Pathways through participation

Research, engagement and impact

November 2011

The Pathways through Participation project

The Pathways through Participation project is a joint research project led by NCVO in partnership with the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) and Involve, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. It explores how and why people get involved and stay involved in different forms of participation over the course of their lives. It focuses on the following questions:

1. How and why does participation begin and continue?

2. Can trends and patterns of participation be identified over time?

3. What connections, if any, are there between different forms and episodes of participation and what triggers movement between them?

Participation means many different things to different people. This project takes a broad approach to understanding participation that includes a range of social, public and individual activities such as being involved in: a formal voluntary organisation; informal or grassroots community groups; campaigning and lobbying; formal public consultations; demonstrations; boycotting products; purchasing fair-trade goods; helping out neighbours and giving to charity. The research methodology placed the individual at the centre of the research and looked at participation in three fieldwork areas (Enfield, Leeds and Suffolk). The researchers conducted over 100 in-depth interviews, exploring participation over people's lifetime and within the communities they belong to. This approach allowed people to tell their story of participation in their own words.

01 Introduction

The main purpose of the Pathways through Participation project was to improve understanding of the multiple dimensions of participation and to increase the evidence base on people's experience of participation over time. The project also always intended to encourage the use of its research findings to influence practice and policy so that more appropriate opportunities for participation could be developed and made available to a greater range of people.

This briefing paper reviews the project's approach to research and stakeholder engagement, highlights how the project set about linking research to policy and practice, and critically assesses some of the research methods and tools that were used. It reflects on some of the challenges of conducting research and summarises the key practical learning from the project for researchers who want to see their research findings being used and having an impact.

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02 Our approach to research and stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement in research can take many forms. At one end of the spectrum research projects can be designed and conducted by professional researchers, with little or no stakeholder involvement and no specific objectives for actions and impacts. At the other end are projects in which stakeholders (e.g. local residents) are involved in the design and delivery of the research, and action research projects in which stakeholders actively input at all stages of the research process to explore how it will lead to change.

The Pathways through Participation project was somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. It aimed to maximise stakeholder collaboration throughout the project, and to see how the findings could inform action. However, the primary focus remained on the production of new knowledge and understanding, and the research team led the design and delivery of the research.

The aim of the stakeholder engagement was to encourage wider ownership of the research process and findings, and to improve the relevance, value and depth of the research. We also took the view that stakeholder engagement would help create better opportunities to link the research findings more directly to policy and practice and explore potential actions. In each of the fieldwork areas a Local Stakeholder Group (LSG) was established in partnership with (and chaired by) the local voluntary sector infrastructure body to provide advice and guidance on the research both within the fieldwork area and more widely.

The groups brought together a range of practitioners and policy-makers from voluntary and community organisations and statutory bodies, and met regularly over the course of the project to inform the research design, the framing of the research findings and our local engagement strategy. After initial interviews with individual key local stakeholders we organised several participatory mapping sessions with people in the fieldwork areas and with the LSGs. These sessions helped the team to identify where participation was taking place in the area and to find people to interview. It also helped to strengthen our relationships and build trust with people in the fieldwork areas.

Towards the end of the project, we worked with the LSGs to organise participatory workshops in each area in order to widen local stakeholder engagement and to explore the implications that the initial research findings had for practice and policy. We also engaged with stakeholders beyond the three research areas.

At national level, we established an Advisory Group made up of experienced individuals from academia, the voluntary and community sector and local and national government. From the outset of the project we communicated extensively about the different stages of the research process and our emerging findings by producing numerous reports that are available on a dedicated website. Regular newsletters alerted our subscribers to new project reports and other related news. In addition to a detailed full final report and a summary report, the findings of the project have been shared at three national learning events that were aimed at policy-makers, voluntary and community organisations and public service providers. These events focused on national policy, volunteering, and engagement on local democracy. All reports have been widely disseminated by the three partner organisations in the project, using a broad range of channels and networks.

03 Our research methods

Throughout the project, our research methods were designed to engage effectively with people by being interactive, collaborative and creative. This included a range of tools and techniques including visual timelines in the in-depth interviews as well as geographical and conceptual maps, and questions cards in the mapping and participatory workshops. The strengths and limitations of each method are analysed in the tables below. Appendix A of the full final report provides additional information on our methodology[1].

1 Available to download at www.pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/resources.

The methods and tools we used to gather data

Method/tool	Strengths	Limitations
Activity mapping[2] was used to identify sites of participation in the fieldwork areas. The mapping sessions started with a short discussion about people's understandings of what participation is and is not. In small groups, participants were asked to draw a map of the local area on a large blank piece of paper, using a variety of materials, and to populate it with the sites where participation occurs. Once finished, the groups reflected on each other's map and discussed similarities, differences, noticeable inclusions and omissions. Each event lasted about 2 hours, was attended by 6 to 10 people, and facilitated by 2 members of the project team.	Interactive, dynamic and fun, and less intimidating for some than text-based techniques. Breaks down the barrier between the 'expert' researcher and the 'subject' of the research. Allows the participants to direct the process and to identify their own priorities rather than those of the researcher. Allows the researcher to develop or strengthen relationships and to introduce the project to a wide range of people in an informal way. Provides valuable data for the following stages of the research (e.g. knowing where to recruit interviewees). Invites dialogue - the discussions during and after the actual mapping are often very rich.	Generates and captures data that reflects only the views and experiences of the people present. The recruitment of participants needs to be well balanced in order to obtain a range of perspectives. Some participants can dominate the map creation: those holding the pen can hold disproportionate power. Some participants can be reluctant to illustrate their experiences and opinions, or may find it difficult to do so in front of others. Can be difficult to capture the discussions and to analyse the data. Needs to be used in conjunction with other research methods.
A life-story approach was used for the **in-depth interviews**. The interview started with a few questions about the interviewees' current involvements, then moved to open-ended questions about the interviewees' experience of participation over their lifetime, followed by prompts about specific participatory activities. Interviewees were invited to create a visual timeline to help structure their narrative and facilitate follow-up questions.	Places the individual at the centre and values people and their experience. Is respondent-led, allowing people to tell their story in their own words and recount events in their preferred order. Produces very rich and detailed data that is grounded in reality, much more so than could be identified through more formal approaches. Is flexible and responsive – can be adapted to a broad range of people. The informality of the process means people feel more at ease and therefore open. Drawing a timeline can trigger people's memory. It helps interviewees reflect on their experience as a whole and illustrates changes over time.	The huge quantity of data generated is time-consuming and difficult to analyse. Creates a body of data that is not readily comparable. Interviewees can 'go off track' and lose focus. Drawing a timeline does not suit everybody. In some cases people asked the interviewer to draw the timeline for them or preferred not to do it at all.

2 See our report Using participatory mapping to explore participation in three communities on our website www.pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk

Image 1:
Example of an interviewee's timeline

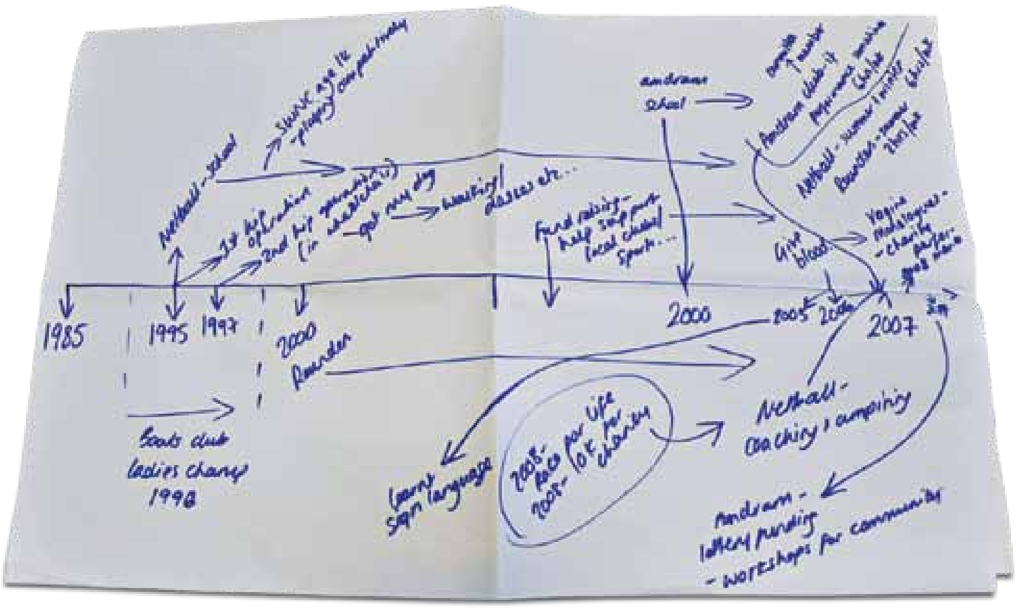

Image 2:
Example of a local map of existing sites of participation

The methods and tools we used to think about implications and actions

Method/tool	Strengths	Limitations
Participatory workshops were organised in each fieldwork area. The workshops were designed around three key questions: **What?** The key research findings were presented to participants. The presentation was followed by a discussion and a group activity which asked people to reflect on what the most important and relevant findings were for them. **So what?** Participants were given the opportunity to think about the implications of the research findings and asked to explore in small groups the challenges and opportunities that the findings presented for their own work and more widely. **Now what?** The 'ecosystem of participation' activity (see box below) was designed for participants to identify specific actions that they might want to take or actions needed more widely, to address some of the challenges and opportunities previously discussed. The results of these workshops were written up and sent to all participants. They also fed into the conclusions and recommendations section of the final research report	Provides participants with the opportunity to meet others, share perspectives and test ideas together. The What? So what? Now what? framework is easy to understand and is based on questions that people spontaneously relate to. The framework follows a logical progression which means that each workshop activity builds on the previous one. The 'ecosystem of participation activity' provides a creative and informal way of thinking about solutions to issues. Gives people a greater sense of ownership of the actions identified. The recommendations made by the researchers are jointly developed and informed by practice.	Finding the right balance between presenting the depth or breadth of the research findings is challenging. If the researchers are too selective, it inevitably influences and narrows the ensuing discussion. Moving from the participants hearing about the research findings for the first time to them developing specific actions for themselves and their organisations requires time, and ideally more than one workshop. The level of discussion about actions can often be very general. Some participants can also find it difficult to be specific about the practical steps that they could take to put the findings of the research into practice. Thinking about actions can risk falsely raising people's expectations and hopes – the actions identified often need additional resources, which may not be available.

The 'ecosystem of participation'

Small groups of workshop participants were given a large paper tree on which to explore in more depth the particular challenge or opportunity they wanted to work on based on their reflections of the research findings.

Participants were asked to examine the deep causes of the issue (e.g. the 'roots' in the tree metaphor), identify the resources or assets already available (e.g. the 'branches' and 'birds') and explore the vision (e.g. the 'sky') that they were ultimately aiming for.

Once they had identified specific actions to address the challenge or opportunity they had chosen and written them on green sticky leaves, participants were also asked to identify their top three priority actions on three golden leaves.

At the end of the exercise, each group presented their golden leaves back to the full workshop and these were all grouped together on one large tree mural.

We had initially planned to conduct a second series of workshops a couple of months later to review how the actions identified had developed; the challenges people had encountered and what the next steps might be. However, due to the difficult circumstances many organisations were experiencing at the time (e.g. loss of funding, redundancies) we decided, after consulting the LSGs and the Advisory Group, to change our plans. We invited instead all of the original workshop participants to attend a networking lunch following the final LSG meeting in each location. At these meetings the LSGs discussed the actions identified at the workshops and decided which they considered to be a priority. When the other workshop participants arrived at the meeting for lunch, they had the opportunity to comment on these priorities and suggest additional ideas, and then discussed the potential for future collaboration.

04 Key learning: 8 lessons for future research

We have identified the following key lessons for researchers considering stakeholder engagement and influencing policy and practice.

1. Be clear about how participatory you will be
Stakeholder satisfaction, and the quality of the project and its findings, will depend on clarity about respective roles, building honest relationships and clear agreements about what each party can expect from the project. You will need to be very clear about how much influence stakeholders will have in the project (e.g. from using some participatory techniques in the research to allowing stakeholders to define the research objectives, questions and methods), and communicate that fully to stakeholders.

2. Be clear about your objectives, approach and planned outcomes
Once your objectives and approach have been agreed (e.g. with funders and any other stakeholders you have involved in this process), it is essential that these are communicated clearly to all stakeholders, including timeframes and key milestones. Be as realistic as possible with stakeholders about what can be achieved and what they can expect to get out of their involvement, and manage their expectations by acknowledging the limitations of the impact that can be achieved during the duration of the project. Some changes will take a long time to happen and many will need further resourcing.

3. Choose the research methods to suit your objectives and stakeholders
Choosing the most appropriate methods for a project will largely depend on your research questions, research participants and practical constraints such as your budget and deadlines. The willingness to innovate and experiment with methods that can reach and engage people who don't usually get involved in research can result in gaining insights that more traditional methods might not achieve. However, using innovative approaches may mean some people feel uncomfortable or don't want to participate, and changes should be made to allow them to be involved.

4. Be flexible and willing to adapt
Stakeholder is a two-way process. If you want to engage with stakeholders you will need to leave some space for change. Listen to people's suggestions and take them on board wherever possible. If it isn't possible, explain to them why this is the case. For long-term research projects, the environment in which your stakeholders operate is likely to change and your project will need to be sufficiently flexible to respond to these changing circumstances.

5. Communicate and listen
Make sure you keep people informed on a regular basis even when you are going through a stage in the research process that may require less stakeholder involvement (e.g. data analysis). Provide a variety of different types of opportunities for people to participate in the project (workshops, advisory groups, blogs, tweets etc.). Be transparent and provide feedback to let people know how their input is contributing to the project.

6. Think creatively about implications and actions
Provide a range of opportunities for stakeholders to consider the implications of the research findings and to identify the information relevant to their work that they can actually use. Find creative ways to help people define what they see as appropriate actions, rather than telling them what is the right thing to do.

7. Reach out to different audiences
Identify who your research findings are aimed at and adapt your messages to the needs and interests of your different audiences. Use a range of online and offline channels to communicate and increase reach. Target organisations that can cascade the information to others through their own networks.

8. Recognise the costs of research
Research that seeks to involve stakeholders and have an impact on policy and practice has a cost. It takes time to develop and maintain relationships with stakeholders and stakeholders need time to fully engage with the project. Many stakeholders will find it difficult to engage and may not be able to prioritise their engagement within limited resources. Furthermore, in most cases the actions identified as a result of the research findings will only be implemented if additional resources can be found.

05 Further information

This paper is a reflection on the research approach that was used by the Pathways through Participation team. Detailed findings, the full report and other briefing papers are available on the Pathways through Participation website.

For more information on the Pathways through Participation project visit the website http://pathwaysthrough participation.org.uk/

Find out more about:

NCVO:
www.ncvo-vol.org.uk

Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR):
www.ivr.org.uk

Involve:
www.involve.org.uk