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COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND COMMUNITY COHESION: PARALLEL AGENDAS FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING IN ENGLAND?

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

Community empowerment and community capacity building have been central to government agendas in Britain over the past decade. Agendas for tackling the so-called 'War on Terrorism' and promoting community cohesion have become increasingly significant in addition, especially since the bombings in London in 2005. This article focuses upon the current gap between these differing agendas. This is particularly relevant in an era of increasing globalisation, with considerable debate on the impact of migration, and anxieties about previous approaches to multiculturalism that have been the subject of growing criticism.

Having set out these gaps in public policy and research in this field, the article examines the evidence from research, including 100 interviews together with focus groups conducted in three localities in England, identifying the problems, in terms of the lack of engagement of 'new communities' and in terms of the potential tensions within and between communities. There was, however, encouraging evidence that strategies were being developed to develop more inclusive, more democratically accountable and more effective forms of community engagement. The article concludes by summarising potential implications for building community cohesion and social solidarity.

Keywords

Community, empowerment, social cohesion, 'new' communities

INTRODUCTION

"Ours is a government committed to greater democracy, devolution and control for communities" the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government emphasises in her Introduction to the government's recent policy proposals, "Communities in control: real people, real power". Devolution and decentralisation should be the hallmark of the modern state, in her view "with power diffused throughout our society" (Blears, 2008, p. iii) giving control over local decisions and services to a wider pool of active citizens. Community empowerment has been central to government agendas for public service modernisation in Britain over the past decade, as well as being advocated as a means of promoting democratic renewal and active citizenship more generally.

Although widely welcomed, these strategies for community empowerment, capacity building and community development have also been the subject of considerable criticism.

As Pitchford argues, whilst colleagues have suggested that "community development has arrived at the policy table" (Pitchford, 2008, p. 93). In his view, based upon interviews with experienced practitioners, in contrast, "it is the importance of 'community' to the New Labour government that has arrived and not that of community development" (Pitchford, 2008, p. 93). Government has been more concerned with agendas to promote self-help, in his view, rather than "enabling communities to have control over resources and institutions" to a significant degree (Pitchford, 2008, p. 93). Community development was becoming increasingly incorporated into government agendas, from the top-down, he argued, with community engagement strategies stronger on the rhetoric than the reality of community empowerment, from the bottom up.

Whatever the validity of these claims, these debates have general relevance in contextual terms. But this is not the main focus of this particular article. The research[1] upon which this is based set out to explore one specific criticism in more detail – the view that there has been and indeed still is a significant gap between government agendas to promote community engagement and empowerment, on the one hand, and government strategies to promote community cohesion, on the other. As subsequent sections argue, this represents a major omission, with potentially serious consequences, in the current policy context. In an era of increasing globalisation, there has been considerable debate about the impact of migration, with evident anxieties about the viability of previous approaches to multiculturalism in Britain, anxieties that have been exacerbated by concerns relating to the so-called 'War on Terror' since the attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001 and the London bombings of 2005.

Whether they are economic migrants from the European Union Accession States, or whether they are refugees or asylum seekers, fleeing from natural or man-made disasters elsewhere, new arrivals are particularly at risk of marginalisation and social exclusion, generally less likely to be in a position to make their voices heard or to access the public services that they require, let alone shape services to take account of their particular needs. Conversely, however, attempts to engage with new arrivals can backfire, if mishandled, potentially fuelling competition for scarce resources. If government policies to promote community engagement fail to take account of these issues, there is a risk that community solidarity may actually become further undermined.

Whilst the research provided evidence to support this view, however, the case studies also provided evidence of more promising practices, ways in which these gaps were actually being

addressed, in practice, in different localities. There is an emerging recognition, it has been argued, "of the role that public participation can play in promoting community cohesion" (Creasy *et al*., 2008, p. 7). The article concludes by summarising a number of lessons from these experiences.

THE PUBLIC POLICY CONTEXT: 'MIND THE GAPS'

Over the past decade or so, under successive New Labour governments, Britain has undergone a series of reforms to promote devolution, decentralisation and the promotion of community and engagement in local structures of governance. In addition to their potential contributions to agendas to promote active citizenship, these reforms have been central to government agendas for public service modernisation. The aim has been to drive improvements in service delivery through the active involvement of service users, an approach that has been characterised as the promotion of user 'voice and choice'. Legislation now provides for user involvement in a variety of services including health, education and the range of services that are provided (whether directly or indirectly) by local government authorities. Further legislation is in train, as the policy paper quoted at the outset of this article illustrates, setting out additional proposals to promote community engagement, "with more people becoming active in their communities as volunteers, advocates and elected representatives", and public services and public servants "in tune with, and accountable to, the people they serve" (Blears, 2008, p. iii).

This model of change relies on service users and residents being organised and engaged however, so that they can take part in the user involvement, community governance and partnership arrangements that are central to devolution. Where particular groups are not well organised or visible locally, or where they are organised on a different spatial basis or on the basis of shared experiences, identities and interests, the risks of them being invisible to the 'voice and choice' mechanisms would seem considerable. There is already evidence to demonstrate the significance of such risks for precisely those established communities most in need of services in the first place, communities in disadvantaged areas, experiencing problems of poverty and social exclusion. Where migrants, mobile or new communities are not recognised as citizens, residents and/or service users, their needs and views are correspondingly even less likely to be sought out or taken into account effectively (Yarnit, 2006).

Meanwhile, in parallel, governments have become increasingly concerned to address issues of diversity and difference, taking account of rapid demographic changes. The notion of

'super-diversity' has been used to describe these processes of population churn (Vertovec, 2005) as migrants from the new Accession States have been arriving from Eastern and Central Europe in increasing numbers in the new Millennium. Official estimates suggest that at least three quarters of a million Poles came to Britain in this period, for example, and this is almost certainly an underestimate. There have been concerns about potential tensions between these new arrivals and established communities (including established Black and Minority Ethnic communities) particularly in relation to potential competition for scarce resources such as social housing, for example, (concerns that have been exacerbated by anxieties following the attack on the Twin Towers in New York and the London bombings in 2005). Although refugees and asylum seekers have been entering Britain in decreasing numbers, in recent years, there have been concerns about them too, in terms of community cohesion, especially when refugees and asylum seekers are believed to come from areas popularly associated with the so-called War on Terror, such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

Whilst Britain has a long history of racism to contend with, it is important not to exaggerate the degree of popular fears and prejudices. There have been disturbances, including, for example, disturbances in several northern English towns in 2001 – leading to government initiatives to promote improved relationships between the different communities involved. But the government's own Commission on Integration and Cohesion concluded that the overall picture of social cohesion was far from entirely negative. There was evidence, for example, that the vast majority of people agreed or strongly agreed with the view that people of different backgrounds get on well together (COIC, 2007). The government has understandably been concerned to address these issues, however, prioritising building horizontal or 'bridging' links between communities, as well as building vertical links between communities and decision-makers (Blears, 2007). The point to emphasise here is precisely this, though – government strategies have so far signally failed to address the importance of building interconnections between the vertical and the horizontal levels, leaving key gaps between policies to promote community engagement on the one hand and policies to promote community cohesion on the other.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH – MIRRORING THE GAPS BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT PUBLIC POLICY AGENDAS

There has been extensive research on decentralisation, local governance restructuring and the promotion of community engagement in Britain, overall (Taylor, 2003; Lowndes & Sullivan,

2004). This research has also raised critical questions about the potential risks and/or dysfunctions of decentralisation. How far could decentralisation policies be promoted without jeopardising the goals of equity and equalities, redistributing resources within and between disadvantaged areas according to social need? And how far could citizens' engagement in structures of local governance impact upon the wider structural factors and policies that affect their lives (Taylor, 2006). In addition, a range of reports critically explore the impact of particular policies in practice (Skelcher, 2003; Mooney *et al*., 2006) questioning the extent to which decentralisation policies address issues of underlying power imbalances in partnership arenas (Davies, 2007).

Public participation has also been the subject of research, more generally. For example, 'Power to the People', the report of an inquiry into Britain's democracy' (Power Inquiry, 2006), set out to explore the causes of public disengagement in Britain, in recent years, and how this trend might be reversed. The findings demonstrated the extent to which the problem of disengagement might be explained, neither by public apathy, nor by widespread economic or political contentment. On the contrary, the report argued that one of the key explanations was to be found in the fact that so many citizens doubted that their views were being taken into account, feelings that were exacerbated, it was suggested, by the political system's failure to respond to the "diverse and complex values and interests of the individuals which make up our post-industrial society" (Power Inquiry, 2006, p. 19). There is, in addition, extensive evidence about what works and what has not worked so well – how to develop effective strategies to promote participation and empowerment in practice (Barnes *et al*., 2007; Lowndes *et al*., 2006a; 2006b). Previous research has also identified the importance of providing sustainable support for communities if they are to engage in structures of governance effectively, findings confirmed by more recent research (Taylor *et al*., 2007).

There has, in parallel, been a wealth of research on migration and population change, and British government approaches, in response, exploring the pivotal role of deprivation and disadvantage. Racial tensions have often been driven by struggles for resources such as employment and housing, it has emerged (Hudson *et al*., 2007). Although employment and housing have been potential sources of tension, however, research has also demonstrated that, far from benefiting from unfair advantages, newcomers have actually been experiencing specific disadvantages, being disproportionately likely to be in low skilled, low waged work, living in poor housing conditions and lacking effective access to services (Spencer *et al*., 2007; Markova & Black, 2007).

There have been fundamental challenges to government policies in response. Morris, for example (Morris, 2007), has argued that a conditional approach to rights dominates New

Labour's perspective, including New Labour's approach to immigration, where rights are a privilege to be earned by meeting labour market needs, a perspective that fails to take sufficient account of the position of asylum seekers, seeking a right to protection. British policy responses towards ethnic minorities in general have been Janus-faced, it has been argued, developing an increasingly repressive and restrictive stance towards immigration, whilst attempting to balance this with community-based initiatives from race relations policies to the present community cohesion policies (Craig, 2007). Despite some liberal initiatives, Craig has argued, then, the racism that has been inherent in previous policies and practices continues, in the current context (Craig, 2007).

Disturbances in a number of northern English cities in 2001 sparked off recent debates on these issues (Cantle, 2005). In particular, the Cantle Report, following these disturbances, argued that white and Black and Minority Ethnic communities were living separate and parallel lives, a finding that provoked a number of responses including the view that multiculturalist approaches were demonstrably failing – and should be abandoned, in favour of more integrationist approaches. This focus on integration and related criticisms of multiculturalism has proved controversial however. Multicultural approaches had been subjected to criticisms in the past, but these more recent criticisms seemed to be more fundamentally challenging, in their implications for public policy. As Shukra *et al*. have concluded "Current debates about race relations and immigration are caught in a conundrum: how to challenge the weaknesses of multiculturalism without reinforcing conditions for the rise of a new assimilationism?" (Shukra *et al*., 2004).

In summary then, there has been research addressing issues of relevance to both sets of concerns, those relating to community engagement and those relating to community cohesion. In parallel with the gap between these two policy strands, there has seemed to be a major gap, however, in terms of research addressing the interconnections between community engagement and community cohesion. It was these interconnections that were precisely the focus for the research that forms the basis for subsequent sections of this article.

RESEARCHING THESE GAPS

The research upon which this article draws was carried out by a team of researchers, based in two locations, Goldsmiths, University of London, and Edge Hill University in the North West of England, working together with consultants with specialist knowledge of local government policies and policy implementation procedures. Having already collaborated on other studies, the

team came together in response to an invitation to bid to undertake research on this topic from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a major sponsor of social policy research rooted in concerns with social justice. The overall aim was to produce academically rigorous research that would also contribute to policy development processes, developing the knowledge and critical understanding to address these gaps constructively.

Having identified the gaps in existing knowledge, the team set out to address these through exploring the following questions:

- Which groups are being heard? How do different communities and groups gain access to decision-making processes?
- Which groups/communities, in contrast, are not being heard or not recognised by the mainstream? How could they be heard more effectively? Can the devolution agenda be delivered in a way that opens decision-making to these groups?
- As new groups are brought into the formal structures, how are the relationships between communities affected? How can this be achieved in ways that promote community cohesion rather than exacerbating competition within and between communities?
- What do new governance structures mean for those expected to represent communities? How can representation be most effective, most inclusive and most democratically accountable?
- How do local experiences and patterns of racism – and of responses to it – shape involvement in structures of governance?

Having completed the literature review, the next stage of the research process was to examine official data, together with the findings from previous locality based studies, in order to identify appropriate sites for fieldwork. On the basis of these findings, together with informal contacts with local government and voluntary and community sector stakeholders, three case study areas were identified for the research – Coventry, Oldham and Newham. These areas were selected for the following reasons.

Firstly, the three areas were selected to illustrate differing patterns of population diversity and churn – a northern town (Oldham) with relatively long-established minority communities and relatively little population churn (at least until recently), a city with established minority communities and considerable population fluidity (Coventry) and a London borough (Newham) with one of the most rapidly changing populations in Britain. The case study areas were also chosen to illustrate differing approaches to the development of community engagement in local

structures of governance, taking account of varying local contexts, and, as it transpired, varying patterns of party political control. Finally, and most importantly, the case study localities were selected because they had each been noted as areas where positive responses to population diversity and churn had been identified. This was significant given the research aim of identifying examples of good practice for policy development and practice.

As it will be argued in subsequent sections, this latter aim was indeed achieved, although the research findings rapidly confirmed the view that it was unrealistic to seek to identify a single blue print for 'good practice'. One size seemed unlikely to fit all, in terms of the range of local responses to complex and varied challenges such as these. So the research team adopted the term 'promising practices', in recognition of this plurality of approaches to 'good practice'. It should also be emphasised, from the outset, that the case study areas refer specifically to the English policy context and cannot necessarily be taken to apply more widely. As the conclusions suggest in more detail, however, there would seem to be some general lessons to be drawn, even if the specifics of different policy contexts vary.

Once Coventry, Newham and Oldham had been selected for further study, the research team interviewed a range of stakeholders from local structures of governance and from the voluntary and community sectors, including faith-based organizations and groupings. Overall, over a hundred interviews were completed. These were semi-structured interviews, focusing upon the research questions as set out above. Interviews lasted around an hour – or more in some cases – and were recorded, after which the recordings were transcribed for analysis. Through regular team meetings, the key themes were identified from these, across the three case study areas.

More detailed interviews were then conducted with a number of individuals whose experiences illustrated differing patterns of engagement in structures of local governance. These individuals were selected for follow-up interviews, following team discussions again, to ensure that there was balanced coverage, including the experiences of women as well as men, from varying communities and faiths/no faiths. These individual accounts included the personal biographies of activists and community representatives from recently arrived communities (as refugees, asylum seekers and migrants) as well as from established communities, reflecting upon their experiences over time.

Preliminary findings were checked back with individuals and focus groups were then organized in each case study area. In some cases, these focus groups were organized specifically to discuss the emerging findings (as with a small group of local authority officers in one area). In other cases, the

focus group discussions took place as part of the regular meetings of a particular voluntary/ community sector group (this format being more convenient for a number of busy volunteers and activists). These focus group discussions were extremely useful, providing additional examples of experiences, further illustrating emerging themes as well as indicating potential lessons and policy conclusions.

Finally, in addition to these other research methods, the researchers observed a number of meetings and events over the 18 months of the project's life between mid 2006 and the end of 2007. The aim was to build as rounded a picture as possible, gaining understanding of each area's local cultures, as well as their formal structures and processes.

SO WHO WAS BEING HEARD AND WHO WAS NOT BEING HEARD?

Feelings of powerlessness and disengagement were evident among established and engaged faith community groups, as well as among newcomers. But disengagement was particularly marked among newer communities who emerged as being amongst the least likely to be able to make their voices heard in local structures of governance. This was widely recognized in each of the three case study areas. Across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors, there seemed to be a degree of shared understanding that this posed significant challenges, challenges that were generally expected to continue with each set of new arrivals, with population churn and super-diversity becoming on-going features of life in the context of increasing globalisation.

One of the most marginalised groups was identified as being failed asylum seekers, those who had become effectively 'non-persons', existing in what was described as a 'limbo', having neither the right to work nor the right to state-funded services. There were harrowing accounts of the problems experienced by people in this situation, together with the dilemmas experienced by public service professionals who were not generally supposed to be providing them with services, or indeed with any form of support at all.

Apart from failed asylum seekers, new arrivals included refugees and asylum seekers with more legitimate access to services as well as economic migrants – migrants from the accession states such as Poland and Lithuania. The boundaries between these two groups was far from clear-cut, however, as some African migrants came via European Union states, having originally arrived as refugees, but having subsequently become European citizens with the right to work. The complexity of the differences within and between these newer arrivals posed additional

challenges for those concerned to enable their voices to be heard effectively via structures of local governance.

Some of these newer groups expressed particular desires to be heard – wanting to receive funding to enable them to meet their own needs, such as the need for a safe space to meet each other. Securing a place to meet – 'a place for our own organisation' – could become symbolic for new groups in terms of whether they were feeling heard or not. But these requests posed additional challenges too. It was not simply that they lacked the knowledge and skills or even the confidence to engage, to put forward their requests. When it came to seeking funding they were also encountering the need to formalise their group, so that they could be effectively accountable for public funds. By definition, however, these requirements posed additional challenges for relatively fluid groups, based as they tended to be upon more informal networks. When groups did receive support enabling them to constitute themselves more formally, this represented a major step forward. In Coventry, for example, as a result of the community development support work of the Coventry Refugee Centre, 40 informal community groups were enabled to become formalised. But even this type of support was unable to meet all the challenges involved for newcomers in the three case study areas. As one agency reflected, having supported one Somali group, this still left ten other Somali groups in the city, each with similar wants and needs. There was no realistic prospect that public funds could be made available to provide community spaces for all eleven – even if the provision of so many different spaces could be justified on policy grounds – but the outcome could be that the remaining ten groups were left feeling even more marginalised and even less effectively heard. These examples illustrate some of the ways in which fluidity and super-diversity can pose additional challenges in terms of whose voices can be effectively heard in terms of gaining access to funding, then.

While there were particular barriers for newer groups, in the context of population churn, there were barriers for more established communities too. The case studies provided evidence of longer established minorities who felt similarly marginalised, minorities such as African-Caribbean communities in one case study area and travelers in another. There were, in addition, reflections from established white communities, expressing similar feelings of marginalisation – not being effectively heard, not only in terms of not gaining access to funding, but in terms of not having their views taken on board more generally. There were echoes here of the Power Inquiry's conclusions about the causes of disengagement as a result of not feeling effectively heard in the past (Power Inquiry, 2006). There were potential tensions here, including tensions relating to social class and access to resources as well as tensions relating to ethnicity and race, tensions that will be discussed in more detail subsequently.

Meanwhile, in addition to differences in terms of ethnicity, race, culture and social class, there were also differences in relation to age – at both ends of the life span. Elderly people who were relatively isolated emerged as feeling unheard, along with other groups that were unorganised. And young people also emerged as less likely to be heard in general, although there were innovative approaches to addressing this, as illustrated by the example of the Youth Council in Oldham, for instance – an initiative that had succeeded in engaging young people across the different community divides.

In summary then, super-diversity and population churn do pose additional challenges in terms of community engagement in structures of local governance. Established communities were experiencing similar barriers to participation, and similar frustrations – although not to the same degree. This points to the importance of sensitivity in addressing the needs of new communities, enabling them to make their voices heard whilst continuing to be sensitive to the needs of established communities.

As it has already been suggested, though, the research did identify a number of promising practices, in response to these challenges, such as the Youth Council in Oldham, engaging young people from different communities together. This example was notable for its success in actively involving young people across community divides, an achievement that was perceived as particularly impressive given the history of disturbances involving young people from ethnic minority communities back in 2001, and given the anxieties expressed at the time about the potential dangers of different communities leading separate, parallel lives. As a nineteen year old British Bengali reflected, in his view the Youth Council did enable young people to make their voices heard – working together across previous divides. He himself felt enthused as a result of his experiences, gaining what he described as a passion for working with young people. Through this he had decided that he wanted to become a youth worker. "If I'd never done this (become involved in the Youth Council) I'd never have thought about doing youth work as a career" he concluded.

Other examples of local authority responses included outreach work to engage with new communities, both directly and via partnership working with the voluntary and community sectors. In Newham, for instance, there was outreach, to contact, inform and support new arrivals. Established voluntary and community sector organisations and groups played key roles in these respects. Welcome packs were provided by a number of community forums in Newham, for instance, to provide information about the area to newcomers. In one case, a welcome pack was piloted and then delivered to every household in the neighbourhood by the local church. In addition, in Newham, flag-raising events were organised when any new community reached significant numbers. At these

ceremonies the community in question's flag was raised alongside the Union Jack at the Town Hall, symbolising the council's welcome to the new-coming community. This would be followed by a speech of welcome by the mayor and a reception, enabling council members and officers to meet community leaders, establishing contact and building communication channels for future community engagement. These events were seen as significant, symbolizing the welcome that was being extended to new arrivals as well as providing practical information and relevant contact details.

A similar welcome event for newcomers was being organised by the mayor in Coventry. Welcome packs were also developed, in this case by the Welcome Project, a partnership project involving the city council, the voluntary sector-based Refugee Centre and others. In addition, a community-based organisation, Peace House, had run sessions to instruct trainers in how to use the welcome packs effectively. The City Council Cabinet Member for Equalities ensured support for the launch of this pack, an excellent event attended by some 80 people, including senior managers from key service provider departments. This was described as a 'really good' initiative, working on both sides of the equation, in partnership, to improve communication about structures and services and how to access them. Unfortunately, however, because of funding constraints, anxieties were expressed as to whether there would be sufficient resources to keep updating the welcome pack.

BEING 'HEARD' LOCALLY IS NOT THE WHOLE STORY THOUGH

So far the focus has been upon whose voices were being heard in the structures of local governance – and whose voices were not being heard effectively – in relation to local service planning and service delivery. These represent key issues in terms of the engagement of so many groups, centrally important in their own right as well as providing entry points: pathways into further engagement in the structures of local governance. Previous research has already identified the potential connections between getting involved in local service delivery and getting involved as an active citizen more generally (Howard & Sweeting, 2007).

Local service issues are not the only focal points, however. The most pressing concerns for some groups are national, if not international, in scope as the experiences of so many refugees and asylum seekers illustrate: problems which involve a government department in relation to their immigration status, for example, as well as concerns for relatives and friends left behind in their countries of origin. Once they are established in a place of safety, for many refugees the next priority is to begin to rebuild their lives, rather than launching into new involvements locally – although this may change over time as they come to use local services, just as economic

migrants' perspectives may come to shift if they begin to settle with their families for the longer term.

For others, though, their key concerns relate to services beyond the scope of neighbourhood or even local structures of governance at all: regional issues such as transport, for example, or national issues such as pensions for pensioners' forums. And for others again, there are underlying doubts about the relevance of the structures of governance themselves: questions about the relevance of engaging with the local authority, for instance, given the fragmentation of responsibilities when it comes to raising housing issues with multiple social housing landlords. The increase of contracting out was a factor here, including the contracting out of community centres to private companies in one area, with the council described as 'running like a private company' itself.

The research team started out with the assumption that it was the communities that were fluid, while the structures were solid, in areas of rapid population change and 'churn'. This assumption was increasingly challenged as community participants described the fluidity as well as the fragmentation of the structures of local governance. Meanwhile communities of interest/identity, including new communities, were also being geographically dispersed, rather than being located within the boundaries of specific neighbourhoods, posing further challenges for community involvement in decentralized forms of Neighbourhood Management, in particular.

TOWARDS DEMOCRATICALLY ACCOUNTABLE, INCLUSIVE AND EFFECTIVE FORMS OF COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION?

Even when new communities' leaders were being reached and engaged at relevant levels, this was far from representing a complete solution. The dilemmas associated with the question of who legitimately speaks for whom constitutes a continuing challenge. As numerous studies have already documented, there are, in any case, tensions inherent in the relationships between formal democratic structures of representation and more direct and participative forms of democracy (Anastacio *et al.*, 2000; Taylor, 2003b; Purdue, 2007). For those representing Black and Minority Ethnic communities, including new communities, these inherent tensions would seem potentially particularly problematic. Different communities may have varying cultures of representation and accountability, nor do new communities necessarily organise themselves formally along clearly defined boundaries at all. Among particular regional groupings such as South Asians, there may be major differences of culture, religion, class, political perspective and caste, for example. And even within apparently nationally based groupings, such as Somalis, there may be significant differences

within and between groups, just as there may be differences in terms of individuals' citizenship status even within the same group (as refugees, asylum seekers and/or EU citizens).

New communities may organise themselves in informal ways, based upon more personal networks of support, that may be invisible to decision-makers within local structures of governance. And informal networks may be less effective channels for the voices of particular groups, including women and younger people, to be heard. Deciding whose voices are genuinely representative is an ongoing challenge, then, for those concerned with local structures of governance.

Questions also emerged from the research related to the difference between the *quality* or intensity of representation and participation and their *quantity* or extensiveness. How important was it that there were representatives of each community, proportionate to their numbers, on each structure of governance? As one person who was interviewed put it, agencies may be comfortable with a 'tickbox' approach: "they want a Somali representative to tick the Somali box, an Asian representative to tick the Asian box, but they are not interested in *how* they represent Somalis and Asians", this person commented. The case studies provided examples that demonstrated the importance of the *quality* of representation and the blend of formal and informal pathways through which communities are represented in decision-making structures – often through key individuals or groups.

Key individuals, groups and organisations can, and so often do, play vital roles, providing 'bridging social capital' – linking communities and structures of governance. The case studies provided evidence of these vital roles, performed by particular councillors, officers and community activists as well as by particular umbrella organisations, including faith-based organisations and groups, as well as networks concerned with the needs of new communities such as refugee and migrant workers' forums.

The role of such key individuals emerged as particularly important in situations of diversity and churn. Migrants have tended to turn to known individuals within their own communities for information and advice, in order to navigate the challenges of their unfamiliar situations – a pattern for migrant communities in differing contexts. The research identified innovative practices as local authorities developed ways of engaging with informal leaders and networks. In Coventry, for instance, the New Communities Forum built upon the outreach work that had already been undertaken, offering a relatively informal forum for new arrivals.

But dependence on key individuals may bring fragility too – especially in the light of fluidity in the structures of governance, as well as in the communities that they serve. Informal leaders

have also tended to be male, rather than female, middle aged or older rather than younger, and not necessarily representative of all interests within their communities at all. As one of those interviewed commented 'with every community there is somebody to represent them, but some are better somebodies than others. There are movers and shakers, but sometimes they are moving and shaking for themselves and not for their whole communities'. Young Muslim women tended to remain less effectively represented, for example, together with other minorities within minority communities, unless strategies were developed to achieve more inclusive outcomes, as in the case of the support provided to the 'Eve' group, via Peace House in Coventry, enabling Muslim women to meet and find their own voice for themselves. Once again, the voluntary and community sectors were identified as having the potential to play key roles, along with faith groups and multi faith forums, acting as bridges for the different interests and groups within new communities to find ways of being effectively heard in local structures of governance.

CHALLENGING RACISM: BUILDING COMMUNITY COHESION AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

The discussion so far has focused upon the findings in relation to the first questions. Whose voices were being heard, whose voices were not being heard, and what could be done to enable those voices to be effectively and democratically represented? As it has already been argued, the research was also concerned to explore ways of achieving these objectives without exacerbating tensions with established communities, challenging racism and building community cohesion and solidarity.

Racism did emerge as an issue that needed to be challenged – although there was also plenty of evidence of awareness of the importance of developing strategies to do just this. Evidence of tensions between established communities and new arrivals emerged too, although some of these tensions related to differences of social class, as well as to differences based upon ethnicity and culture. In Newham, East London, for instance, established communities expressed anxieties that they may be facing marginalisation, as regeneration initiatives were transforming the area, attracting higher income residents with the potential to price them out of these older industrial areas. As it has already been suggested, competition for scarce resources, such as housing, has been identified as centrally important in the development of such tensions.

These tensions could also be exacerbated; it has been suggested, by well-meaning but misguided attempts to engage with new arrivals without also considering the impact, in

terms of community cohesion. One of the key messages to emerge from the research was the message about the importance of what has been described as 'visible fairness', a term used by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion to emphasise the importance of transparency in the provision of services and the allocation of scarce resources more generally. There were widespread myths – re-enforced in the mass media – to the effect that newcomers were getting preferential treatment, jumping the queue for scarce resources ahead of longer established communities. The criteria – and the processes – by which such decisions were reached needed to be visible and visibly fair.

There were, in addition, examples of promising practices, in terms of myth-busting exercises, as local government authorities provided the information to challenge these types of myths. In one area, for example, the local authority carried out research to identify precisely what established communities were actually concerned about, and then produced leaflets to dispel these fears with the actual facts. These types of interventions were most effective, it seemed, when part of wider communication strategies to convey more positive messages, more generally. The case studies also provided examples of speedy and effective action to identify potential symptoms of tension and proactively respond. Racist graffiti were identified – and dealt with – in these ways, for example, as were instances of 'hate crimes'.

Other examples of proactive strategies to promote community cohesion and social solidarity included the organisation of shared community events. These included community festivals, neighbourhood outings and sports events, to provide safe spaces where different communities could come together and enjoy shared interests, building mutual understanding and respect.

The voluntary and community sectors had key roles to play here too. Umbrella organisations and forums could and did provide safe spaces where different groups could meet, both amongst themselves and with others from different backgrounds. Voluntary and community organisations were also providing community development support, to enable diverse communities to organise themselves and to engage with others. Faith-based organisations and multi faith forums emerged as taking the lead too in some places, such as Oldham, for example, providing advice and support to newcomers, whilst working with more established communities on a continuing basis. Local authorities needed to work in partnership with voluntary and community sector organisations, it was argued, if community cohesion strategies were to be developed effectively.

EMERGING LESSONS?

The research confirmed the importance of connecting agendas for community engagement with agendas for community cohesion. Despite the gaps in government strategies, stakeholders in the three case study areas had clearly identified the need to take account of population churn and super-diversity, if all sections of their communities were to engage with structures of governance, making their voices heard more effectively. And equally clearly, stakeholders were developing strategies to try to ensure that new arrivals were being engaged in ways that minimised rather than exacerbated tensions within and between new and more established communities.

There were a number of emerging lessons here, suggesting strategies that could usefully be developed and applied in different contexts locally. Local government authorities could clearly play leading roles here, welcoming new communities in symbolic and in practical ways, providing welcome packs as well as welcome events for example, making contact with new arrivals and encouraging staff to undertake outreach work to link newcomers with services and service providers. Community events were also proving valuable in some situations, bringing new and established communities together in culturally sensitive ways, promoting shared interests around sports for young people, for instance, or around different types of music. Encouraging joint action around shared issues, such as environmental issues in neighbourhoods, was similarly identified as a means of building bridges across community divides.

Local government authorities could play significant roles, collaborating with the police, in addition, identifying any signs of potential tension – such as racist graffiti – and ensuring speedy reactions, in response. It was evidently important too, that local government authorities developed effective communication strategies, to challenge negative myths and stereotypes. Local authorities identified the benefits of providing clear messages, including clear messages about 'visible justice' as the basis for allocating resources and services to each and every community.

The research particularly identified the importance of local government authorities working collaboratively with the voluntary and community sectors in their areas, including faith-based organizations. In each case study area, there was evidence of the contributions that the Third Sector could make, developing outreach to new communities, enabling new communities to organize themselves and access services whilst working alongside existing communities on shared issues and concerns. Multi-faith forums and youth forums emerged alongside 'anchor' organizations such as councils of voluntary action, in these respects. These types of organization

could provide community development support, building trust and ensuring that the voices of different interests and groups could be represented democratically as well as the voices of the 'usual suspects'.

Government policies need to take account of these emerging lessons, linking the different strands of policy more effectively together. Without suggesting that there might be any one model that could be applied, to build community cohesion in different contexts, there do seem to be examples of promising practices. And these have included examples of community development strategies and approaches spanning the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. This makes it all the more important to ensure that community development continues to play an independent role, rather than becoming increasingly incorporated into government agendas from the top-down, as Pitchford and others have been fearing. Otherwise community engagement strategies may continue to be criticised for being stronger on the rhetoric than the reality of community empowerment. And they may fail to engage some of the most marginalised communities at all, potentially exacerbating tensions within and between them and their longer established neighbours.

Finally, as several of those who were interviewed reflected, government policy impacts in often contradictory ways, at different levels. There are issues here that urgently need to be addressed. As Craig (Craig, 2007) and others have argued, there are, for example, inherent tensions between government policies towards immigration and government policies towards community cohesion in Britain. The mass media only too readily amplify any such negative messages about newcomers, effectively undermining the more positive messages about visible fairness and community cohesion. In the context of increasing globalization, the impact of international policies and interventions can be just as – if not even more – significant. As one of the local politicians who was interviewed commented, reflecting upon the British government's foreign policy, this was effectively undermining local attempts to build bridges with Muslim communities and between Muslim communities and Christian and Jewish communities in the city. Ultimately, the emerging lessons have implications for international policies as well as for more local policies, and for voluntary and community sector-based action in the context of increasing globalization.

Writing in response to one of the most shocking contemporary cases of terrorism – the Mumbai attacks of 2008 – Arundhati Roy explored these connections between the local, the national and the international sources of tensions and civil disturbances. Homeland security could ultimately be achieved, she argued, only by addressing underlying causes, rooted in long-standing injustices and inequalities.

"We're standing at a fork in the road", she concluded, with no third way, only the sign indicating the route towards civil strife and the sign indicating the route towards social justice (Roy, 2008, p. 36).

NOTE

1   'Community Engagement and Community Cohesion' published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, June 2008, www.jrf.org.uk

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