

In September 2009 a group of practitioners, policy officers and academics met with two international participation activists, to reflect on the 'case for participation'. This event was motivated by the Champions of Participation residential workshop, designed to help people 'think outside the box', and to inform and inspire future strategies for empowerment.

The workshop was jointly organised by the Yorkshire and the Humber Empowerment Partnership, led by COGS, and the International Centre for Participation Studies at Bradford University. It was part funded by the Community Development Journal and formed one of a series of events across the UK which followed an International Symposium 'Community Development in an Age of Uncertainty: Connections and Fragmentations'.

The Workshop

The purpose of the 'Making the case' workshop was to encourage people to move beyond what we already know about the challenges and opportunities of participation, and to think creatively and constructively about how to embed and develop this agenda.

The workshop title, Making the Case for Participation, has two interesting implications. Firstly, it reflects the sense that we are not asking whether participation beyond voting for representatives is of value as a goal, as we start from the assumption that it is. While this battle has not been wholly won, this demonstrates how far the agenda has travelled in recent years. Secondly, it raises the question of who we are making 'the case for participation' to. This report reflects on the different audiences for the case for participation, and the challenges of making the case to community members and the case to existing decision-makers.

Key Learning

- » The desire for change drives participation. People participate on the basis of felt needs, and in pursuit of big ideas like justice.
- » We need to truly understand the relationship between participation and representative democracy in order to make an effective case for participation.
- » Conflict is an essential part of participation. We need to be prepared for disagreement and know how to embrace it constructively.
- » Participation requires new skills and new ways of thinking from both decision-makers and community members – neither of whom are used to genuine collaboration on decision-making.
- » Agendas for participation must not be fixed in advance. Facilitators and participants must be able to work together to identify the agenda (while recognising that there are real constraints on this).
- » The case to participants is about the potential for change, and rebuilding faith in the democratic system as a route to change.
- » The case to decision-makers is about the effectiveness of participation as a means to decision-making and delivery, and the availability of support for successful engagement.

Making the Case for Participation

Participation in the UK

Presentations were given by Jenny Pearce from the International Centre for Participation Studies, Mandy Wilson from COGS and Joe Micheli from Barnsley Council.

The participation and empowerment agenda has been developing in the UK for some years. There is a sense of real learning from over ten years of government initiatives. Part of the aim of events like this one is to consolidate this learning, and to ensure that we build upon it, not lose it as the programmes come to an end.

‘Participation needs to keep its ‘edge’ – we mustn’t let it become too bureaucratic or managerial’

The key issue is how we make participation ‘real’, not tokenistic; how to ensure that it remains innovative and creative. Many existing spaces for participation are heavily managed, not least because of the many targets for participation. We need to learn how to measure participation in a meaningful way. The local authorities that score low on empowerment targets aren’t necessarily the worst at responding to community needs.

‘Real’ participation involves more than creating opportunities – it requires changing the culture of politics in the UK (attitudes, mindset and behaviour). We need to embed participation so that it is integral to the way that public institutions work at all levels. We need to nurture cultures of deliberation and negotiation, which include space for dissent. As organisers and as participants, we need to acknowledge that there will be real differences, real conflicts, and be prepared for disagreement. We need to understand participation – not simply deliver it. We need empowerment to be part of the day job. These changes require not only expertise and experience but meaningful political will. Engagement requires resources. As we move into a phase of major cuts in government spending, how can we make the case that the empowerment agenda is not the first to go?

‘Not everyone can just ‘do’ community engagement. It is about a set of skills and about values – knowing where you are coming from.’

(Mandy Wilson)

However, challenges also exist beyond the state. The recent expenses scandal has exacerbated a quite frightening attitude to politics, that politics is simply corrupt. The culture change that we need goes beyond state institutions. We need change in all the spaces of encounter. People who have never been heard, who don’t feel they can make a difference, and don’t trust the system as a route to change, have internalised a sense of their own powerlessness, their own worthlessness. It is not easy to bring people into participatory decision-making spaces when they have been constructed as social problems for many years, rather than as the source of solutions. Participation requires us to support people’s ability to reason, to reflect, to debate ideas (there is more than one view of a ‘just’ society). Participation also requires us to support people’s ability to use power constructively, so that new participants do not reproduce sites of dominating power (power over others) but encourage everybody’s capacity to act.

‘People have struggled for many decades to say that society cannot be left to a few to run it’

(Jenny Pearce)

The UK has a history of grassroots mobilisation, but now participation is structured ‘top-down’ without that wider social mobilisation. Participation is not seen as a right. People don’t think: I am the recipient of these policies; I have the experience – I have the right to be here. There is some evidence that people don’t want to participate, but is it because they don’t think anything will change? If participation does bring change, will more people want to participate? To achieve the outcomes we want, we need to understand what it is about participation that makes it progressive. Do we want direct participation, or participation via the mediation of particular community voices? Who actually gets to the table? Who speaks for whom? What does transformative participation actually look like?

International inspiration

Learning from South Africa: participation after mobilisation

Presentation by Vaughn John, Centre for Adult Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Vaughn is an experienced educator and researcher, with expertise in peace education and popular participation.

The history of participation in South Africa centres on undoing apartheid, and bringing about political change in that context. That was the height of participation in South Africa. It involved mass mobilisation. Every sector of society was engaged. This was galvanised by the need for change and for justice. This was the grand, noble political project which harnessed all the activities. South Africa is now in the second phase of facilitating participation: invited participation, the same phase that the UK is in at present. Participation is a government requirement in many environments, and it is muted, limited, managed. It has lost its critical edge, its meaningful dimension. Practitioners in South Africa are now asking how to get meaningful participation happening again.

‘What is participation? Is it to tick a box? A tool? Or is it a way of life?’

(Vaughn John)

Though the contexts are different, South Africa and the UK are both experiencing the challenge of exclusion from participatory spaces. The barriers in each country differ; in South Africa there are serious issues of poverty, illiteracy, and lack of access to transport; in the UK the situation is less extreme. However, the questions are the same. Who is participating and who is not? How do we hear those excluded voices?

Politicians can hijack spaces for invited participation. They say that they are there to hear the community’s needs, but really it is about party politics, about the needs of the politicians. Poverty makes people desperate, and this makes it easier for politicians to hijack spaces that should be led by the needs and agendas of the people. However, it is also an opportunity, when governments use terms like dialogue and participation. We need to take this space and use it critically, make sure that it is democratising. In the UK, people talk about participation versus representation. In South Africa, people contrast the ‘power with’ style of Mandela with the ‘power

over’ style of Mbeki. Mbeki’s style of governance is more about representation, Mandela’s more about participation. It should not be a choice between the two styles, but a balance between them. Cogs are a nice metaphor for the use of power. There are some cogs which have to work very fast, and have to make a lot of turns to make one revolution of the big cog. We have to work with elected representatives and people with power, in synergy.

Participation is most successful when it is linked to social movements. Shack dwellers’ associations in South Africa have linked with the struggles of landless people in other countries. These connections help them to feel powerful. Community development often has a very local focus in the UK. However, the international dimension, connections with other cities and other countries, can help people to see patterns, to think critically, to know that the struggles they are engaged in are not just about what is happening in their neighbourhood. This can be truly empowering.

A taste of success is also important. People need a sense that something real and material can change, even if it is very small. We have a tendency to slip into pessimism about our work. We need to try not to be too hard on ourselves about what success might look like.

In participating around particular issues, such as housing or access to HIV / Aids medicines, people learn a tremendous amount that may serve them beyond that particular struggle. They don’t just learn to ‘do’ but to ‘be’. They are doing identity work, learning about citizenship. In feeling able to take control of an aspect of their lives, there is a sense of hope.

People in the UK often speak about reform. In South Africa, people talk about transformation. These are quite different. Is the UK talking enough about transformation? What is the bigger project in the UK – beyond participation? Is it about justice? Is it about housing? Whatever it is, it’s important to talk about it.

Making the Case for Participation

Learning from Chile: popular education in difficult times

Presentation by Rosa Parissi, Chilean Community Activist and CAFOD Programme Office during and after the Pinochet Dictatorship. Rosa has worked at community level for many years. She is a popular educator who worked alongside Paulo Freire.

Participation in Chile took place through particular moments and particular contexts, through the work of popular organisations (people's organisations), made up of people who came to the cities looking for work, housing, education. Their motivation was to have a place in society and to meet their material needs, to ensure access to basic things like water. The organisations worked for twenty years before a government (that of Salvador Allende) came to power that was willing to support community organisations, to give them legal protection and respect. Each area had a neighbourhood council, and many representatives on the councils (including many women) began to feel themselves to be participants, to feel that they had influence on decisions. They achieved real gains, such as land on which to build houses.

Tension still existed because the government wanted to control the community organising, but the organisations were strong because they used a popular education methodology. The government did not value the popular education work, but it was these organisations that supported the government, and allowed Allende to develop his political project. It was these organisations who formed emergency groupings when they could see that there was a coup coming, the coup that brought Pinochet to power.

The popular education process is driven by a spirit of solidarity, by Freire's methodology of creating horizontal relationships between the people and the facilitators. Both parties are always learning. Rosa told a story of work that she herself was involved in, in which the women of a community acquired land and built a hospital to treat their malnourished children. Doctors volunteered time to treat the children. Rosa emphasised that she had doubted whether this could be achieved when she first went to the neighbourhood, and that she learned through this process, as well as the women.

This history illustrates some of the requirements for participation. People are motivated to participate around real needs, felt needs, and around their values, the collective

social values of their community. Facilitators of participation need to have knowledge of the context, to be able to see the problems and the dangers, but especially the culture of the group. Dialogue, the horizontal relationship, is crucial. The external person is not the protagonist, but the facilitator. They promote discussion so that people gain a sense of consciousness: the capacity to see reality and to see yourself as someone that can bring about change in that reality. There must be coherence between what is planned and what the group want. The process can't go ahead of what they want themselves. We have a tendency to develop our plans, and take them to the people. The greatest triumphs are when you come together to do them.

'I can't say that I am a person of solidarity if I don't see that in my practice: I can't impose what I think is good for people if the people don't already think it is good for them.'

(Rosa Parissi)

Under the dictatorship, there was a woman who worked for ten years with very poor women, going to the popular bathing areas, producing leaflets. Today the married daughter of one of the women is studying law in the university, and has been a very important leader for a group of students who are trying to improve education in Chile. That's to say how long the processes are and how lovely the results are.

Making the case to participants

Many of the conversations during the workshop touched on what community members need in order to believe it is worth their while participating in local democratic spaces. This is the case to participants rather than to decision-makers. Overall, there was a sense that people will participate if they think it is 'real' participation. Workshop participants suggested the following features of 'real' participation (as well as suggesting that we need to know more about what community members themselves consider to be meaningful participation):

- » Participation needs to be a means not an end – too often it is implemented for its own sake;
- » With meaningful participation 'you might get an outcome, some change';
- » Real participation means 'being prepared to change your mind – as an organisation you are still listening even when they disagree';
- » Meaningful participation is 'edgy', not too cosy;
- » It involves real public deliberation – and conflict;
- » Meaningful participation has a critical edge.

'If we are talking about participation, we are talking about change.'

(Participant, voluntary sector worker)

The idea of change was seen to be central in convincing people that participation is worthwhile. Vaughn John said that although 'we talk about alienation, if people come to the meetings we call and don't see any changes, they will drop off'. Change might be material or it might be in the way people see themselves, but as soon as possible, participants need the sense that 'I'm going somewhere, I've taken a step'.

'I've got a question for you. Is it true that people in England don't have any problems?'

(Rosa Parissi)

Some workshop participants recognised that there is community enthusiasm for change, but not for formal participation. Making the case for participation is about capturing that enthusiasm. Often it is something very local that acts as a catalyst to action and participation. Formal participation may need to become more local in order to be seen as relevant. However, the case for participation will not be made effectively unless the people supporting it, from within the system, are critically reflective about it themselves:

'We are struggling with how to make participation from above

more relevant to help people engage – so we have to ask ourselves what is the purpose of participation – because unless we understand it, they haven't got a chance!'

Participant (council officer)

'We are struggling with how to make participation from above more relevant to help people engage – so we have to ask ourselves what is the purpose of participation – because unless we understand it, they haven't got a chance!'

(Participant, council officer)

Finally, the case to participants is not just about convincing people, but about supporting the sense of self-worth and skills needed to participate effectively.

Making the case to decision-makers

Workshop participants also touched on the fact that existing decision-makers must also be committed to increased participation for it to be effective. For some, this is about securing resources, making the 'business case' for participation.

'The political will is there. Politicians want people to engage. What am I doing to educate our elected members to know how to do it?'

However, for many, there is a sense that the political will is there, but elected members need support. This can be practical, how to engage with community members effectively, but also in terms of understanding the role of participation within decision-making, and their own role within the participation agenda. In order to support participatory processes, existing decision-makers need to understand that participation is part of democracy, not a threat. Relationships are pivotal to this: supporting alliances between councillors and community members. The case to decision-makers is also about 'winning the argument' for participation, building a shared belief that 'a society with more participation is one in which people make things better' (Jenny Pearce).

Making the Case for Participation

Challenges and tensions

Can participation lead to change?

How will participants know that things can change until the decision-makers are themselves ready for the idea that participation is likely to lead to change? One council worker talked about her frustration at offering what she saw as tick-box opportunities for participation – sanctioned by her employers, the Council – when she genuinely believes in real participation. In her view, the opportunities for real participation are limited by existing Council agendas and targets, which are in reality not open to influence through participation. Participants discussed the difficulties of this culture in response to Rosa Parissi's strong message that the agenda for participation must not be pre-determined.

'It's a big problem trying to get a balance between targets and genuine direction setting from groups.'

(Participant, council worker)

Lack of faith in the political system

Making the case to participants is hampered by the very low regard in which the political system is currently held. Many workshops participants reported a general mistrust of elected members, and even 'disgust at how Councillors behave and operate' (participant). As discussed above, people need to believe that their participation will be taken seriously, that it will lead to change. Several workshop participants referred to the lack of faith in participation brought about by experiences of participating in anti-war protests which were not taken seriously.

How do top-down participation and bottom-up participation fit together?

The challenge of facilitating participatory processes in the absence of clear social movements is another key issue, again raised by hearing about experiences in Latin America.

However, while there was widespread recognition that UK participation is overwhelmingly 'top-down' at present, there have been moments of mass mobilisation, for example on Iraq, and a corresponding recognition that these moments have not been harnessed by the institutions seeking to facilitate participation. Rather, the opposite has happened; the

experience of mobilisation may have been disempowering, even disillusioning.

'What I've got from this afternoon is that the clearest participation is where there is a burning need for change – our challenge is that, though there are many things that burningly need to be changed, we do not have mobilisation – I even feel like a dinosaur using that word! How do we promote participation in that context?'

(Participant, community activist)

For some, facilitators of participatory processes need to seize the moments of opportunity where people are motivated to create change (however local and on whatever scale), and work with that.

Resources

Making the case for participation is at least in part about securing adequate resources. The core message from the Champions of Participation residential held in October 2008 was that:

'If the government is serious about community empowerment, it needs to ensure that the work required to implement it should be valued and given high priority when central and local resources are being allocated'

(From *Engagement to Empowerment*, Voices from Experience, January 2009, Sheffield: COGS, pg6)

This message was echoed at the 'Making the Case' workshop. Can these resources be secured in straitened economic times?

How can participation be measured effectively?

Measuring participation is strongly felt to be an issue. There is concern that the 'right things' are not being measured, that councils who do badly on meeting participation targets are not necessarily doing badly on meaningful participation, listening and empowerment. The timescale of effective participation is seen to be an issue here. Rosa Parissi talked about an engagement process in the 1970s with results in the 1990s.

Key idea: The relationship between participation and representative democracy

An essential part of ‘making the case for participation’ is convincing existing decision-makers that greater participation is positive and desirable. These are the people with the greatest stake in the existing system, the status quo of representative democracy as we understand it in the UK.

John Denham, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, believes that:

‘...in reality, we cannot spend all our lives participating. And a key right must remain the right to elect a local councillor, and thus a local council, which has the power to shape area and services on our behalf’

(John Denham, *Strengthening Local Democracy*, speech to the NLGN conference, 21st July 2009¹)

The relationship between community participants and elected members was a recurring theme of the ‘Making the Case’ workshop, giving rise to many questions. What is the relationship, the balance, between elected representatives and individual active participants, in terms of democratic decision-making? How is the role of elected members complemented by participation? How do community members hold elected members to account for decisions made on their behalf? The relationship between participatory decision-making and representative decision-making needs to be clearly understood, if a convincing case is to be made for participation.

‘I don’t know what the balance between representative democracy and participatory democracy should be – but people have only had the vote for a hundred years, so it’s still early doors in a way!’

(Participant, voluntary sector worker)

¹ Available at: www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/corporate/strengtheninglocaldemocracy

Key idea: Conflict

Conflict emerged in the ‘Making the Case’ workshop as a key but neglected dimension of participation. Meaningful participation must include the possibility of conflict. People are motivated to participate by the desire to change things. Both decision-makers and participants must be prepared for constructive disagreement and debate, and have strategies for developing positive new directions together. Decision-makers need to understand that participation is about the sharing of different views, and has to include the possibility of different outcomes.

‘As a resident it’s like going into battle’

(Participant, community activist)

‘Participation from above’ doesn’t welcome conflict. Top-down participation tends towards cosy relationships, bringing new voices into existing decision-making spaces, but stifling dissent as the agenda is already set. Dissenters can be seen as trouble-makers. How do we acknowledge that with real participation comes real differences, real conflicts?

Agenda for the next Champions of Participation residential workshop

Participants in the Making the Case workshop collaboratively produced a set of agenda suggestions for the next Champions of Participation residential, to be held in Spring 2010. These represent key issues that participants believe to be vital in consolidating and developing the participation agenda in the UK.

Putting the P (politics) back into participation

- » What are the values of participation?
- » Are we aiming for conflict or unity?
- » How can council officers facilitate critical thinking about council services?
- » What do you do when you realise your energy for what you are doing has been depleted?

Participatory, deliberative and representative democracy: the balance

- » What is the relationship between direct and representative democracy?

Making the Case for Participation

- » What can we learn from other models of democracy?
- » How do we involve elected members (and others who are part of the existing democratic system) in a conversation about how democracy can develop beyond voting?

Learning for and through participation

- » What training do elected members and officers need to help them support active participation?
- » What would be involved in developing a useful training and development package?
- » What can we learn from real methodologies for participation that have worked in other places? (What did they set out to achieve and how did they do it?)
- » How can we make participation fun and effective?

Valuing participation and recognising success

- » (How) do we make the business case for participation?
- » How do we capture the softer outcomes of participation, and present them in a way that can be valued?
- » How can we embed participation beyond the general election? (scenario planning for the future)

Who is being heard?

- » How do we tackle the challenges of inclusion in participatory processes?
- » How do we respond to the Far Right's engagement with democracy and participation?

'This kind of event is a chance to think outside my day job and re-enthuse me around participation and empowerment'

(council worker)

'There is a great value in learning from other countries, though we have to make adjustments for our own contexts of course'

(voluntary sector worker)

The International Centre for Participation Studies is based within Bradford University's Peace Studies Department, and undertakes research and teaching on the relationship between political participation and peace. ICPS works with academics, participatory practitioners and grassroots activists to co-produce knowledge of new forms and theories of democratic participation.



Community Development Journal
Community Development in an Age of Uncertainty:
Connections and Fragmentations



International Centre for Participation
Studies at Bradford University

To find out more about the next Champions of Participation residential conference and the Regional Empowerment Partnership contact COGS on **0114 268 7070**, or email **mail@cogs.uk.net**.

More VOICES are available on the regional empowerment website
www.yhep.org.uk



neep National
Empowerment
Partnership

Managed by the
Community
Development
Foundation

Funded by the
Department for
Communities and
Local Government