Citizen involvement in partnerships for urban regeneration

Conference paper

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A framework for action

'Partnership, more partnership' was the slogan advanced at the 1998 European Urban Forum by Monika Wulf-Mathies, EU Commissioner for Regional Affairs, to describe the strategic direction of reform of the structural funds. She was speaking at the launch of a framework for action to promote 'Sustainable urban development in the European Union'.

The key threads in this action framework are its guiding principles of subsidiary integration, partnership, environmental sustainability and market efficiency. Each of these threads is, of course, woven from complex strands. In the case of partnership there is an emphasis upon drawing together stakeholders at the local level – to strengthen economic prosperity, to contribute to good urban governance and to promote equality, social inclusion and regeneration in urban areas.

The framework for action argues that, at the local level, 'it is important to involve citizens and the private and community sectors, thereby ensuring that the aspirations of all the main actors are taken on board, that the needs of targeted local beneficiaries are met, that all possible resources are mobilised and that "ownership" and commitment are enhanced, thus increasing policy legitimacy and effectiveness.'

Among the four key policy aims of the EU framework for action, that on the promotion of good urban governance focuses strongly on the involvement of citizens in urban policies and local empowerment. Again the main vehicle for the development of shared strategic goals involves partnership-building between the public, private and local community sectors.

This local partnership approach and its rationale are equally reflected across a wide range of EU and Member State policies and programmes. However, the partnership approach presents problems in both concept and practice. The 'partnership' concept has been used to encompass a vast variety of structures and relationships, from contacts and communication to consensus, cooperation and common action. It evidently involves at least two parties, but partnership has been employed to describe the joint activity of two agencies, e.g. government departments, as well as bodies from different interest groups.

Partnership links may be 'vertical' as well as 'horizontal'. The model of local partnership developed in many of the EU's community initiatives has included economic and social partners, NGOs and representatives of the local community. These initiatives have resulted in both relative successes and relative failures. To return to the Urban Forum debate, there was strong argument that there had been a lack of learning from these experiences but that such knowledge should be urgently acquired in order to build sound foundations for the future development of effective and meaningful partnerships.

Foundation research into partnership

While acknowledging the fundamental need for community involvement in the partnership approach, attention to factors that will support meaningful and productive community involvement, has been inadequate. Work for the Foundation (Chanan, 1997, 1999) emphasises that effective resident representation on a partnership or development initiative is based on a 'hinterland' of low-profile involvement by many residents in independent small-scale activity groups. This 'local' community sector of citizen action encompasses both independent local residents' involvement in their own organisation and networks and, secondly, their involvement in official development schemes, often indirectly through networks. Specialist workers and targeted resources are usually necessary to increase the level and effectiveness of community involvement. The community involvement team's job is to strengthen the local community sector and to

work with public services and agencies to improve their relationship with the sector and their combined impact on the community.

Other work of the Foundation (Geddes, 1997; Conway, 1999) recognised that the mechanisms or principles for successful partnership working were unclear. There has been relatively little evidence of the advantages and disadvantages of different models of partnership, or about the experiences and outcomes for different partners and stakeholders. Thus in 1994 the Foundation launched a cross-national analysis of the development of a local partnership approach to promote social cohesion; and of the structures and working methods, and the contribution and impact of such bodies. It was felt that a European analysis of developments within different programmes, in different contexts and cultures, and involving a wide range of different partners and actors could assist in identifying effective practice, in improving the transfer of experience and reducing the waste of resources.

The research adopted a specific working definition of local partnerships, in order to distinguish them from more limited and/or informal processes of collaboration and networking, and to guide identification of suitable partnerships for the case study element of the research. The definition that was adopted emphasised four key features of local partnerships:

- A formal organisational structure for policymaking and implementation

- The mobilisation of a coalition of interests and the commitment of a range of different partners

- A common agenda and multi-dimensional action programme

- The combat against unemployment, poverty and social exclusion and promotion of social cohesion and inclusion

Within the transnational research programme, research studies were undertaken in 10 Member States of the EU: Austria, Belgium, France, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. The results, conclusions and recommendations of this work are reported in *Local partnerships: a successful strategy for social cohesion?*

Building partnership across the EU

Wide differences exist in the extent to which local partnerships have succeeded in developing effective structures and processes of interest representation. On the one hand, many of those involved felt that partnership structures did indeed offer adequate representation to many key interests, expressed in comments such as 'the balance is about right' or 'all the key players are there'. It is clear from the research that this did not normally mean that all partners had equal influence, but that their representation was considered to be proportionate to their contribution to, or stake in, the partnership. On the other hand, the research also documents very different experiences, both of partnerships which have not succeeded in representing interests effectively, and cases where different partners and actors express conflicting views.

Women play active and prominent roles in many local partnerships, but are much more likely to be community representatives and project leaders than partner representatives on partnership boards or management committees where policy decisions are made. This distinction reflects the fact that in most local partnerships formal and active equal opportunity policies and guidelines are conspicuous by their absence. Indeed, many of those who are involved in local partnerships do not recognise their relevance. This tends to mean that the degree and level of opportunity for women within local partnerships is less than that for men: there are exceptions, but women are more often involved at lower levels, and in less powerful positions.

Local partnerships must not only establish structures and processes which ensure the representation of key interests, but must negotiate a consensus around a common strategy and the consequent action plan, and manage the conflicts which are likely to arise. Building and maintaining a partnership strategy involves the collaboration of unequal partners with widely differing resources, expertise, culture and interests.

A few of the partnerships in the research illustrate comprehensive obstacles to establishing effective partnership. This is particularly the case in certain countries, although it is not a problem confined to them. In Greece, because of negative cultural and attitudinal factors, none of the three partnerships for which case studies were conducted showed success in establishing durable partnership relationships at local level. This situation was encapsulated by the comments of the Greek research study on the partnership oriented to the needs of the Muslim majority:

> *It was impossible to create permanent, stable and flexible partnerships because of the variety of economic, social, behavioural and attitudinal problems and aspirations.*

Building partnership needs time and patience and is difficult where there is:

- local political turbulence;

- absence of a strong local associative tradition;

- lack of a collaborative tradition in the public sector.

The research highlighted a number of factors which assist in building partnership. These include:

- clear identification of the benefits to be gained by joint working;

- strong leadership, especially in the early phases;

- skilled management and project staff;

- a strong shared local identity;

- active involvement of all partners in the shaping and implementation of strategy and activities;

- seeing new solutions to problems;

- cooperating to obtain new resources and maintaining a solid resource base;

- appropriate skills training and development.

Effective working by local partnerships often involves not only building relationships 'horizontally' between local actors (where forging links between the formal partnership and more informal local networks is emphasised) but 'vertically' with national and European stakeholders.

Findings of the research

The research shows how local partnerships can enable welfare, employment and other policies to respond more effectively to local concentrations of unemployment, poverty and exclusion. Partnerships can help to develop a collaborative culture in a locality or region, through mediating and negotiating common perspectives among different interests. They can provide a local institutional framework which can involve and empower key actors, including local community interests and excluded groups. Local partnerships can improve the delivery of policies at the local and

regional levels, enhancing the performance of mainstream economic, welfare and environment policies by tailoring them to local needs and capacities. They can act as forums for innovation and experimentation and can enhance the value obtained from resources, both by applying resources more effectively in local contexts, and by levering in additional resources. Finally, local partnerships can play valuable roles as 'advocates' for the interests of an area, by acting as a 'spokesbody', drawing on their capacity to speak for a range of local interests in influencing wider policies nationally and at European level.

However, the research also makes it clear that local partnerships are complementary to and not a replacement for mainstream policies.

- Local partnership, by itself, is a valuable but not sufficient response to localised problems of poverty and exclusion.

- Partnerships have been established to counter problems in specific local areas, often as experimental or model actions. They may not be in a position to tackle more dispersed problems of exclusion.

In looking forward, six key issues need to be addressed to ensure that the gains from partnership are sustained.

- *Representation and communication*

  Many local partnerships need to develop clear principles to guide the way in which key interests are represented, and especially to ensure the more effective representation of local communities and disadvantaged groups. They also need better mechanisms for reporting and feedback to partner organisations.

- *Organisational capacity and skills*

  Greater resources and specific training are required to ensure that partnerships possess the necessary range of professional, managerial and communication skills.

- *Financial resources*

  The short-term funding – typically lasting from three to five years – provided by most national and European programmes is seldom adequate to allow partnership relationships to become securely rooted and perform effectively. Reliance on a succession of short-term funding sources poses serious problems for local partnerships.

- *Timescales*

  The problems of poverty and exclusion with which local partnerships contend cannot be solved through short-term interventions, which often represent poor or wasted use of resources. The research raises questions of the extent to which local partnerships are regarded as temporary or more permanent elements of the policy framework.

- *Transparency and accountability*

  Care needs to be taken to ensure transparency in the application of public funds by partnerships, and to avoid any potential 'democratic deficit' as a result of partnership.

- *Research, evaluation and dissemination*

  The limited extent of monitoring, evaluation and research in many partnerships hinders their effectiveness and makes it difficult for national and European policymakers and others to assess the advantages and disadvantages of the many 'models' of local partnership which are associated with different EU, national and local initiatives. There is a need for further review and pooling of experience on the methods, techniques and tools of evaluation most appropriate to local partnerships.

Given the diversity of current practice in Member States, the way forward will have different implications according to the national policy context. However, national and/or regional governments should institute programmes which fund and provide longer term support to local partnerships, closely linked to mainstream social and economic policies.

National and/or regional policy programmes must ensure that local partnerships have access to the expertise, skills, time and resources which they need, in particular, for the following:

- *human resource and training programmes* for partner representatives, managers and staff;

- *local community development and capacity building* to support the active and positive involvement of community organisations and excluded groups;

- *evaluation* to promote learning and exchange of experience as well as improved results.

Finally, the research has shown that in many cases effective 'horizontal' partnership at local level needs to be supplemented by 'vertical' partnership between local actors, regional and national authorities and the EU.

References to Foundation publications

Chanan G. (1997) - *Active citizenship and community involvement: getting to the roots*

Chanan G. (1999) - *Local community involvement: a handbook for good practice*

Conway M. (1999) - *Partnerships, participation, investment, innovation: meeting the challenge of distressed urban areas.* Conference report

Geddes M (1998) - *Local partnerships: a successful strategy for social cohesion*. European research report