinsky S.D. (1969) *Reveille for Radicals* New York: Vintage Books (Random House) (originally published in 1949; this is a revised edition).
11 As the Red Queen said to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*
12 Tam H. (1998) *Communitarianism. A new agenda for Politics and Citizenship* Basingstoke: Macmillan
13 Speaking to Involve in 2004
14 David Marquand (1988), quoted in Henry Tam (see note 10).
15 Diane Warburton (1998) 'A passionate dialogue: community and sustainable development' in Warburton D. (ed) *Community and Sustainable Development. Participation in the Future*. London: Earthscan

The Power of Shopping

Shopping may not be an obvious form of participation but, as *Ian Cook*, *Michelle Harrison* and *Charlotte Lacey* argue, it is actually one of our most political acts. The challenges and potential benefits of recognising this are explored below.

Consumerism is a bit of a dirty word these days. In certain social groups, and perhaps amongst the readership of this pamphlet, it is associated with much of what we worry about: environmental problems, debt and inequality. We stand at the supermarket check-out judging others by the contents of their trolleys and when we arrive home and unpack our purchases we appal ourselves by the sheer amount of stuff consumed or wasted in our own homes. We curse the affluence of our society, its unsustainability and its greed.

And of course it is all true – as we have got richer as a society we have grown more careless and profligate. At the same time, though, our relative affluence has also afforded us greater choice. As our real incomes have doubled over the last three decades, so has our personal power to effect change. When we shop, we engage directly with the lives of other citizens in our country and across the globe. As consumers, we shape the lives of people both here and overseas.[1] But when we dismiss consumerism as the problem instead of recognising it as a route to participation, we lose out on an opportunity to reengage citizens and change the scales of inequality. Let's be brave (and controversial): shopping, and the choices that it affords us as individuals, provides one of the single most influential forces of political re-engagement that there is. Shopping is an act of love,[2] an act of self-expression and belief. It is the simplest interaction that we have, and contribution that we can make, to the state of the world around us.

Shopping as participation

Consumer apathy is a bit of a myth.[3] If small steps in the right direction are enough to excite you, then there is plenty to build on. Henley Centre research has consistently shown the consumer appetite to shop 'ethically'; for as long as we've been tracking it consumers have also shown a steady willingness to boycott corporations that they believe behave in an unethical way. The great thing about championing consumer power is that we can simultaneously arm people with the insights as to how they connect, via the highstreet and the supermarket, with global political economy, and the realisation that they have an immediate personal weapon, in their wallets, to fight their corner.

Don't blame the politicians for world debt and trade inequalities and then pop into the supermarket for a bar of cheap chocolate. Don't expect transport policy and local environmental problems to be sorted out whilst you are driving to Bluewater. Don't bemoan a corporate conspiracy of sweatshop factory conditions whilst wearing 3 for the price of 2 t-shirts. The fastest way to change the world is through the cash tills. Affluent consumers are not impotent.

The swell of enthusiasm for collective action inspired by Geldof and the reinvigoration of youth politics that Naomi Klein propelled with the publication of *No Logo*[4] are recent heartening illustrations of the potential for public participation in the political sphere. The challenge is to overcome the tendency amongst consumers to *compartmentalise* their lives[5] – to vote one way and shop another (or to not vote at all), or to hold a set of 'ethical' beliefs or opinions which manage to get lost in the shopping mall. The challenge is to broaden participation, not just across society but *within* each person's life. To release consumer power we need more follow through, from the dinner party chat to the dinner party menu. So, what is the platform from which we start? What more can be done to release the power of consumption as an act of public participation?

Over the last decade in the UK, and elsewhere across the Western world, there has been an enormous market expansion in 'ethical' products. This movement started largely around the cash crops of coffee, tea, sugar and cocoa. From these initial products most symbolic of the global inequalities created with colonialism, it has spread to a plethora of food products and into clothing, interiors and financial services. In the UK 'fair traded' coffee has taken an estimated 10% of the market and the 'ethical' financial investment market continues to grow year on year. The market for 'environmentally friendly' goods and organic produce is now so well developed that it can no longer be considered niche. Indeed, the top British supermarkets are selling millions of pounds of organic produce every week.

Yet this really should be seen as just the beginning. There is still enormous potential for consumers to continue to change the marketplace. We know this because of the proportion of consumers who report that they would rather buy 'ethical' products and the mismatch with the contents of their shopping bags. Experience tells us that consumers rarely set out to deliberately lie about their habits and persuasions – when they report an interest in 'ethical' products they genuinely mean it, even if they don't manage to translate it into action in the supermarket. We also know it because the majority of consumers have little awareness of the social and environmental impact of their own consumption. They may march at Gleneagles but fail to connect with the trade inequalities embedded in their own cup of cocoa. Again, it is understandable.

There are a series of genuine obstacles in the way of consumers when it comes to unleashing the power of shopping. If we want to continue to grow and promote this type of participation, then we need to focus in on them.

Removing barriers

Henley Centre research suggests that only a small proportion of British consumers consistently shop 'ethically' – a 'hardcore' group of less than 5% who will, regardless of circumstance, favour products that have 'ethical merit' (within this group, the most significant subgroup make their purchasing decisions on the basis of environmental concerns). The rest of us – the vast majority of us – are far more modal in our behaviour. This is consultancy jargon to describe the fact that there is generally as much difference in behaviour between the same person on two different shopping occasions as between two different people on the same occasion. Mode refers to the mood that we are in, the company we are with and the time that we have at our disposal. The majority of people with a screaming two year old in their trolley will want to get through their shopping ordeal as quickly as they can, regardless of their gender or social class. Similarly, if same toddler has been left at home, then the shopper may well adopt 'holiday mode', lingering over the purchasing decisions and relishing the quiet of the frozen food aisle, again regardless of gender or budget. Indeed, the time that the shopper has available to them, even beyond the money they have at their disposal, will often be the ultimate definer of the contents of the shopping trolley. Time squeeze, the badge of 1990s success, has lingered on as major barrier to participatory shopping.

Pressure group 'types' often seem to find the 'lack of time' excuse a bit unpalatable. Surely people who really cared would find the time to source the best products in the supermarket or on the high street or go to a series of small family run outlets for their provisions rather than a corporate monstrosity? No doubt, people who *really* cared would. For the rest – those that want the world to be a more equitable place but often find themselves too distracted by their own lives to act on it – it has to be made as easy as possible for them to make the right choice. 'Ethical' products need to put the thought into how they can offer 21st century benefits as much as any other benefit. They have to focus on their time efficiency as much as their value and they always have to be in easy reach of the consumer. There is no point offering a home delivery service if it isn't provided during 'at home' hours, or portion sizes that are too big for the growing number of singe person households. There is no doubt that we are moving fast in the right direction in this regard but there is still plenty of distance to go.

The second major constraint to the expansion of the ethical marketplace is the growing social and economic inequalities amongst British consumers. The growth in affluence

has not been equitably distributed: the richest have got richer at a far greater rate than the poorest have got richer. The price premiums that are associated with fairly traded, organically grown or ethically manufactured goods are more easily absorbed by the more affluent. Mode certainly matters, but so does money: it is hardly surprising that consumers from social group AB are more likely to purchase 'ethical' produce than those from social group D. Henley Centre research with low income consumers confirms, however, that lack of income does not mean lack of *interest* in ethically traded produce. Looking ahead, the real danger is of the continuing growth in the divide between the shopping experience of the mass affluent and that of the economically excluded, with the range and opportunity to participate accessible to the former contrasting with genuine food poverty for the latter.[6] This poses a critical policy issue too structural and significant to be assessed or remedied here.

Category confusion is another potential constraint on the growth of the ethical sector, or at the least, a potential consumer turn-off when it comes to participating. The world of fast moving consumer goods has gone crazy over the last fifteen years with range expansion: from shampoo to breakfast cereal, the aisles are loaded with multiple subtle variations of the same product. The majority of consumers are now fed up with the amount of 'choice' they face when shopping and from a consumer perspective, there is a danger that the 'ethical' marketplace, particularly in the food sector, is developing in the same direction. Products variously offer fair trade benefits, local sourcing, or environmental (organic) value. There has been some merging around these categories (e.g. organic fair trade) but the shopper is still faced with a variety of options for their consumer participation.

Trade offs and benefits

In truth, to some extent they always will be. Producers and manufacturers need to keep their messages simple and avoid the tendency to create the unhelpful proliferation of choice reminiscent of the shampoo shelves; they need to act as choice editors for the time short shopper and build trusted brands that signal core values of ethical intent. But there is no benefit to be had in pretending that there are no difficult trade offs to be made when consumers use the power of their wallet to influence global political economy.

As in any area of public policy and public participation, there are competing interests with legitimate needs. Fairly traded food that offers decent markets to overseas producers reinforces, rather than ameliorates, the concerns around food miles. A decent price to producers invariably represents a higher price to consumers, and thus reinforces the divide between richer and poorer shoppers within our own society. For

every shopper there is the very personal trade off between spending extra on their household provision as an act of deliberate personal political expression or saving money at all cost in order to manage familial responsibilities. Ultimately, there is the big one from an environmental standpoint: that when in doubt, probably the most significant act of participation is to not buy at all.

But none of this is overwhelming. As with all forms of participation we do need to face shopping's challenges but, most importantly, we need to celebrate and encourage its benefits. In our contemporary culture of consumption it is too easy to feel apathetic – to view any individual purchase as meaningless against the size of the problem. But the world can be changed in small steps as well as big ones. We can and must connect people through the most mundane acts of their daily lives to some of the most significant political issues of our time.

Notes

1 Harrison M. (2001) *King Sugar: Jamaica, the Caribbean and the World Sugar Economy* New York: New York University Press and London: Latin American Bureau, Cook I. and Harrison M. (2003) *Cross-over Food: Re-materialising Postcolonial Geographies* Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 28 (3) pp.296-317 and Cook I., Harrison M. et al. (2004) *Follow the Thing: West Indian Hot Pepper Sauces*. paper presented at the Food & Mobilities symposium, CeMoRe, Lancaster University, 12-13 November 2004
2 Miller D. (1998) *A Theory of Shopping* Cornell: Cornell University Press
3 Henley Centre Planning for Consumer Change (research and insight platform) 1995 to 2005 London
4 Klein N. (2000) *No Logo* Flamingo
5 Henley Centre Planning for Consumer Change (research and insight platform) 1995 to 2005 London
6 Christie I., Lang T., Harrison M. and Hitchman C. (2002) *Inconvenience Food* London: Demos

Many-to-Many: Lessons from Web 2.0 for Participation and E-democracy

E-democracy has yet to achieve significantly better results in enabling participation than conventional methods. *Lee Bryant* and *David Wilcox* explore the reasons for this and argue that the key to success is learning from the ways that people behave on the internet.

The participation sector has spawned a large amount of research, methodology and consulting services, but remarkably little new thinking about how to get better results from consultation and participation exercises. In the late 90's, the Internet and related technologies were seen as a potential solution to these problems, but the majority of early e-government and e-democracy initiatives have been little more than old thinking disseminated using new media. However, the outlines of a new approach are beginning to take shape that draw on recent thinking in online social networks and the emerging culture of the World Wide Web to offer some lessons for the future.

What's the problem?
Most research into why participation is not generating the hoped-for results and levels of engagement points to three key groups of issues[1]:

— Conventional 'top-down' approaches to participation do not overcome the feeling of powerlessness that many participants experience, nor the political, economic, cultural and technical barriers to participation.
— People are much more likely to get involved if they think something tangible and worthwhile will come out of it, which is why it is better to support independent organisations run by people themselves.
— Capacity building to support empowerment and participation is lacking, especially among excluded groups – but this does not mean turning people into professional service users.

At the heart of these issues is the question of power and where it lies. Regardless of the quality of techniques employed or facilitation provided, if a participation exercise consists of a powerful body (e.g. a government department) inviting submissions on pre-determined questions from the disempowered, then the power imbalance built into the consultation will cast doubt on the results. Power is derived most obviously from being able to choose and frame the questions and the type of language used; but it is also important to consider who is asking the questions, when and how they are asked and, of course, who can answer.

Why does this situation continue? Firstly, institutional inertia and vested interests among consultation or participation professionals sometimes result in us clinging to old models for as long as they are funded, regardless of their success. This applies across the board, from client staff and external consultants to the cadre of semi-professional 'service users' who take part in these projects. Secondly, perhaps there is a genuine shortage of ideas when it comes to engaging people in decision-making and the work-ings of power from the bottom-up. Even where organisations try to speak the language of bottom-up processes, they do so in a top-down way because that is all they know.[2]

It is sometimes argued on the basis of existing evidence that most people do not want to be engaged or to participate. But there is also evidence suggesting that we all have issues or problems which we regard as important enough to motivate us to get involved in finding solutions.[3] Indeed, it may be that some of the problems we face in the Twenty-first century, such as the increasing demands placed on the National Health Service and environmental protection, are practically insoluble without some form of shared solution between the government, civil society and individual citizens.

Where does technology fit in?

E-democracy has been looked to as a solution for some of participation's problems by virtue of its newness, ability to reach greater numbers of people and, for certain kinds of people, its increased accessibility when compared to giving up a evening to attend a public meeting. But current e-democracy models are largely based on traditional thinking. Government has spent £4 million on pilots but the work is mostly top down.[4] There are two pilot community forums[5], and Bristol council is developing a community campaigning pack, but on the whole the impact on the cultural and organisational problems of participation is minimal. In common with the majority of e-government projects, this work is based on the idea that government can construct an online 'place' that reflects its own view of the issues, and then invite 'communities' to visit and 'join in the debate'. However, the real debate and the real action are elsewhere – within people's own networks.

Even so, if you look at what is happening in the commercial world, marketing specialists and some big corporations now recognise that that the best way to improve their products is to develop and maintain continuing conversations with their customers[6] in an attempt to genuinely involve them in customer support, product design and future direction. They are monitoring weblogs, engaging with criticism and generally trying to keep up in a highly competitive (and fickle) world where customers have shown time and time again that they will not tolerate inferior service – or worse – old-fashioned PR and spin.[7]

Technology is changing civil society. People are starting to use their digital cameras to show up failures in public services. The National Computing Centre is supporting groups who want to make campaign videos, the BBC offers an online campaigning platform[8], community groups in Teesside are showing how to mix new digital media with older methods of engagement[9], and citizens in London and elsewhere are organising online for change.[10] There is lots of participation and involvement going on, it's just that most of it is DIY activity taking place a long way from the calcified environment of formal participation and consultation projects.

Learning from technology
So what lessons can we learn from these new, alternative approaches, and what role, if any, can online technologies play in participation?

Perhaps the most surprising thing to say about current developments in the online world is that their greatest contribution is probably cultural rather than technical. There has been a significant increase in online participation and involvement over the past couple of years, which has marked what some people have called the transition from Web 1.0 (publishing 'pages' within a broadcast model) to a new phase dubbed Web 2.0[11] (the network as platform, remix culture and network effects). Interestingly, this has not been driven by sophisticated new technology, software or hardware. Rather it is the result of a critical mass of connected individuals doing some technically very simple things together.

For example, Weblogs are technically little different to the personal homepages that proliferated in the early days of the 'net, the difference is they are now at the centre of millions of connected conversations that are taking place between individuals without mediation by mainstream media, traditional organisations or IT departments.

Whereas leading Web sites used to focus on pushing information to individuals (one-to-many), proponents of Web 2.0 are building what they call an 'architecture of participation' to support many-to-many interaction. In the jargon, it is about creating social affordances based on network effects – i.e. new things are possible with a critical mass of connected people and content. Crucially, this process has a human voice – it places great importance on the value of conversation rather than just information sharing.

The best-known example of this phenomenon is Google. The power of its search engine is derived from millions of people linking their web sites to one another, which creates a sufficiently large and dynamic dataset for Google's Pagerank algorithm[12]

to determine the most useful Web links for a given search, based on previous users' behaviour. Amazon, the online bookseller, and eBay, the online auction, also utilise network effects to drive their recommendation and reputation systems. In each case, users are doing something very small and simple that, when aggregated at scale, enables new and powerful applications based on popular participation.

There are several key cultural aspects of Web 2.0 thinking that have been key to its growth so far, which may be useful reference points for a new approach to thinking about participation:

Open source, open services and the remix culture
Open source ideas began in the gift economy of academia and later influenced software developers and Internet pioneers. The idea is simple: by allowing people to participate in the development of tools or services that are important to them, we can together create public value that more restrictive models of exchange can not offer. This idea is key to encouraging people to get involved with projects of various kinds, because they can benefit from the shared value that results. Demos published a useful report in 2005 entitled Wide Open[13], which suggested how this approach could be applied in knowledge sharing, team working and conversations, and contained some useful pointers for using these ideas in a practical setting.

Aggregation and syndication
Modern Web-based systems see information and content as services, not products, and allow end users to choose what and how to aggregate it in order to support their own worldview or needs. This works both ways. Just as people should be able to aggregate the information they need, so organisations that want to know their views should attempt to aggregate those views where they have already been expressed, rather than hope that people will take the trouble to tell their story or share their views all over again.

Co-production
Ideas such as commons-based peer production are giving a new lease of life to older concepts of public good and public value, with projects such as Wikipedia[14] achieving levels of meaningful participation that e-democracy practitioners can only dream about. The 'wiki way' is for people to collaborate to build up ideas, plans, documents and resources that they can all share. This is an important form of participation that traditional approaches rarely accomplish.

User-driven language

This cuts to the heart of the language problem in participation projects; instead of using a fixed set of terms or categories and expecting people to understand and engage with them, many Web 2.0 applications use methods such as social tagging to facilitate a fluid process of language and meaning negotiation between users. Aggregating user-driven terms provides a much more accurate picture of their views and priorities than surveys that ask how many agree with *proposition X* or *label Y.*[15]

Intelligence at the edges

These new developments are all about building capacity within the network and devolving intelligence to the edges and away from the centre. Capacity building should be about network development and strengthening, rather than just individual interactions with service users. Even if organisations adopt open participation tools and methods, the absence of network development will mean they never get off the ground.[16]

Personal ownership, agency and voice

Rather than expect people to visit somebody else's online space to share their views or debate issues, more and more people will share their own views through a personal space, weblog or wiki with the expectation that these can be cross-posted or syndicated to other places that would like to share them. People should own their own contributions and express them in their own voice – it should be up to the consulting organisation to do the leg-work to aggregate these contributions by going to the people, rather than vice versa.

The Web as a new frontier

What all these themes have in common is the question of power: in a networked world, power lies with the network nodes, not the centre. If we are to move beyond the traditional broadcast or portal model of e-government, or the staid forum-based approach of early e-democracy, then we must actively seek to increase the power and the capacity of the network for participation to succeed.

There are some obvious first steps, such as more networky organisations[17], storytelling instead of surveys[18], more ground-up e-democracy creating civic spaces and events with conversations instead of presentations.[19] But the impressive levels of participation that we are witnessing on the Web's new frontier will only be achieved in conventional participation projects if we delve more deeply into network thinking to address the power problem that lies at the heart of traditional participation methods.

If we are to go beyond mere consultation, where people are invited to give their views on a limited set of issues that are fed back into a process that remains largely opaque and inaccessible, then we should perhaps look to network thinking for some lessons on how to do this in the real world.

The 'architecture of participation' being developed under the banner Web 2.0 provides a good starting point, and ideas such as network-based co-production, open source thinking and user-driven language are already being used in a variety of fields to engage people better than before. But this will only work if accompanied by a corresponding cultural shift, which involves letting go and sharing power within a network context, rather than clinging to the belief that government, charities or companies have all the answers and their customers are simply a resource to be managed.

Notes

1   See for example www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/0395.asp
2   www.partnerships.typepad.com/civic/2005/09/participation_l.html
3   See for example www.pledgebank.com and www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork/C2655
4   www.partnerships.typepad.com/civic/2005/04/time_to_open_so.html
5   www.partnerships.typepad.com/civic/2005/06/edemocracy_gain.html
6   See www.cluetrain.org for a good introduction to the idea that markets are conversations
7   Recent examples of the power of consumer conversations are the Kryptonite bike lock debacle (see www.flacklife.blogspot.com/2005/03/heres-brief-qa-from-prnews-about.html) and the Land Rover Discovery campaign (see www.haveyoursay.com/)
8   www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork/
9   www.partnerships.typepad.com/civic/2005/08/a_modest_projec.html
10 www.londoncitizens.org.uk/index.htm
11 See for example www.radar.oreilly.com/archives/2005/10/web_20_compact_definition.html
12 www-db.stanford.edu/~backrub/google.html
13 www.demos.co.uk/catalogue/wideopen/
14 www.wikipedia.org
15 www.headshift.com/archives/002085.cfm
16 www.worldchanging.com/archives/002782.html
17 www.partnerships.typepad.com/civic/2005/06/planning_a_netw.html
18 www.partnerships.typepad.com/civic/2005/06/storytelling_pr.html
19 www.partnerships.typepad.com/civic/2004/10/can_we_learn_co.html

Participation and the Private Sector — Where Next Now that the Novelty Has Gone?

Stakeholder engagement is now the norm in a lot of companies and this is obvious progress. But moving beyond that, *Mike King* and *Anthony Perret* look at how participation in the corporate sector is likely to develop as its timing, participants and aims change and expectations increase.

At a recent meeting with a senior executive from a large multinational corporation their opening gambit was along the lines of: 'I hope that you're not going to tell us about Stakeholder Engagement because we've done that'. So is that it then? Engagement has been done, ticked off the list, let's move on. It made me wonder about where we actually are and where next. If we were to make some grand and vague generalisations about the progression of corporate stakeholder engagement, as seen by The Environment Council, over the last ten or so years, it might look a bit like this.

Where are we at?
In the early days there were dialogues breaking out around critical and contentious issues, with companies forced to talk by campaigners – Brent Spar might be the typical example. Five years on, dialogues were being built around issues as a way of establishing relationships between previously unconnected stakeholder groups – the British Nuclear Fuels (BNFL) National Dialogue would be our proto-type here. More recently, relationships, sometimes those established in the previous round, are being used to deal with specific issues. This is sometimes through official 'dialogues', such as stakeholder panels, sometime in more unofficial ways, through better understanding, networks and ongoing conversations.

So while there may be a perception that engagement has stuck and is less of a priority that previously, the reality is that it has, quite naturally, become accepted and therefore seems less exciting. But you just have to look at the number of stakeholder-based consultancies and the added 'engagement' offering of the established posse to know that, while it has been done, it also continues to be done. In many ways this should be seen as a great success for those of us who were involved in establishing and pushing the idea and it is too easily overlooked.

In the same way, Corporate Responsibility has become a norm, an established part of business that is buttressed by acknowledged arguments about business benefits. But do either of them meet their purpose? You have to assume that for the companies they do, otherwise we would not be seeing their consistent growth. But for the

stakeholders? This is a more complex question – for some they might, while for others they definitely don't. The clamour about engagement not being worthwhile and having been subsumed by the corporate beast is nothing new. The reality is surely that this was always going to be the case, campaigners will always have to move on to new techniques, companies will always retain the power to make their own decisions, and the public will always have other priorities.

So while it may have been successfully integrated, was the promise of participation illusory? Should we all give up and go back to campaigning? It is very tempting to say yes. Not only is campaigning more fun, it can sometimes be hard to see what ten years of increased dialogue has really done to change corporate behaviour, though one could say the same of thirty years of campaigning. Of course behaviour change, the ultimate objective, is always hard to see and measure. But if you spend long enough with the corporate sector, or at least with the leading parts of it, you will see that behaviours and attitudes and relationships have indeed changed. Some of this may be due to the greater role of participation and engagement, some due to factors such as globalisation, generational shifts and crisis issues of global significance, such as climate change. It then becomes a question of the engagement field keeping up with the greater changes that are going on and adjusting its role accordingly.

What challenges do we face?
Before we get onto that though, let's have a quick skip through some of the realities of corporate dialogue and see where that leaves us. Starting with engaging "upstream".

Early engagement – the ever popular chant that stakeholders should be engaged at the early stages of development, particularly around science-based products like nanotechnology, face an uphill struggle in several respects. The technical difficulties of really engaging the public in any meaningful way are not something I have seen any persuasive response to from the participation sector. Even if they were addressed, any methods would still face extremely difficult issues around competition and commercial confidentiality – would you let people in on a big research secret that you have invested millions in? Would you sideline a new technology, with its millions in potential profits, its solid market research and its positive impact on your quarterly figures because some groups have concerns? The truth is that companies will not give up the power to make decisions about policy, strategy and products.

Influence, however, is another matter. Stakeholders can often influence and increase companies' understanding of their perspectives. Often this is most meaningfully done through ongoing relationships. It is important to realise that, although external

stakeholders will often see companies as a monolith this is in fact a somewhat simplistic notion. The person they are dealing with, maybe a Corporate Responsibility (CR) Director, often has little real power in the organisation themselves, only influence. In this way, consultation is real; dialogue, in the so-called technical sense, a fallacy.

Timing itself is a difficulty. It is very easy to say engage early when the decisions can still be changed, but even if you were to get through the two issues above, when do you actually engage? In the pharmaceutical sector nine out of ten early stage compounds fail. By the time you know they are going to work many decisions have been irrevocably made and millions spent. This area is becoming even more complicated by the increasing competition between governments to bring science and research based companies into their economy. As a corporate CEO, if you are faced with siting your new investment in a country where all your ideas have to go through a stakeholder engagement process, with the prospect not only of the direct costs, but also of increased expectation on performance, safety and reliability or even changes to the product itself; or siting yourself in a new high-tech hub, where innovation is positively encouraged, the population are highly pro-science and the tax is lower – where would you go? It will be interesting to see how this relationship changes further as the relative purchasing powers of different consumer nations alters.

Of course the accepted corollary is that you risk consumer rejection if you don't engage with stakeholders. GM certainly provides a good example of this, as does nuclear power in the UK perhaps. But where else? And even in these two cases – has the market really been lost, or has it just moved elsewhere? From the company perspective, is there really a great risk of rejection? On technological grounds the number of new technologies joyfully accepted as must-haves vastly outnumbers those seen as high-risk, and when there is an element of both – mobile phones – must-have tends to outweigh might-harm.

Even then, we risk making a molehill out of a mountain. Would dialogue have led to any sort of solution to the GM issue? Will it in the nuclear new build debate? When faced with issues that have such deep divisions of belief, and limited resources on both sides, doesn't history show that resorting to the media is far more likely to lead to success, for the campaigners anyway?

So is there in fact no future for participation in the corporate sector? Of course there is, but as with any new technology, whether scientific or social, our expectations of it both mellow and alter as it becomes a norm. For starters, we should not forget the deep inroads already made; talking to stakeholders, engaging with those directly

affected, business/NGO partnerships, Corporate Responsibility panels – all of these would have seemed groundbreaking a decade ago, now they are normal, at least among those companies taking Corporate Responsibility seriously. Whether we can ever really expect them to filter down from the FTSE100 to the FTSE350 and beyond is a moot point. As you move down the scale resources become more stretched, public reputations less important and, lets not forget, stakeholders less interested. Where next though is what I was asked to opine on in this piece. I want to outline four key areas where the next stages of progress might appear.

Where next?

The first area we might loosely call regulation and governance. It is very unfortunate that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in his wisdom, decided to surprise us all, including the DTI, with an about face on the Operating and Financial Review (OFR). He ignored seven years of DTI work and announced in a speech to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in November 2005 that he was cancelling the planned introduction of mandatory OFR reporting. The OFR would have given some legal force to the importance of stakeholder relationships in judging future prospects. However, despite this pandering to the more reactionary elements of the CBI, the reasoning behind the OFR will not go away, and I hope rumours of it being taken up by the Association of British Insurers as best practice prove accurate. Corporate Governance is increasingly having to account for the management of future risks in a more complex society. Expectations and established stakeholder relationships cannot help but be part of this for the larger companies, but don't expect it to be genuine dialogue.

The second important area is brand and reputation, not necessarily among consumers, who are far too fickle, short-term and self-centred, but among staff. The 'war for talent' is becoming a tired cliché, but as with most tired clichés it has a basis in truth. Most large companies see staff, present and future, as a key driver to their CR activities. A company's ability to engage with and gain the respect of their staff, which are key stakeholders, can be a key driver of reputation among the more educated and aware people that make up the most desirable employees. In a reinforcing spiral this will aid increased participation by the corporate sector with stakeholders and in debates. An interesting corollary in this area, which will further accelerate change, is the increasingly porous boundaries of employment between the private sector and NGOs, including bringing engagement skills in-house.

Which leads me on to my third driver – the increased role of the company as stakeholder. Corporate lobbying in nothing new, but it is an area which is starting to attract increased attention and demands for transparency. Examples include the

Extractives Industries Transparency Initiative, the development of lobbying policies by Socially Responsible Investment houses and a sudden rash of reports from think tanks. So while the role of company as stakeholder in policy is not new, its participation may become more open and more participative.

The other side of this coin is the increasing role that companies, and here I mean multi-nationals, are likely to play in the realm of policy failures. Key here will be the Millenium Development Goals. With the increasing pressure faced as their failure becomes more obvious, the expectations on business will mount (this will be one of the pay-offs for global markets) as they have an increasingly key role as a participant in development, as holders of purse strings, possessors of skills and, perhaps, as the only truly global organisations.

My concluding pressure is different, as it is not about the role of the company, but the role of participation. Outside of the putative engagement sector, participation will have to keep proving its worth. As it becomes a norm its value as innovation will diminish and it will come to be judged on quality, value for money and impact (which may be difficult considering some of the issues discussed above). Evaluation will be increasingly important over the next few years. We will need to find ways to measure the benefits, highlight the value of those invisible and intangible advantages and prove the worth of participation. And we will have to do it quickly, cheaply and efficiently. Not every evaluation of an engagement process should be a PhD.

So in the end that executive may well have been right, stakeholder engagement has been done. But then so has risk-management, accounts and marketing. The fact that it is not new does not diminish its importance, nor stop innovation. In fact, innovation is likely to become more important than ever, not just to keep up the interest and impact but also as the field becomes even more competitive. This will have an important impact on the stakeholder based sector itself. As a mature service, stakeholder engagement will no longer be treated with kid gloves, funded as part of being a responsible company. The long-standing demand, that it has to have an impact, may well come true, and that might just make the business a whole lot harder.

Bringing Citizens In From the Cold — Creating Space in Decision-Making

Perry Walker uses a local planning dispute to reflect on the much larger questions about representative democracy that it raises and the potential for citizens' participation in decision-making to strengthen representative democracy.

The planning system is one which invites participation and has even legislated for it, with its statements for community involvement. It aims to go beyond representative democracy and allow citizens to have their voice heard on planning issues which will affect them. Yet it is also a system which incites anger, helplessness and cynicism among citizens. In doing so it throws into sharp and continuous relief the clash between traditional representative democracy and participative democracy. I witnessed this conflict in the microcosm of a recent planning dispute in Ledbury, the market town in Herefordshire where I live, which both depressed and inspired me. The depression came mainly from the way the planning system worked and the inspiration from the insights I gained into how it *could* work.

Close to home
The dispute in question was over a proposal to build a multi-storied residential home for the elderly at Leadon Bank. The objection was not to the principle – as the existing home on the site is clearly inadequate and the town's increasing population of elderly people need providing for – but to the proposed scale and design. It seemed out of keeping with other buildings in the town, would involve destroying many trees and would overlook and overshadow nearby houses and a recreation ground.

Towards the end of the dispute, in October 2005, a town referendum was held. Over 800 people turned out, despite the fact that the referendum was purely advisory and Herefordshire Council had already agreed the plans. To give a sense of the atmosphere, Jane Horton, a local resident, remarked that she was in Prague shortly after the Velvet Revolution and '*the atmosphere on referendum day here felt a bit the same.*'

If the turnout was inspiring, less so was the reaction to the referendum, as detailed by the Ledbury Reporter of November 4th. Barry Ashton, who represents Ledbury on Herefordshire Council, was quoted as saying, '*I suppose you could say the referendum was an exercise in democracy, but it was an exercise in futility, actually. So 10.3 per cent of the electorate turned out. Big deal.*' I think he felt that the representative democractic system was up to the job and had made its decision, leaving the meeting with no

legitimacy. By contrast, Peter Watts of the town council in Ledbury, which had funded the referendum, said, '*(the referendum) shows that people have a democracy and should have their say. Herefordshire Council and our representatives on that council have not listened to us at all.*' Ninety percent of those who voted in the referendum were unhappy with the proposal, making it clear that representative democracy does not always make the right decision.

For many of those involved in the campaign that culminated in the referendum their experience of this failure to listen came as a surprise. Their cynicism came later. The lead in the campaign was taken by two men who live near Leadon Bank: Steve Kerridge and Darren Stokes. Steve said that at the outset that he '*believed that if we made enough fuss, they (Hereforshire Council) would listen.*'

There was certainly plenty to listen to. The campaign's initial 300 fliers caused 113 people to fill in their views and personal details and send them in. It is a small but significant example of the insensitivity of bureaucracy that these 113 responses were treated as a single petition.

Lack of communication
This flurry of activity led to an offer of a meeting by Shaw Healthcare, the developers, however Steve and Darren did not feel that their concerns were truly addressed. They were assured that materials being used in the building had been chosen to be sympathetic to the local area, yet the drawings looked pretty much identical to other buildings, from other parts of the country, on Shaw's website.

This meeting was however an advance on the situation with the planning officer at Herefordshire Council who refused to meet them. When Darren went along to the council offices he managed no better than a phone conversation with the planning officer from the office's reception. Some reception!

This lack of communication felt symptomatic. The Planning Officer reported that a consultation had been going on for months but this did not seem to have included local residents. When he reported that a change had been made to the sightline to address residents' objections, he did not seem to have contacted any residents to see if this was true. When he reported that, '*no new material objections have been received*' this seemed a sleight of hand to Steve and Darren. From their point of view, they had voiced no new objections because they were still trying to get answers to their original objections.

Another instance of lack of communication came in the middle of a meeting of the relevant area sub-committee of the Planning Committee. It was suddenly announced that the Leadon Bank development was to be referred to a meeting of the full committee. Whether or not this was appropriate, the eight or so members of the public who had attended the meeting for that one item suddenly found that their journey had been a waste of time. They did not feel considered by the political process and no apology was given to them.

Lack of trust

This leads onto my next point, that residents felt unfairly treated. Steve, as their representative, had one three-minute slot at the Planning Committee meeting. He had to abide by rules on not handing out material or referring to drawings etc. that did not apply to the Planning Officer and he felt insulted.

What made this worse, in the eyes of residents, was that while they were getting a rough ride, Shaw Healthcare's ride was a good deal smoother. When the proposals for Leadon Bank were first put forward by Shaw Healthcare, residents believed that the council would give the opposition a fair hearing but this belief was gradually whittled away. The company had plenty of access to the Planning Officer, unlike the residents, and the biggest blow came when the Planning Officer stated in a committee report that Shaw had dealt with all of the objections. Yet the resubmitted plans tabled at the meeting were received at the last minute, after the committee report had gone out.

Particularly galling, especially for Steve and for Darren, was that they appeared to be doing a better job of scrutinising the proposals than the elected representatives whose responsibility that is. After wading through the inaccessible language of the planning sector Steve was able to make arguments about issues such as the fact that real trees will hide the building far less than representative ones on a model. This highly detailed analysis contrasts with the councillors, who seemed contented to take the word of the planning officer. Steve felt strongly about this and stated that he '*was disgusted that they never interrogated the visual information.*'

The cumulative effect of all this was a lack of trust in the council. At the meeting held to call the referendum, it was stated that, '*The Ledbury Residents' Group predict that Hereford Council, once informed of the requirement to hold a parish poll [i.e. the referendum], will cynically schedule it to take place after the date of the planning meeting that will consider the approval of the 'Leadon Bank Development'*'. And this was in fact what happened. What is significant about this is not whether the Council behaved cynically, but that residents believed that they would do so.

How could this be different?

Having this dispute avoid the cynicism of citizens does not require restructuring the entire planning system. It merely requires recognising what citizens are able to offer a decision-making process, rather than assuming that resprepresentative democracy is always sufficient and will always make the right decision.

In the case above, citizens were capable and willing to help councillors scrutinize the planning proposals but the system was unable to recognise their effort. At the planning committee meeting, those opposing the proposal were allotted three minutes to make their case and allowed no part in further discussion. Discussions would have been better informed and more representative of citizens' views if Steve and Darren could have taken a full part in them, whether or not they were part of the final vote, for example by co-opting them onto the committee.

Unfortunately though, this dispute is one of many and underlying it is a clash of the tectonic plates of politics with issues that need resolving if disputes such as Leadon Bank are to be prevented. One of these plates is good old representative democracy, which often assumes that once an election has been held decisions will be made by representatives, guided of course by public opinion. The second plate is participative democracy. This is both older and newer, harking back to ancient Greece, but also struggling to define itself and to emerge in response to the current failings of the representative form.

The model of representative democracy has changed little since John Stuart Mill called it, '*the grand discovery of modern times*' in 1822 and it has certainly changed less than the world around it. The result is that some of the assumptions underlying it have become outdated, but these assumptions are usually hidden. Let me try and bring three of them, all related, blinking into the light of day.

Assumptions of representative democracy

One assumption is that the representative knows best. One US legislator stated, '*I know full well and without the slightest question that had the five thousand people who had written me been in the possession of the knowledge that was mine, at least a majority of them would have taken (my) position.*'

In the case of Leadon Bank, this was certainly not the case. Steve and Darren in particular gave months of their spare time (plus plenty that was not spare) to under-standing and commenting on the proposals. Steve is trained in design and Darren lectures in 3-D design. They were far better informed than the councilors – generalists

with a much wider range of issues to consider – could hope to be.

The second assumption is that the only source of legitimacy is through election and that election gives you legitimacy, however low the turnout. But while no-one challenged the right of councillors to take the final decision, I do myself challenge their legitimacy to undertake scrutiny, as others, such as Steve and Darren, were able to do it far better.

The third assumption is that what people have to contribute is their opinion. This is implicit in Edmund Burke's famous speech to the electors of Bristol in 1774 when he declared: '*Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.*' He also said, '*If government were a matter of will upon any side, yours without question ought to be superior. But government and legislation are matters of reason and judgment*' with the assumption that reason and judgment can only to be found in the chambers of Parliament.

But as Steve Kerridge's detailed scrutiny of the Leadon Bank plans illustrates, citizens have far more to contribute than their opinion. They have the motivation to start projects and to inform decision-making with reasoned and informed arguments and ideas informed by their experience and their values as a community. Opinions will always come into play but citizen participation can not be dismissed purely on the basis that all people have to offer is their uninformed opinion.

In conclusion, we will always need representatives, as there will always be views or interests that need representing. Even if everyone on the planet spoke for themselves, there would still be generations past and present and nature to represent. Furthermore, if it is the articulate and the confident who turn up – as is often the case – we still need representatives to look after the interests of those who are not at the table.

But representative democracy needs to recognise and address the roadblocks faced by citizens seeking to engage with the political process. Either new avenues need to be created or existing ones changed to allow citizens to genuinely take part in decision-making. Our representative democracy needs to be more porous and more welcoming, more alert to the range of what citizens have to offer. And as we search for new mechanisms we have a touchstone, provided by the American sociologist, Philip Slater. We should reject those that contribute to what he calls the culture of division and seek out those that help to create a culture of connection. And throughout the process of discovering and fine tuning these, let our watchword and our inspiration come from E M Forster: '*only connect*'.

3 The Art of Participation

Participants – Economic Men or Social Animals?

Edward Andersson **explores what gets people out of their homes and into a participative process and the importance of understanding these motivations in order to improve the practice of participation and avoid consultation fatigue.**

Most people involved in encouraging or facilitating participation would agree that it is a worthwhile activity but there is a growing realisation that we need to acknowledge the incentives of participants in public engagement processes. There are conflicting views on 'what makes participants tick' and on the correct way to avoid engagement fatigue. Are participants primarily in it for personal gains and benefits, or are they motivated by a will to work for the greater good of the community? The answer to this is critical to the way in which we encourage increased participation – should we appeal to peoples' self interest or their conscience? The truth is that the answer depends on the context; in some cases participants will respond well to material incentives and in other cases they will be pointless at best and, at worst, harmful to the success of the project. Recent research by Involve explores both the risks and opportunities of taking participant incentives into account.[1]

What we don't know

While we know very little about the economics of public participation in general the sad truth is that even less is known about the specific costs and benefits to the participants. In many ways this is a remarkable situation; the motives of the people who are supposed to be at the centre of engagement are still somewhat of a mystery to practitioners and researchers. The reporting and thinking is often centred on the interests and outlook of the delivering bodies, a situation increasingly seen to cause problems. This area has recently been the focus of research, both an ESRC funded

project by the University of Stirling focussing on how to 'strengthen the participation chain',[2] and work on the economics of participation more generally by Involve.

Why does it matter?

It is often assumed that among the teeming masses of the public there is a massive untapped drive to get involved; all an organisation has to do is to organise the events and the participants will come. The growing signs of 'engagement fatigue' go some way to dispelling this myth but in many areas the assumption lingers on, leading to a proliferation of partnerships, the burn out of community representatives and a gradual increase in cynicism (a telling example was given in one study, which found an average of 92 partnerships per Welsh local authority).[3] In fact the will and time available among members of the public to get involved is limited and we need a clearer understanding of their priorities in order to target engagement better and make the best use of the time that people are willing to give us.

By changing what and how we engage with people, the will to participate can be increased. The question is how we do that, which links directly to the question about the motives that drive participants to engage. Understanding these motives is crucial to ensuring the long-term sustainability of public engagement.

In this article I am primarily focussing on the benefits of participation rather than the costs. This is not because the costs are in any way less important than benefits; I have simply chosen to focus on what drives people to participate rather than what deters them. High costs (both in terms of money and time) are a recognised problem in public participation today (for a recent contribution on the costs to participants see Carolyn Kagan's work[4]).

I believe it is possible to identify two different perspectives on why people participate and, linked to these, two solutions for the problem of engagement fatigue. One perspective focuses primarily on the *material* incentives whereas the other emphasises *altruistic* motives for participation. These two models are obviously generalisations and are in practice often combined to a lesser or greater degree.

What's in it for me?

The materialist view assumes that participants are primarily guided by material incentives. They balance the gains and losses of participation, either to themselves or their close friends and family, and base their decision on whether or not to participate on this assessment. If this is what motivates participants then increasing the direct benefits of participation and reducing the costs is the route to increasing the levels of participation.

The most clear cut materialist perspective is found in mainstream economics. Neoclassical economics assumes that people act rationally and consider their own interests as the basis for decisions. This notion of the 'economic man' has been criticised for making unrealistic assumptions, such as perfect information, discounting of future costs and benefits and no consideration of the impact of social norms on people's behaviour. Neoclassical economics finds it extremely hard to deal with altruistic values and these are often disregarded when they show up as responses in economic surveys as 'unrealistic'.

For the greater good

In contrast, altruistic motives are not based on personal gain, but rather the feeling of doing 'what is right'. Instead of individual benefits this is about collective benefits. Social norms and peer pressure play a part in encouraging this behaviour and high levels of social capital have been shown to increase the likelihood of people acting in an altruistic way. If altruistic motives are the primary driver of participation then it would seem more important to focus on the benefits of participation to groups and society at large, rather than focussing on the costs and benefits to individual participants. Communicating the beneficial outcomes of participation in a clear and effective way could play a part in this, as well as efforts to create a culture of participation where it is seen as 'the right thing to do'.

Many initiatives aimed at engaging young people or increasing voter turnout take this approach and talk about rights rather than individual benefits. And while most participatory projects have concrete material aims as their primary objective, they are also keen to point out the more intangible and collective benefits arising from the project, like community cohesion, social capital etc.

Muddying the waters

But motives are not as easy to define or discern as the above paragraphs might suggest. There is no simple dichotomy between mainstream economists on one hand and community practitioners on the other. For one thing, many people who find themselves at odds with the idea of the 'economic man' still think it is important to consider 'what's in it for the participants' and how to ensure that they get good value from the time they spend. Secondly, there are economists who emphasise the role of altruistic behaviour as well. Behavioural economics has challenged many of the assumptions of mainstream economics, including the idea that only immediate, egotistical needs matter to how people make decisions.[5] So in reality, the distinction between the materialist and the altruistic perspectives is blurred and in many cases both can be in force at once in a single project.

Furthermore, research has shown that where people are primarily motivated by altruism the introduction of material incentives (like monetary compensation) can actually decrease the level of participation.[6] It seems that people think in different frames of mind depending on whether they are thinking about their own interests or what is socially acceptable. Bringing in money into the picture seems to put people into a different set of mind and to put them off doing things voluntarily.

Methods to encourage participation

Both altruistic and materialistic encouragements have been used to increase participation in the UK over the past few years. Efforts to make participation more accessible are increasingly being used, such as scheduling meetings at better times, providing child care, and reimbursing costs for transport and other expenses. These efforts are all about reducing the costs of taking part to participants. But it is also increasingly common to pay compensation for the time that participants put into a process. With market research in particular, it is often difficult to find participants without paying for their time. The latter tactics aim to increase the direct benefits to individuals in order to encourage their participation.

On the other hand we have initiatives encouraging altruistic behaviour. The citizen curricula in schools and last year's 'Year of the Volunteer' programme aim to create and develop a culture of public participation in society. These initiatives do not promise to deliver benefits to the individual but rather appeal to their will to do good.

What Involve's research found

Case studies carried out by Involve to explore the perceptions of the costs and benefits of participation have revealed how different projects create different types of incentive structures. The research highlighted a number of different situations with relevance to this debate.

One of our cases studies was a Primary Care Trust (PCT) in North East England that ran a health support service in collaboration with a major health charity. This service relied on volunteer participants for its day-to-day functioning. When asked about their motivations for taking part the participants cited motives such as, *'doing the right thing'* and *'giving something back to the community'*. When asked about financial compensation (beyond the PCT providing free transport) the interviewees felt that they were happy not to receive any. It should be pointed out that the majority of participants in this case were retired and therefore it could be argued that their time had lower opportunity costs than that of potential participants with full time work.

In other cases, such as a large carer's involvement project run by a County Council in South England, participants were given the opportunity to claim for travel and other expenses related to their attendance. Many participants did not claim, and while this might be attributed to poor information or complicated claims forms, it is equally possible that there were altruistic factors in play. The council's offer to pay costs may have been sufficient for many people as a gesture of respect and appreciation for their time and effort, without the participants actually having to take the council up on the offer. According to the project manager there had been efforts to pay some key participants for their time, but this had been deemed too complicated to do for administrative reasons.

In comparison, we also looked at a case where a charity ran a long-term engagement process in Wales aiming to support children and their families to break cycles of deprivation and ill health. Because the project relied on the long-term involvement of the participants, and because the project manager had seen a number of cases where he felt that participants had been 'mined for information', he was very adamant that participants should be adequately compensated for their involvement. Efforts were made to ensure that costs would not stop anyone from participating. The manager felt that in cases where participants had a stake in the outcome of an activity the main thing was to ensure that their direct costs were paid for. In cases where there were no direct benefits to the participants themselves he felt that direct compensation of some kind was in order.

The way forward for costs and benefits
There appears to be a real difference between costs and benefits. For costs it is fairly straightforward: reducing the costs to participants can have a real impact on the *ability* of people to take part. This can mean reducing costs by shifting around the timings of meetings or providing free crèche facilities or it can mean compensating for incurred costs, like travel or accommodation costs. These methods enable the participation of those who are willing to take part but find the costs prohibitive. However, it is unlikely that compensating for costs will encourage the participation of those who have little natural inclination to take part.

For benefits the situation is slightly different: increasing the levels of benefits can have a real impact on the *willingness* of participants to take part. The relationship is also more complicated than with costs.

In cases where the main benefit experienced by the participants is the opportunity to make a difference to others, or similar altruistic benefits, it may be counterproductive

to introduce financial incentives. In the case of the volunteer run health advice service, paying participants a wage for their time might undermine the feelings of doing good that motivates them to take part. In short, putting a price on people's participation can be a risky strategy.

On the other hand, in situations where the participants have little to gain from the participation, monetary or other compensation is a fair way of making sure that there is something in it for the participants. For example, few people attend focus groups or other consultation events because they feel it is their civic duty. In these cases monetary rewards are unlikely to crowd out any altruistic motives.

Overall, this is an area that practitioners, commissioners and project managers really need to learn more about. The scale and number of public participation events looks set to continuously increase in the coming years but, while the 'supply' of engagement events rises, the 'demand' for them may well drop due to engagement fatigue. We all need to wisen up to the fact that the time and energy that people put into participating is a valuable resource. Not only because participation can deliver better policy, improved services, wider support for decisions and reduced conflict, but also because it is time that participants might otherwise have spent with their families and friends. It is our responsibility to ensure that we do not waste it.

Notes

1 Involve (2005) *The True Costs of Participation: Full Report* London: Involve research summary available to download at www.involving.org
2 Simmons R. and Birchall J. (2005) '*A Joined-up Approach to User Participation in Public Services: Strengthening the "Participation Chain"*' Social Policy & Administration 39(3) pp.260
3 Carley M. (2005) 'Summary' in Bound K., Carley M. et al (Ed) (2005) *Mapping Governance at the Local Level* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation pp.4
4 Kagan C. (2006) *Making a Difference: Participation and Wellbeing* Liverpool: Renew Northwest
5 Dawnay E. and Shah H. (2005) *Behavioural Economics: Seven principles for Policy-makers* London: New Economics Foundation
6 Frey B.S. and Goette L. (1999) *Does Pay Motivate Volunteers?*: Working Paper No. 7 Institute for Empirical Research in Economics, University of Zurich, Zurich.

The Art of Participation and Sustainable Development: Transformation in Practice

Lindsey Colbourne takes a personal look at the lessons she has learned about participation through her years as a facilitator and the ways in which recognising them can enable moves towards a deeper democracy.

What motivated me to enter the participation field at the age of 24 – and what keeps me here around 2,000 participatory meetings later – is sustainable development as an objective and participation as the essential means. It is through collaborative and interactive working, or what I call 'participatory decision-making', that real transformation is achieved, as practice shows again and again. I focus here on the art rather than the science of participation, in recognition that participation is a new and evolving field of approaches, which cannot be confined to a reductionist analysis of techniques.

I hope to make the case that participatory decision-making is more than a set of techniques, an end in itself or about producing better decisions. Every participatory decision-making process raises big questions about the future governance of society and how we will organise ourselves. But these questions and any lessons learned often remain within the confines of an individual project or area.

Even so, it is the potential for these insights to identify new ways of organising ourselves and tackling the 'wicked issues' that face us that really motivates me to practice participation. Below I pull together my key insights from participatory decision in the UK and set out how I have come to these conclusions.

Believing in win: win solutions

People often assume that participatory decision making processes result in lowest common denominator solutions and muddy compromises, but practice refutes this. In the late 1990s I experienced the potential for participation to generate new, added value decisions, using skills of collaboration and deliberation. I was running a public meeting in Lambeth, south London, where controversy had broken out over an option to re-open a road bridge, which would significantly affect traffic flows through a residential area. The council had identified two options – keep the bridge closed or re-open it. Residents and businesses had taken sides, creating a direct and emotive conflict. 120 people turned up to the meeting and, with standing room only, I started by asking people to talk about local traffic problems in general. Story after story emerged, illustrating that traffic was a shared problem that needed to be tackled holistically, not on a street by

street basis. I watched with amazement as peoples' anger melted to anticipation and concentration and previously opposed people started working on possible traffic plans for the whole area. Half an hour later, one group presented a solution that received a spontaneous, full room cheer. The 'third option' which had eluded the council, was to combine bridge re-opening with traffic calming measures. Councillors and officers came onto the platform to pledge that they would put this solution to the usual planning/regulatory 'tests'.

This experience graphically illustrated to me that you can get beyond positional arguing by focusing on common ground, even in situations with a seemingly direct conflict of interests. The assumption that there will be winners and losers is replaced by a common effort to find a win: win way forward. The bridge example, and many others, illustrates that this usually involves collectively considering problems before generating options and making decisions. These approaches can overcome the traditional 'win or lose' fights that characterise much of our decision making, enshrined especially in the planning system.

Whole systems approaches

My first experience of participatory decision-making was in 1992, as founder of a Local Agenda 21[1] initiative, Vision 21. This initiative was established to promote sustainable development in Gloucestershire and the breakthroughs it achieved stemmed from its ability to bring organisations and individuals together to work holistically.

However, to be completely honest, I had no idea at the age of 24 what sustainable development was, it just sounded like a motivating idea to create a better world, and I had less than no idea how the change required might be achieved. Logically, the best bet was to bring together as many people as possible to work it out collectively. Under the auspices of a local charity and with £50 funding I set about 'convening' a process which created the space for that to happen. Five years later there were 1,500 volunteers, the support of the county and all 6 district councils, £400,000 annual funding and 60 practical projects.

The real value of whole system working was brought home to all of us at a conference[2] we convened over 2.5 days. Stakeholders were carefully chosen to bring the 'whole system' into the room, ranging from the homeless to house builders and a woman's refuge to county planners, to discuss 'accommodating people in Gloucestershire'. The conference was convened in the middle of a huge controversy over government figures requiring thousands of new homes to be built in Gloucestershire. Public meetings had led to stand up fights and council planners had been forced to resign in droves. Despite

the very different backgrounds, interests and views of the stakeholders, and the raging controversy at the time, the conference resulted in a consensus proposal which was put to the county council and unanimously accepted. The proposal included a set of overarching principles to guide accommodating people in Gloucestershire and a number of practical 'pilot' projects led by diverse people and organisations.

This experience clearly showed the need to develop new political spaces, which enable whole system views and which generate a healthy anti-silo, anti-institution mentality, both in terms of issues to be addressed and the ability to act on addressing them. Almost none of the most pressing problems people and communities face conform to the remits within which government institutions are capable of producing effective or legitimate solutions. Problems are simply too complicated, too contested and too unstable to allow for schematic, centralised regulation.

Acknowledging and working with uncertainty

The examples I have given so far have been quite straight forward in terms of the complexity and uncertainty involved. However, with issues such as GM or global warming, decisions have to be made under conditions of great uncertainty. This involves acknowledging and responding positively to the '*demise of myth of absolute knowledge in the public domain*'.[3] We can no longer rely on institutions to obtain certain facts and to make logical decisions based upon them. We need to broaden what counts as justified belief and valid knowledge and to break free of the limits to what questions and information are acceptable in political debate.

My first foray into real uncertainty came when I inherited a national dialogue, run by The Environment Council, focused on making recommendations on decommissioning the UK's Magnox nuclear power stations. The dialogue involved stakeholders from local anti-nuclear campaigns to BNFL (British Nuclear Fuels) and was dealing with deep technical complexity, very strongly held values and technical, political and funding uncertainties. The conflict was extreme and focussing on creating a single solution in the face of it was impossible. Instead the dialogue focused on understanding the range of possible decommissioning options and the assumptions and requirements for each to be viable through using Strategic Action Planning. Using this technique it was possible to incorporate uncertainty into the process. The results of the Strategic Action Planning work and the report from this dialogue have been taken account of in the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's draft strategy.

People *do* make good decisions

I have found over and over again that governmental institutions (at a local level) are

finding themselves unable to deliver what they are 'there' to deliver – either because of lack of trust and legitimacy or because there is a mismatch between the scope of problems and the understanding, powers and remit of the organisation. One creative response to this challenge was organised earlier this year by PAVO, the voluntary service council in Powys. When improving transport for young people PAVO wanted young people's ideas and understanding to shape their initiative. We ran a day long conference for 100 local young people and, after an informal session exploring transport difficulties, they set their own agenda for the rest of the day and ran it with no interference from adults.[4]

The resulting recommendations were overwhelmingly practical and the local MP, councillors, youth workers and volunteers were bowled over with the results. A steering group was formed and more than 20 young people volunteered to take part, ensuring that the initiative has credibility amongst its intended users and is based on truly needed services, rather than prescriptions from arms length organisations.

Working with values and feelings

In addition to being unable to rely on the power and wisdom of institutions to deal with problems, practice provides evidence of the value of broadening decision making to incorporate values and feelings. Indeed, participatory decision making processes need to both be fuelled and coloured by people's passions and feelings about particular issues. When proposals are seen as furthering or threatening peoples' individual interests, or even their collective identity, they must be allowed to bring their passion and values into the decision-making process.

A classic example of this is an ongoing piece of work I am involved with in Newborough. Newborough is a fairly deprived part of Wales but it is blessed with a world-class sand dune system with a large coniferous forest planted on half of it. The Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) has been working with the Forestry Commission for Wales (FCW) to develop a new plan for managing the forest in a way which ecologically supports the sand dunes. For a number of reasons this seemingly innocuous intention became locally understood as a plan to deforest the area, which threatened the collective identity and traditional 'rights' of those living there. As the plan went out to consultation a massive campaign was launched, including the creation of new pressure groups, the involvement of the First Minister and constant press coverage.

The protest and statements, such as one from a local resident that '*the environment doesn't need CCW*', forced CCW and FCW to realise they did not have the legitimacy to implement their plan on the basis of rational analysis alone, local interests had to be

incorporated. I devised a participatory decision making process by which they could go right back to a 'blank slate' and involve the area's full range of interests in deciding how best to enhance its social, environmental and economic value. The critical component in making the process work was for the full range of interested parties to believe that a positive future for the local area could *only* be achieved by working together and including local values and feelings alongside technical issues.

Recognising that trust and legitimacy are earned not given

Another conclusion from the Newborough example is that institutions involved in shaping change require both trust and legitimacy to have any chance of creating it. Politics and policy making is no longer simply about finding 'logical' solutions for pressing problems, it is about generating trust among those affected. Ongoing work I am doing with the Environment Agency in Devon to understand how to build trust with communities is revealing that the Environment Agency cannot assume that it is trusted and seen as having legitimacy in protecting people against flooding.

It is critical to build trust early in the process, by shifting from the high risk, traditional 'decide-announce-defend' (DAD) mindset, which often results in unacceptable decisions being rejected by an angered community, towards an 'engage-deliberate-decide' (EDD) approach. Communities then come to trust government institutions and they understand together the problems or risks they face and the range of options. As more and more 'wicked' issues reach the top of the political agenda, having tools to create this level of trust and collaborative working will become increasingly critical. We cannot afford to rely on DAD approaches or referenda.

The first time the danger of the DAD approach, and the benefits of an EDD approach, were brought home to me was when working on a plan for controlled parking zones (CPZ) in Bath.[5] A CPZ scheme in Bristol, which had been put to consultation (DAD approach), due to fears that it was too complex and controversial for a participative decision making process, was scuppered by the resulting protest. By contrast, in Bath we set up a cross-town steering group of local interest groups and ran large public meetings ward by ward to set the 'remit and principles' for a CPZ scheme. The results of the meetings were collated by the Steering Group and put to the council, who accepted the proposals unanimously and implemented the scheme within a year.[6]

Changed institutions

It is an obvious and important point to make that all this implies a need for new kinds of organisations to implement these changes. Much of what is required goes without saying but one of the most striking observations from my experience is that the front

line staff involved in participatory decision make the real difference between a process that results in transformational results and one which flounders. It only takes one individual officer who refuses to hide behind bureaucracy. This point is reinforced by Atkinson and Moffat who have argued that what they call '*asymmetric forms of demand*'[7] (i.e. the requirement from citizens and consumers for tailored/flexible services and decisions) require power to be taken to the edge of an organisation.

This means giving the people closest to the customer/community/citizen the power to organise the services/decisions around their values, needs and demands, instead of expecting them to organise themselves around the services and remit of an organisation. Participatory decision-making requires that front line staff can make choices to enable collaborative working. This in turn requires 'agile' infrastructures so that organisations can respond to front line demands.

Creating new spaces

If we are to successfully tackle the 'wicked issues' that face us, society as a whole needs to shift towards '*a deeper/expansive democracy*'[8] which doesn't rely on the better informed few prescribing for the less-informed many (who can then only reject or tweak a proposal). A deeper democracy will – and practice shows it can – involve the creation of new spaces and a culture which supports a more '*frank and engaged*'[10] politics. This deeper democracy will involve a new ethos for politics which acknowledges difficult choices and engages citizens. It will also create well considered links between communities and organisations to enable collaborative approaches to policy making and delivery. Thus will we shift from representative to decision specific democracy.[10]

Notes

1 Local Agenda 21 (LA21) is a program for implementing sustainable development at the local level. It builds upon existing local government strategies and resources to better integrate environment, economic and social goals.

2 Technique note – we used 'future search conferencing'

3 Hajer M.A. and Wagenaar H. (2003) *Deliberative Policy analysis – Understanding Governance in the Network Society* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

5 Technique note – we used Image Theatre and Open Space Technology

6 With Jeff Bishop

7 For more detail on this example, see 'A Tale of Two Cities' on www.interactweb.org.uk

8 Atkinson S.R. and Moffat J. (2005) *The Agile Organisation*, from Informal Networks to Complex Effects and Agility CCRP: www.ccrp.org

9 This term is used by Hajer M.A. and Wagenaar H. (2003) *Deliberative Policy analysis – Understanding Governance in the Network Society* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

10   Russell M. (2005) '*Must politics Disappoint?*' Fabian Ideas series (editor Jonathon Heawood) London: Fabian Society

11   Ed Straw at Highlands Facilitator Network training

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