

10

Community Involvement: Embracing the People

Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make a field ring with their importunate chink ... do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field.

Edmund Burke

DEFINITIONS AND IMPORTANCE

The increasing involvement of local people in rural development has been a striking feature of the past few years, whether in relation to the formulation of strategies for action or in the actual delivery of programmes on the ground. Thus the government's 'Rural White Paper' (Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions and MAFF, 2000: 145) stressed that 'we want to see...people living in rural areas being fully involved in developing their community, safeguarding its valued features and shaping the decisions that affect them'. And local development initiatives resting on the 'challenge principle' as with Rural Challenge and the Single Regeneration Budget and/or on the operation of local partnerships, as with LEADER and England's Rural Development Programmes in the 1990s, have all extolled the benefits of carefully encouraging the active involvement of the people living in the relevant area.

The growing weight placed by European, national and local government on community involvement in rural development reflects its wish to reap four anticipated benefits (Warburton, 1998a; Lowe *et al.*, 1998).

BETTER DECISION-MAKING

The first argument has two strands. Local people, if carefully consulted, are a source of valuable ideas, information and wisdom that it would be folly to

ignore, the resultant programme being better targeted and more cost-effective for having culled local knowledge and opinion. In addition, the burden of adversarial decision may be reduced by seeking at an early stage to reconcile conflicting views. In this connection there is often an 'educative element', that of encouraging local people to see the bigger picture and to appreciate the needs of other groups and of neighbouring areas; this conception of the purpose of involvement often hopes that it will be an antidote to NIMBYism in its most myopic form.

MORE DURABLE ACTION

To the extent that any proposed policy or action is built upon a genuine local consensus, it is more likely to be durable and to escape being scuppered by local antagonism or indifference. Indeed, if the action has local origins and 'ownership' – if it has emerged from the involvement exercise – then it is more likely to be pursued with vigour and sustained commitment by local people even, perhaps, when the initial financial resources have run out.

THE PROMOTION OF SELF-HELP

Clearly, it is attractive to the state if community involvement leads to some of the burden of programme delivery passing to local volunteers. And experience shows that local people are frequently more ready to give of their time, labour, expertise and money, not to mention spare seats in their cars, for example, or underused space in their buildings, if this is in a good, locally focused and locally determined cause. Not only is there a cost saving but, it is argued, more imaginative and innovative action may be forthcoming if the uniformity of a state-led approach is relaxed.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, EMPOWERMENT AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Involving people as partners in decision-making and/or in programme delivery is also likely to increase and improve the 'human resource'. The argument is that involvement has an *educative or training function*, with individuals gaining new skills and awareness, as well as a *development function*, with local networks and institutions being spawned or strengthened and whole communities gaining the confidence and energy to launch new ventures at a later date, perhaps unrelated to the one in hand.

But what exactly is meant by the term 'community involvement'? Generally, it is used to denote some of the 'middle range' of activities in the spectrum or 'ladder' (Arnstein, 1969) of activities often evoked to denote a range of possible relationships between the state and the local community. Different writers

tend to denote that spectrum a little differently from one another (see, for example, Warburton, 1998a and New Economics Foundation, 1998) but the main elements are as follows, with the strongest empowerment of local communities coming at the top:

1. citizen control
2. delegation
3. partnership
4. participation
5. consultation
6. education
7. information
8. manipulation

'Community involvement', in the present context, is construed to embrace levels 3, 4 and 5, namely *partnership*, *participation* and *consultation*. As Chapter 9 has already explored the concept and practice of 'partnership', we will confine ourselves here to:

- *consultation* – the process of seeking the views of local people; and
- *participation* – the process of involving local people in determining and/or delivering policy, programmes or projects (but without the state 'letting go' to the extent implied in the concept of 'partnership').

What has happened in recent years is that the point of interface between the local community and the local state – meaning, in general terms, the local authorities and the various local and regional quangos – has tended to 'move up' the spectrum set out above. This has arisen not just because the state has grown more and more keen to reap the four benefits listed earlier, but because the 'community' has grown in sophistication and has become less prepared to 'leave everything to the government'.

SOME KEY ISSUES

A number of key issues surround the involvement of local people in the rural development process and in this discussion we are assuming that it is a local authority or some sort of local development partnership that is contemplating launching an 'involvement exercise' – though sometimes it is the local community itself taking the initiative, effectively appropriating a measure of power to itself.

The first key issue is *why* the involvement? Which of the four possible benefits listed earlier is the 'involver' hoping to achieve – better decision-making,

more durable action, the promotion of self-help or the development of the community? Or is it just going through the motions with the key decisions already taken – an exercise belonging properly at levels 6, 7 and 8 of the spectrum? Certainly, a clear answer to this question will help to determine how the whole exercise is planned and carried out.

Going on from that, *who* should be involved? Is ‘the constituency’ just the people who live in the area in question – and how narrow or extensive is that?, or should it include those who work or have businesses in the area, as well as tourists and visitors? Does it comprise adults but not children, and all of the people or just those likely to make use of a particular facility such as a health centre, public transport service or youth programme? Is it a consultation of pre-existing groups or of the population at large? If the latter, will a sample suffice or a representative group of acknowledged spokespersons? This raises the whole issue of inclusiveness, of recognising that participants tend to be self-selecting and that the articulate will probably not reflect the views of excluded groups such as women at home, the homeless, unemployed people or ethnic minorities. There are ways of trying to involve such ‘hard-to-reach’ groups, but they take time and care.

How the local community is approached is also important. The purpose of the exercise needs to be explained and reactions sought at the outset. In seeking increased involvement there is a need to work through existing groups and institutions, to respect the roles and positions of local leaders, rather than to jump in unannounced.

There is a wide range of consultation and participation *tools* to choose from, and a clear temptation to get ‘hooked’ on a particular familiar one. ‘Mix and match’, or developing some sort of hybrid, is often possible and different techniques may be needed as a project progresses. For example, public meetings and the use of the media may be useful as a project is being launched, community appraisals and round-table workshops may be appropriate in the middle stages as popular opinion is being canvassed and ideas are being generated, and action planning may come into its own when a ‘wish list’ has to be translated into a viable plan.

Then there is the significance of the *rural context*. Many consultation techniques have been developed with an urban context in mind – a large housing estate or a run-down inner-city area perhaps. In rural areas, however, the wide scatter of the population provides its own challenge. Consulting the same number of people there as in an inner-city area may be impossible using formal meetings; indeed an insistence on consulting a similar number of people in a single exercise may involve basing it on a geographical area so extensive that it has no real meaning for those involved. And the use of three-dimensional physical models, as in ‘planning for real’ exercises, could well miss the point in a rural development context where the built environment may not really be at issue.

Often the careful deployment of a *community development worker* to initiate, facilitate and draw together the threads of a participation or consultation exercise is essential. But such a person has to tread carefully, respecting not just the sensitivities of the existing social and political structure in the area but also the need to let the local people themselves shape and steer the exercise to the maximum extent possible. This implies a sound training in the craft of 'facilitation'.

Then there is the need to remember that *involvement is a process*, not a one-off quick fix. Early disappointments need to be countered by a determination to build up a culture of participation in which people feel confident that they will be taken seriously in both fashioning and helping to deliver projects and programmes. In short, consultation is not just a matter of finding out what people want; it should be part of an ongoing process of mutual learning, partnership and the development of self-reliance. And 'participation' must involve a genuine readiness to allow people to do things differently and maybe make mistakes. All of this can be expected to take time, especially if a climate of demoralisation, elitism and fatalism provides the starting point.

THE TOOLKIT

There are several compendia setting out a range of participation and consultation tools available and the pros and cons of each (for example Moseley and Cherrett, 1993; Environment Trust Associates and Local Government Management Board, 1994; DETR, 1997; Rural Forum and the Scottish Office, 1997; New Economics Foundation, 1998; Bur *et al.*, 1999). The tools vary greatly in their degree of sophistication and formality, in their capacity to embrace all social groups and in their ability to stimulate a real exchange of ideas and concerns rather than just an accumulation of individual opinions.

Many of the most popular methods today involve groups of people, possibly preselected to match a particular desired profile, coming together for a few hours, or possibly days, in order to 'brainstorm' or somehow seek to arrive at a common position or vision for the future of an area. Words like 'visualise', 'visioning', 'imagine', 'jury' and 'search' recur in the nomenclature of group consultation techniques. These groups may be based on clear sets of interests – such as those of farmers, trade unionists, conservationists or newcomers – or be intended to encapsulate a cross-section of the whole community. Other tools seek to embrace much larger numbers of people but may gain comprehensiveness at the expense of real debate and the testing of ideas.

All we can do here is set out in tabular form a small number of the possible methods indicating one or two strengths and weaknesses of each (Table 10.1).

Table 10.1 *Some approaches to consultation and participation in local development*

What	In essence	Some strengths	Some limitations
Parish (or 'village' or 'community') appraisals	A questionnaire survey of, by and for the community, regarding its wants, needs, resources, problems etc. It leads to a report and usually local discussion and action points. ('Community appraisals' can also be taken to mean more comprehensive audits involving the use of much more than household surveys.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% of the community can participate • anonymity • good for identifying the nature and strength of local concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinions are not formed or honed in debate • time-consuming and labour-intensive (often takes a year or more but survey software can help)
Modelling local sustainability	A gaming exercise in which small groups appraise possible local projects against environmental, economic and social criteria. The game can be board-based or computer-based.	Brings together disparate interest groups or stakeholders to test each others' ideas and the merit of different options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation is by invitation only • Requires high level of verbal skill
Local focus groups	Several variants – all tend to involve small groups considering key issue(s). Thus 'Future Search' involves stakeholders creating a shared vision via alternative scenarios.	Contributes to local consensus building and an appreciation of trade-offs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation by just a select few • Requires high level of verbal skill
Parish maps	A large map of the locality is communally generated, locating whatever it is that local people cherish – an exercise producing a physical product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inspires community awareness and spurs initiatives to conserve or enhance local features • in practice, often involves women 	may tend to favour physical, land-use and location-specific issues at the expense of the less tangible

(Continued)

Table 10.1 Continued

What	In essence	Some strengths	Some limitations
Participatory rural appraisal	<p>as a stimulus to discussion.</p> <p>A composite term embracing various methods of learning from local communities, usually including semi-structured interviews with key informants, group discussions, gaming and ranking exercises to elicit preferences.</p>	relatively quick way of identifying priority concerns and issues	requires careful preparation and good skills in community development
Planning for real	Local people use a three-dimensional model of the neighbourhood in a series of open meetings and reveal their needs by placing cards or flags in appropriate locations. A spur to discussion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of a 3-D model is a good way of engaging people, e.g. re. road safety or building developments • participants do not need high level of verbal skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strong physical, land-use bias • best for a defined, built-up neighbourhood – less obviously useful for area-based rural development
Public meetings	Involves publicising and convening a meeting, open to all, with formal presentations by people in positions of responsibility, plus questions/ comments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • open to all • good for giving out basic information and raising initial awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • poor basis for real debate • generally dominated by the articulate minority
Formal local democracy (parish councils and the like)	The periodic election of representatives by universal suffrage. The council then resolves a limited range of local issues but has authority to act and spend quite widely and also to represent local issues at a higher level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • legitimacy that comes with legal status and formal recognition • can be an effective focus for consultation and debate if the council is dynamic and open in style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • often has a poor image • usually low turnout in elections (or no election at all) which raises doubts re. representative-ness • can choose to work to a narrow agenda with little interest in local development

CASE STUDY 19: THE PARISH/VILLAGE/COMMUNITY APPRAISAL

The parish/village/community appraisal may be defined as 'a questionnaire survey of, by and for the local community, designed to identify local characteristics, problems, needs, threats, strengths and opportunities and thereby to create a sound foundation of awareness and understanding on which to base future community action'. The key words in that definition are 'of, by and for'. All three are essential elements, though the style and emphasis of parish appraisals does vary from place to place as should be the case with truly community-based endeavours. Indeed, the terms in common usage vary; there are parish, village, town and community appraisals, profiles and audits. But in the English context, most of the 2000 or so such studies that have been carried out in the past 25 years have been termed 'appraisals' and have related to civil parishes with populations of between 300 and 3000 (Moseley, 1997a).

For the various reasons underlying state support for community involvement that were reviewed earlier in this chapter, English local authorities and development agencies such as the LEADER II local action groups have shown an increasing readiness to promote and support parish appraisals in recent years. Sometimes they have agreed to defray a share of the costs incurred by local communities in carrying them out; sometimes they have undertaken to consider sympathetically any concerns or proposals that might emerge from them. But it is arguable whether the parish appraisal is strictly a 'tool of consultation' for the simple reason that normally the real impetus behind them comes from the local community itself and not from a 'superior' body anxious to consult.

Why this local enthusiasm for a task which is always demanding and generally takes a year or more of determined work to complete? One motive has been sheer curiosity, a wish by local people to research and publish a kind of local Domesday Book or 'state-of-the-village' report. More common, however, has been a wish by some concerned group of people to explore which direction the community wants to go, sometimes in the face of a perceived threat such as a proposed large new housing development, sometimes with a general feeling that 'the place is going downhill', as evidenced perhaps by the closure of the village school or the steady decline of the number of young people. Sometimes there has been a wish to see if some factional view, perhaps that of a vocal preservationist lobby, really has majority support, or else to gather opinion in the hope of influencing the local planning authority as it prepares a new local plan.

What does an appraisal involve? The main stages are normally: working to establish broadly based support in the parish for the venture; forming a steering

group to decide what, how, when and by whom; planning the survey and drawing up the questionnaire; collecting the information from the parish's households and/or individuals; analysing the information; drafting an appraisal report to include recommendations and action points as well as the statistical evidence; distributing the report widely in the parish; local discussion to get a mandate to proceed; follow-up action; and monitoring and evaluation. Sometimes, as will be explained in Chapter 12, the appraisal can be just a preliminary step towards the preparation of a village action plan.

Thus the questionnaire survey is, or should be, just the centre-piece of a much longer and broader exercise. It *is* time-consuming and demanding, though in recent years help has been available in the form of computer software which offers local communities a long 'menu' of possible questions for their consideration, prints out the preferred questionnaire, handles data entry and undertakes data analysis and the presentation of the results in tabular and diagrammatic form (Countryside and Community Research Unit, 1998). None of this, however, is a substitute for local judgement at all stages of the appraisal exercise, and concern is sometimes expressed that the use of computer software risks turning a real community initiative into a technological fix.

There are two quite distinct views about the real value of parish appraisals. The first is that they are essentially a 'means to an end' i.e. a necessary precursor to some sort of tangible action on the ground such as bus shelters, play-groups, a community minibus or whatever. The second is that 'the process is itself the product' or, more accurately, that the real product is the enhanced awareness, confidence, resolve, skills and relationships generated by the appraisal exercise in the community as a whole and/or in many of its individual members. Happily, these two desirable outcomes are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, success in one can and often does breed success in the other, and the possibility of triggering an upward spiral of achievement in this way is precisely what community development is about.

But do appraisals genuinely lead to action? Research involving the author went some way towards clarifying 'what happened afterwards?' at least with regard to two counties in southern England, namely Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire (Moseley *et al.*, 1996). There, 44 appraisals carried out in the early 1990s were reviewed one to four years later and it was found that of the 422 separate recommendations or action points contained in the appraisal reports, roughly equal proportions had subsequently been wholly implemented, not implemented at all and – the intermediate category – partially implemented, or else were in some sense still ongoing. Looking at which particular recommendations and action points had met with most success, the most commonly implemented were those where the relevant power had rested largely in local, parish hands; the least successful were where agreement and expenditure were needed from superior bodies such as the county councils. Thus action points relating to better local information provision, the maintenance of footpaths and the

establishment of 'good neighbour schemes' had very largely come to fruition, while those relating to traffic and road conditions, the provision of low-cost housing or the creation of new employment opportunities had proved much more intractable, though some clear successes were, none the less, evident even in those fields.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this and related research on parish appraisals:

- Parish appraisals have been successfully undertaken by a wide range of local communities, of different size and social composition and with different characteristics and problems; the 'triggers' to undertake appraisals have varied greatly.
- The typically high response rates achieved in the surveys are a testament to the level of interest people have in their local community when asked to express an opinion, and they provide a reasonable mandate for subsequent action.
- Virtually all appraisals have generated some beneficial outcomes relating either to action on the ground and/or to the wider domain of 'community development'.
- As far as 'action on the ground' is concerned, success tends to depend on the dynamism and determination of a few individuals in the community; the level of appreciation locally that follow-up needs to be carefully planned and vigorously pursued; the degree of support and enthusiasm coming from the elected parish council; and the support of outside agencies such as the local authorities and the county-based Rural Community Councils.

In short, parish appraisals are an important social innovation which has helped to devolve to local people a significant share of the task of caring for their local community and environment as well as giving statutory agencies and voluntary bodies a firmer factual basis upon which to plan their services.

But three cautionary notes should be sounded: first, they are much better at crystallising a community's needs and wants than the community resources that might be harnessed to help meet them; second, they may imply an element of 'first up, best dressed', with those communities most adept at getting themselves organised winning a disproportionate share of any resources on offer; and third, response rates of 60 to 80 per cent are impressive in any household survey but the silent 20 to 40 per cent should always be borne in mind as they may well comprise most of the truly disadvantaged people in the community.

CASE STUDY 20: WALLONIA'S COMMUNE PROGRAMMES FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

As a continental example of good practice in involving local people in rural development we may cite the work of the Fondation Rurale de Wallonie,

which serves the 130 or so essentially rural communes of Belgium's French-speaking Walloon region. The Wallonia regional government has responsibilities that include economic development, strategic land-use planning and environmental management, as well as the supervision and part-funding of the commune councils. As for the latter, they too enjoy considerable responsibility including the provision of a local police service, road maintenance and ensuring the provision of water, gas and electricity – but with the more rural communes typically having only about 7000 inhabitants they often have to act in concert with their neighbours or other agencies.

For more than 20 years the Wallonia regional government has sought to address such rural issues as agricultural restructuring, environmental pressures, the need for a broader employment base and the difficulties of servicing a scattered population. Building on its early experience, it legislated in 1991 to give force to a number of basic principles of rural development and, more specifically, to a 12-stage programme that communes would be obliged to follow if they were subsequently to be eligible for the substantial financial assistance potentially available for rural development projects.

The guiding principles, which are firmly adhered to, are:-

- development should be planned and managed at the commune level and by means of a Commune Programme for Rural Development;
- these programmes must be integrated, covering most or all aspects of life – the local economy and employment, housing, transport, environmental enhancement, service provision, community development etc.;
- the programmes must be designed so as to make fuller use of local physical and human resource; and
- the production and execution of the programme must involve local people fully; consultation and citizen participation must be central to the whole process.

It is the last of these – the requirement to involve local people fully, as expressed in a particular commune – that we are most concerned with here. But first it is necessary to explain the key role of the Fondation Rurale de Wallonie (FRW) which was set up in 1975 to foster rural development in the region. It is a not-for-profit organisation with a social purpose, but run on quasi-commercial lines, with the regional government and the communes being, effectively, its clients. From 1979 onwards it piloted and refined a rural development process in partnership with over 20 communes, a process which was later to be enshrined in law, as explained earlier.

Much of FRW's work on the ground is carried out by about 40 *agents de developpement* whose task is to help commune councils and their residents to prepare and implement the rural development programmes. By 1995, 46 of Wallonia's rural communes had contracted with FRW to work together in this

way, these communes containing some 500 individual villages and over 300,000 residents. So there is now a tried-and-tested procedure for rural development in Wallonia set out in an unambiguous legal framework. Information, consultation and participation are formal requirements and minimal procedures are laid down in the 1991 law.

In 1995/96, the author was able to study these procedures as followed in the Walloon commune of Brunehaut, as part of a transnational project relating to community involvement in rural France, Britain and Belgium (Fondation Rurale de Wallonie, 1996). The commune of Brunehaut comprises nine former communes near the French border, amalgamated in 1977 and covering 46 sq. km, with a population of some 7500 people. The commune council, elected every six years, has 19 members of whom a group of five, chaired by the mayor, comprises its executive. The council employs some 60 staff and has an annual expenditure in excess of £1.5 million.

In 1990, when the commune council resolved to launch a rural development programme, the commune had a 15 per cent unemployment rate, employment in both manufacturing and agriculture in sharp decline, earned incomes well below the regional average, a falling school-age population and the imminence of reform to the Common Agricultural Policy causing some anxiety among the commune's farmers.

The commune's rural development programme went through four phases.

The information phase

In the autumn of 1991 a two-hour, peak-time regional television presentation and debate about the proposed Brunehaut rural development programme was seen by half of the commune's residents, many of whom phoned in with questions and observations. After that, four local meetings, scattered throughout the commune, were convened to discuss the initiative, and an exhibition was staged in the offices of the commune council. Together, these initial ventures persuaded about 70 people to volunteer to participate in the working groups which would carry things forward.

The consultation phase

Seven working groups were established and they met a total of 18 times between November 1991 and May 1992, averaging ten participants per meeting. The groups focused on topics suggested at the public meetings, namely the economy, tourism, housing, agriculture, social and community life, the environment and road safety. Questionnaires were distributed to a sample of residents to ascertain the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the commune for discussion in the working groups.

The local commission phase

In April 1992 a Local Commission for Rural Development was established in the commune as required by the 1991 legislation. Chaired by the mayor, and

with its members drawn widely, both geographically and socio-economically, from lay people within the commune, the Commission's role was to be a 'permanent consultative body at the disposal of the commune' charged with drafting the Commune Programme for Rural Development and with assisting its subsequent implementation and monitoring. During 1993, it duly worked to produce the Draft Plan, with technical assistance from the FRW and drawing on the opinions and proposals that had come from the various working groups. The Draft Plan set out about 60 specific projects together with an indication of their relative priority, cost and relationship to relevant objectives, and went forward for the approval of the commune council.

The implementation phase

By November 1993, the commune council and the Wallonia regional council had both approved the Plan, and in January 1994 the region announced that it would fund 80 per cent of the cost of five projects given high priority in it. These related to the creation of a 'shop window' for local produce, the conversion of a redundant building into a village hall-cum-environmental interpretation centre, the redesign of a congested square in one of the villages, traffic-calming measures outside two village schools and the conversion of another redundant building into a village hall incorporating a unit of social housing. By early 1995, all five of these projects had come to fruition together with four smaller schemes set out in the Plan and wholly funded by the commune. The working groups were then reconvened by the Local Commission to bring forward further proposals for its consideration and possible inclusion in a rolled-forward Plan.

Many useful conclusions about rural community development can be drawn from this experience. It was genuinely multi-sectoral, dealing with issues defined as important by local people. The consultation exercises were genuine, and well-planned and executed. A precise legal framework for that consultation removed the temptation to 'cut corners'. The continuing support of an experienced rural development agency deploying a specific officer was crucial to the project's success. Local effort and enthusiasm was sustained in large part by the knowledge that the region's financial support for selected projects was assured so long as the job was done properly. And finally, the involvement and authority of the commune council, and the Local Commission that it established and owned, firmly anchored the process in the locality and gave it legitimacy.

From its launch on regional television to the completion of the first tranche of projects the process took about three-and-a-half-years. Over and above the tangible successes on the ground, less obvious but equally valuable benefits had been secured. These included an enhanced sense of belonging and local pride, a reduction of suspicion and rivalry between the constituent villages of the commune and a flourishing of active citizenship.

**SEE ALSO...**

Several other case studies relate directly to community involvement in local development, especially numbers 2, 5, 12, 24 and 28.

SELECTED FURTHER READING

DETR (1997), Derounian (1998), Lowe *et al.* (1998), New Economics Foundation (1998) and Chapter 12 of the Rural White Paper (Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions and MAFF, 2000).

