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***Public Participation in New Local Governance Spaces:  
The Case for Community Development in Local Strategic Partnerships***

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**Abstract**

Research into public participation in local decision-making has increased over the past forty years, reflecting increased interest in the subject from academic, policy and practitioner perspectives. The same applies to community development, a values-based profession promoting a transformational agenda.

During the New Labour government's period in office (1997-2010), public participation featured centrally in several policies, reflecting their adherence to communitarian theory and Third Way politics. Additionally, the language of community development (promoting community empowerment and social justice) featured in these policies. Guidance for Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) – central to New Labour's local government reforms – required them to facilitate public participation in decision-making, and used the language and values of community development.

This paper reports on research into LSPs' public participation practice. Applying a constructivist methodology, the research applied an evaluative framework reflecting the community development values in all 22 LSPs in the Yorkshire & Humber region. Data was collected through documentary review and interviews with LSP officials in each participating LSP. Case study research was conducted in one LSP, concentrating on two communities, generating deeper understanding of the process of facilitating public participation in different circumstances.

Notions of power feature centrally in the analysis, and the research concludes that local authorities struggle to relinquish power to communities in any meaningful way, even within the context of government guidance requiring this process to be implemented. These findings are extrapolated to present a brief critique of the present UK government's stated commitment to de-centralising power to communities in various policy areas.

Key Words: Community development, community empowerment, public participation, New Labour, public policy.

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## Introduction

Public participation in local decision-making has featured increasingly as a central tenet of public policy over the past forty years, particularly in relation to planning (Damer & Hague, 1971; Innes & Booher, 2004), health (Mitton *et al*, 2009) and environmental issues (Webler & Tuler, 2007). Theories have evolved over this time to help better understand the impact and evaluate the effectiveness of various public participation initiatives, and to shape future policy (e.g. Arnstein, 1969; Wilcox, 1994; OECD, 2001; IAAP, 2007). Over the same period, the community development profession has evolved, such that it is recognized a values-based profession promoting a transformational agenda (Banks, *et al*, 2013).

This paper aims to explore the extent to which these professional values provide a useful framework with which to evaluate public participation policy and programmes. It draws on the findings of research conducted into the public participation practice of new local governance 'structures' in Yorkshire & the Humber region, and aims to contribute to the wider debate on the translation of policy into practice using these cases as exemplars. The paper has the following objectives:

- To review public participation theory, addressing its relationship with community development, focusing on how it incorporates consideration of issues of power.
- To present an overview of the public participation policy of the New Labour governments of 1997-2010, specifically relating to Local Strategic Partnerships.
- To assess the extent to which these policies were translated in practice by LSPs, based on the community development model.
- To reflect on the current government's approach to public participation.

## Community Development Values

This paper uses as the basis of its analysis the set of professional values that underpins community development practice, as laid out in the National Occupational Standards (NOSs) for Community Development (LLUK, 2009). Banks *et al* (2013: 144) suggest that practitioners need to exhibit these in an open and explicit manner in order to enhance the likelihood of successful outcomes in work with communities. The NOSs expand on these values to promote a wider understanding of their application and to ensure they are reflected in any activity described as community development practice (*op cit*: 7-9):

- **Equality & Anti-Discrimination** - challenging structural inequalities and discriminatory practices, recognising that people are not the same, but are all of equal worth and therefore entitled to the same degree of respect and acknowledgement.
- **Social Justice** - involves identifying and seeking to alleviate structural disadvantage and advocating strategies for overcoming exclusion, discrimination and inequality.
- **Collective Action** - supporting groups of people, increasing their knowledge, skills and confidence so they can develop an analysis of and identify and act on issues.

- **Community Empowerment** - supporting people to become critical, liberated and active participants, taking control over their lives, communities and environment.
- **Working & Learning Together** - enabling participants to learn from reflecting on their collective experiences, based on participatory and experiential processes.

Notions of power feature centrally in the community development values, especially equality and anti-discrimination, social justice and community empowerment, and effectively underpin and hold them all together (Ledwith, 2011). When assessing LSPs' policies, it should be possible to identify how closely they align with these values, which align closely with definitions of public participation.

## Public Participation

Public participation is the process by which individuals and groups affected by any proposed intervention are involved in the decision-making process relating to that intervention (IAPP, 2007a; IAIA, 2006). **Political participation** – “taking part in the processes of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies” (Parry, Moyser & Day, 1992: 16) – differs from **developmental participation**: “collective efforts to increase and exercise control over resources and institutions on the part of groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from control” (Stiefel & Wolfe, 1994: 5). **Citizen participation** is “about power and its exercise by different social actors in the spaces created for the interaction between citizens and local authorities” (Gaventa & Valderama, 1999: 7). It is a “categorical term for citizen power ... the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programmes are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parcelled out” (Arnstein, 1969: 216).

Public participation is perceived increasingly as a ‘right’ of citizenship, both locally and at national / international levels (Cornwall, 2002: 2), with communities of interest effectively demanding the right to be included in the decision-making process (Gilchrist, 2004: 17). Three key drivers of the recent focus on public participation in decision-making have been identified. Firstly, the ‘**democratic deficit**’ is evidenced by a decline in public participation in traditional decision-making processes (Electoral Commission, 2005), and other activities associated with political participation, (Power Inquiry, 2006; Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2004). As well as a decline in voter turnout at elections, it includes a lack of trust in political institutions and a fall in membership of political parties and trades unions (Prendergast, 2008; Bender, 2003; Barber, 1984). Furthermore, considerable challenges face **civil society**. While the scale of voluntary and community sector (VCS) remains substantial (870,000 formal civil society associations with £210 billion assets), Carnegie Trust (2010) identifies a blurring of values in pursuit of financial security, increased inequality between VCS organisations and weakened influence in key policy areas. **Citizen action** is less clear-cut, as recent mass demonstrations demonstrate citizens’ commitment to challenge governments; whose resulting action has demonstrated an intransigence on the part of the political classes, unwilling to respond to the concerns expressed by their citizenry. For example (Figure 2), the UK government invaded Iraq despite the largest demonstration in British history; the Egyptian military overthrew the

democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood government; and Russia annexed Crimea, after demonstrations in Ukraine resulted in a change in government.

**Figure 1: State Response to Citizen Action**



Politicians appear to believe that the seeming downward spiral of participation – which undermines the effectiveness of representative institutions in managing public affairs – reflects disengagement, disinterest and apathy on the part of the populace. This results in a fragmented and isolated social life, a culture of distrust and hierarchical political structures. Several writers (e.g. Bang, 2009; Li & Marsh, 2008; Norris, 2007) challenge this perspective, citing the emergence of new forms of public participation – such as single-issue citizen activism and web-based organizing – as contradictory evidence. They emphasise the importance of power relations, citing alienation as a more likely cause of the decline in public participation (Marsh, O’Toole & Jones, 2006). They also suggest that the increased complexity of governance in a globalised and individualised system has resulted in some of the weakest and most vulnerable groups and individuals being excluded from the decision-making process by powerful politicians, bureaucrats and corporatist interests (e.g. Bang, 2004: 4). Consequently, new forms of public participation outside the conventional arenas have emerged, reflecting participants’ identities and project politics, and state institutions accept that the complexity of the policy arena requires a broader range of stakeholders to engage more directly in the policy process (Keeley & Scoones, 1999: 29). These include ‘virtual’ or electronic forums for campaigning (examples in Figure 2).

**Figure 2: E-Participation Platforms**



More fluid boundaries have emerged between loose networks, coalitions and decentralised organisational structures, and there is an increasing focus on achieving social change through direct action and community-building (Norris, 2007: 638-9). People engage in issues that affect them directly, seeing action as a more effective form of participation than voting (Kane et al, 2009: 123). This ‘micro-political’ participation allows individuals to influence people with responsibility for implementing specific policies that impact on their own lives, as opposed to engaging

in policy-making processes at a more remote level (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2004: 113). A significant proportion of the population is engaged in some form of civic activism (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2003: 465), with an increased emphasis on self-actualisation identified as a motivation for participation in these less formal processes, with young people in particular motivated more by individual purpose than obligations to government (Brooks, 2009: 2.3).

### Values of Public Participation

Cornwall (2000: 77) distinguishes between ‘induced’ and ‘invited’ participation and a form of citizen participation through which “people come to create their own spaces and enact their own strategies for change”. Oakley (1995) views participation as either a developmental process (undertaken as an end in itself), or an instrumental process (aiming to affect the outcome and quality of decisions made). This distinction represents a choice between utilitarian and empowerment models (Morgan, 2001: 221; Nelson & Wright, 1995: 1). As summarised in Figure 3: in the utilitarian model, an agency may promote public participation to achieve its stated aims more efficiently, effectively or cheaply; in the empowerment model, communities promote public participation as an end in itself, using it as a tool to diagnose their needs and control their own development.

**Figure 3: Public Participation as a Means or an End**

	Public Participation as:	
	A means	An end
Alternative moniker	Instrumental Participation	Transformational Participation
	Utilitarian model	Empowerment model
Rationale	Pragmatic	Normative
Basis of interaction between community and agency	Consultative, Collaborative	Collegial
Characterisation of interactions	Community participates in agency’s agenda	Agency addresses community’s priorities
Goal	Efficiency	Empowerment

(Adapted from Nelson & Wright, 1995)

These distinctions reveal how decisions about the intended focus of participation are likely to be informed by values. For example, relating public participation in decision-making to notions of justice, Sen argues that it should be understood as a “constitutive part of the ends of development” (1999: 291). The International Association for Public Participation identifies seven core values for use in implementation of public participation processes (Figure 4). Aiming to ensure decisions better reflect the interests and concerns of potentially affected people, these correspond closely with the community development values.

**Figure 4: Core Values of Public Participation**

- 1 Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
- 2 Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.

- 3 Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
  - 4 Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
  - 5 Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
  - 6 Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
  - 7 Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.
- (IAPP, 2007b)

### **Public Participation & New Labour Policy**

New Labour's public participation policy sought to reconfigure the roles and relationships of citizens, communities and government (Prior, 2005: 357), and embraced community as the locus of many reforms (Imrie & Raco, 2003: 5), seeing it as "a natural and desirable social formation, based on the diminution of difference and conflict and the inculcation of shared values" (*ibid*: 8). The New Labour government sought to challenge the failings of the prevailing neo-liberal political hegemony, introducing policies that rejected the view that societies can flourish simply by promoting 'competitive individualism' and unfettered private enterprise (Driver & Martell, 1997). They highlighted roles in shaping society both for government and individuals based on values of co-operation and collaboration to contain the excesses of the market system, believing that a society of individuals recognising the extent to which they are inter-dependent is likely to be more effective than one in which they simply seek to assert their individual rights and preferences. This perspective incorporates implied ethical and explicit moral imperatives, inasmuch as community must be accepted as a 'good thing', in which people should subscribe to a clearly defined set of shared values (*ibid*: 35). However, while making repeated reference to 'values', New Labour failed to encourage people to subscribe fully to them, due to the vagueness of their exposition of these values, and because they were imposed, rather than emerging from a dialogue with the citizenry (Hall, 1998: 11). This reflects the fact that New Labour governments saw it as their role to lead the process of fostering community in society, through exhortation, symbolic action and legislation (Driver & Martell, 2000: 159).

'Community' remained the cornerstone of New Labour policies throughout their tenure, Tony Blair asserting that community is "the governing idea of modern social democracy" (2001: 5). Community was conceived as being a fundamental component in addressing social problems, promoted as a "practical means of furthering the social and material refurbishment of neighbourhoods, towns and larger local areas" (Giddens, 1998: 79). Reflecting the view that people have the "moral power of personal responsibility for ourselves and each other" (Blair, 1996: 3), New Labour policy promoted a view of the citizen as an individual with rights and responsibilities, one of which is to contribute to the welfare and governance of their community (Pratchett, 1999: 7). Citizens were viewed as having a responsibility to exercise individual choice and participate in collective decisions (Jordan, 1999: 119); meanwhile, communities were characterised as instruments of policy delivery,

particularly in disadvantaged areas, encompassing latent values that government programmes could revive or re-define (Fremaux, 2005: 271).

New Labour conceived public participation as part of a fundamental re-modelling of the public sector, requiring a re-negotiation of the relationship between the state and its citizenry, and a shift in emphasis from the individual to communities (DETR, 1998). While aiming to re-engage people isolated by an increasingly individuated society, generating enhanced accountability and re-kindling the urge to participate in democratic institutions, policy also sought to draw on the knowledge, ideas and experience of the public to inform change in the nature and quality of services (Martin, 2009; Pratchett, 1999). Policy also acknowledged that different initiatives would be undermined if public participation focussed only on one of these stated purposes while overlooking others (ODPM, 2002a: 3).

### **Local Strategic Partnerships**

The Local Government Act 2000 (DETR, 2000a) required local authorities and local agencies to prepare Community Strategies, to promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their areas. Proposals for the establishment of formal partnerships to oversee this work and neighbourhood renewal recommended that LSPs adopt a collaborative approach to addressing inequalities between areas within each locality, bringing together the public, private, voluntary and community sectors to do this (DETR, 2000b).

Government guidance (DETR, 2000c) urged local authorities to ground the Community Strategy in the views and expectations of individuals, groups and communities, putting local people at the heart of partnership working. Further guidance (DETR, 2001) emphasised the opportunities LSPs provided to focus on issues that matter to local people, and promote equity and inclusion. Involving local people was identified as a “vital” force for change, and LSPs were urged to adopt imaginative and flexible approaches to secure public participation, to improve service delivery and strengthen social inclusion, developing empowered communities. Additional guidance highlighted the need for LSPs to engage groups traditionally excluded and alienated from local decision-making processes (ODPM, 2002b: 10-11). The implicit commitment to community development values in these was made explicit in subsequent policy (DCLG, 2006a).

Other independently produced guidance (LGA, 2002, 2001; CDF/Urban Forum, 2001; CDF, 2000) suggested that LSPs should create a culture and dialogue in which the contribution of the community is valued, that they support local community groups in raising their capacity, and that local people challenge LSPs about their participative structures. Subsequent policy included a clear expectation that the third sector would be actively involved in shaping the local area (DCLG, 2006b), and introduced a duty to involve the local community (i.e. inform, consult or involve representatives of local people) in the exercise of LSPs’ functions (DCLG, 2007a). Proposals to strengthen LSPs’ role included the statement of a set of principles of representation of the VCS, which aimed specifically to ensure greater accountability, equality and openness in their work (DCLG, 2007b).



LSP evaluations identified a lack of clarity about LSPs' different communities, proposing the following as guiding principles for public participation: participants' ownership, inclusivity, a commitment to change and support, training and development for community members (ODPM, 2004a; 2004b). They highlighted the continued existence of barriers to community engagement, particularly to young people and BME communities, including overly complex structures, the imposition of externally determined priorities and excessive time lags between decisions and action.

### Researching LSPs in Yorkshire & the Humber

Research was conducted in all 22 LSPs in the Yorkshire & Humber region, to explore the translation of New Labour's public participation policies into practice. This research explored the extent to which LSP practice reflected theoretical perspectives and the community development values. This sample of LSPs included: rural and urban areas; locales served by District and County or Unitary / Metropolitan Councils; the full range of economic conditions, from among the poorest neighbourhoods to some of the wealthiest in the country; boroughs and constituencies represented / controlled by all major political parties. This sampling sought to allow for extrapolation of the findings to LSPs throughout the country displaying similar characteristics. One LSP was selected as a case study, allowing for themes emerging from the wider sample to be explored in more detail and to generate greater depth of understanding of processes.

An analytical framework (Figure 5) was devised to allow for comparison between the LSPs, and to help in generating conclusions about general patterns and trends. This built on previous typologies characterising community development practice (Toomey, 2011; Popple, 1995; Glen, 1993), allowing for distinctions to be drawn between radical, consensual, reformist and service management approaches to public participation. Practice in each LSP was assessed against this framework, and each was ascribed to one of these four elements of the typology.

**Figure 5: Outline Analytical Framework**

LSP:		Element of Model				
		Radical	Consensual	Reformist	Managerial	
Characteristics	Context	Community Models, Relationships & Strategies				
		Governance				
	Approach	Community Empowerment				
		Community Capacity				
	Participation	Focus				
		Initiation				
		Form				

	<b>Roles</b>	Practitioner Role				
		Community Role				
	<b>Values</b>	Political				
		Professional				
		Community Development				
<b>Overall Category:</b>						

A key part of this analysis considered the extent to which the community development values were implemented, and how these had helped to shape each LSP's approach to public participation. While all five of the values were likely to be in evidence to some extent in the practice of all LSPs, it was felt likely that greater weight would be given to one or more of the values depending on which element of the typology prevails (Figure 6).

Where the radical model is dominant, practice may be informed by belief in the need for disadvantaged groups and communities to overcome institutional barriers to individuals and communities fulfilling their potential. The aim of public participation would be community empowerment, ultimately enabling them to overcome injustices and oppression, and LSPs would recognise the need to support and respond to collective action within communities. If the consensual model were dominant, LSPs practice might focus on seeking out common priorities, with agencies and communities working with and learning from one another to pursue the common good, characterised here as social justice. While LSPs operating with the reformist model in the ascendancy use the language of social justice, their practice is more likely to focus on equality of opportunity than of outcome. Given the focus on service-specific issues and the involvement of individuals more often than groups to identify ways to improve service delivery, LSPs where the service management model dominates would only specifically promote the working and learning together value.

**Figure 6: Community Development Values**

<b>Radical</b>	<b>Consensual</b>	<b>Reformist</b>	<b>Service Management</b>
Collective Action Community Empowerment	Working & Learning Together Social Justice	Equality & Anti- Discrimination	Working & Learning Together
Equity and social justice over efficiency and effectiveness		Efficiency and effectiveness over equity and social justice	

### **Key Findings**

The following selected findings are presented as a representation of how effective LSPs were in implementing policy and guidance on public participation, and the

extent to which this work was informed by political and professional values, and – specifically – those of the community development approach.

Overall, there was significant evidence of local communities participating in consultations on the development of Community Strategies and other high level strategies. Most LSPs had also established complex structures to facilitate the participation in decision-making of representatives of the community sector. In many cases, too, local authorities and other partners in the LSP employed staff to support communities' participation in local service planning processes, or / and in overseeing implementation of projects at a local scale. However, in all cases, local people expressed concern that their input had little or no impact on the key decisions affecting their communities, feeling that much of their effort was wasted. In several cases, community representatives on LSP structures complained that their presence was merely tolerated, and that they felt their participation was tokenistic at best and – in many cases – an opportunity for them to be manipulated by partners.

A fundamental weakness in the approach of all LSPs to promoting and facilitating public participation was their unwillingness to cede any power – over decisions or resources – to local communities. In particular, local authority personnel (both officers and elected members) demonstrated a strong reluctance to facilitate genuine community empowerment. Many officers claimed they had a duty to act objectively and draw on their professional expertise to plan and manage services on behalf of their citizens (who they asserted prefer bureaucrats to make these decisions on their behalf). Likewise, Councillors decried the process of promoting public participation as anti-democratic, asserting that they knew their community better than anyone, particularly self-selecting individuals with vested interests or 'axes to grind'.

A third of Community Strategies focused on neighbourhood renewal, aiming explicitly to 'narrow the gap' between the most deprived communities and their more affluent neighbours. Hence, public participation here – as in most other LSPs – was based on a deficit model, focusing on engaging people from more disadvantaged areas.

Only one LSP had a 'public participation strategy', although five LSPs were developing one. A further six LSPs use their local authority's policy to guide work in this area, with two more planning to do so once the authority completed work on their policy. In one case, devising additional stand-alone strategies was said to be contrary to their stated intention of minimising bureaucracy and limiting the LSP's area of responsibility to producing a Community Strategy.

LSP Managers and Co-ordinators highlighted the fact that consideration of values influences LSPs' approach to identifying and approaching their community. In particular, there appears to have been considerable difficulty in balancing the 'rights versus responsibilities' dichotomy. Half of LSP's stated aims reflected more closely the former, while the policy agenda they were required to implement pushed the latter. They also ranked the community development values in order of importance ascribed to them by their LSP. Although the results indicate that LSPs place most emphasis on community empowerment, it is clear from other responses that their practice is not designed to bring about this result. One explanation for this might be that reference to community empowerment features to such an extent in policy and

guidance that – when presented with this choice in the survey – respondents recognised the term, without necessarily fully appreciating the meaning (even though a definition was provided). It is possible that a similar phenomenon explains the priority given by five respondents to social justice in this survey, when there is little evidence to corroborate these claims elsewhere. Equality and anti-discrimination were identified as important by all those who responded to this question, which corresponds with the stated goals in many of the Community Strategies. While it is perhaps unsurprising that eight respondents feel that collective action is neither important nor unimportant to their LSP, the same rating for working and learning together is perhaps more unexpected. With the majority of Community Strategies committing their LSP to working with communities to identify common priorities, one might have expected for this value to be rated as more important. Although they were not all ranked by all respondents, it is interesting to note that nobody felt that any of the community development values are unimportant or contrary to their LSP's approach.

### **Public Participation under the Con-Dem Coalition**

After the 2010 general election, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government stated its commitment to disperse power more widely (Cabinet Office, 2010: 7). The coalition sought to reform the relationship between citizens and the state, creating a '*Big Society*' to engender greater personal, professional and civic responsibility so that social issues are addressed by the communities they affect, and problems resolved by social action instead of state intervention. In this vision, the role of the state is to stimulate social action, helping every adult citizen participate in an active neighbourhood group (Conservative Party, 2010a), thereby fostering and supporting a new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy and social action (Cameron, 2010a). The *Big Society* is to be brought about by giving more power to communities (e.g. in reform of the planning system, or in 'saving' threatened local services), and promoting / supporting more active involvement in local volunteering. As with New Labour, the objectives of reforms have been grouped under three themes (Cabinet Office, 2010; Conservative Party, 2010b): enhanced social action (or 'mass engagement'), reformed public services, and community empowerment. The rationale is to shift power, emphasising the government's belief that "when people are given the freedom to take responsibility, they start achieving things on their own and they're possessed with new dynamism" (Cameron, 2010b).

The *Big Society* is presented as a rethinking of the nature of society from first principles, an approach to policy making that emphasises "the three-way relation of enabling state, active individual and linking institution" (Norman, 2010: 6-7). Also akin to New Labour's approach, these ambitions include an implicit commitment to partnership approaches and delivery models, with relationships between government and the community subject to radical change (Cameron, 2010c). A voluntary and community sector strategy (OCS, 2010) details government plans to give local communities the right to buy or bid to run community assets, and requires public service commissioning to allow charities to bid for public contracts. The Localism Act and associated guidance outlines six 'essential actions' to transfer power from the state to local communities (DCLG, 2011): reduce bureaucracy, empower communities, increase local control of public finance, diversify the supply of public services, increase public scrutiny, and strengthen accountability to local people.

The *Big Society* agenda could be perceived as a continuation of New Labour's public participation policies. McCabe (2010: 5) reports a shift in tone, however, in the implementation of these policies, from voluntarism under New Labour to 'aspirational compulsion' under the coalition government's proposals. Similarly, Scott (2011: 20) notes the irony that the *Big Society* agenda is being implemented in a top-down manner by the government, when the stated intention is to facilitate bottom-up, community-led action. At the same time, the language accompanying announcements on the *Big Society* reflects a shift in values, and disguises a deliberate attempt to co-opt "the language of transformational development" (McCabe, 2010: 6-7). For example, the vague notion of 'fairness' is used in place of social justice, while 'social action' has replaced 'community engagement'. Social justice features in ongoing critique of the *Big Society* agenda (e.g. Coote, 2010; NEF, 2010), with concerns expressed that the policy is most likely to further disadvantage people already excluded from society, as it remains unclear about how power will be transferred between different groups.

The *Big Society* vision appears consistent with community development practice, recognising that everyone has assets (not just problems), and encouraging citizens' involvement / action, to strengthen social networks and to use local knowledge to get better results (NEF, 2010). However, not everyone will be able to benefit from the *Big Society*, as participation relies on individuals and communities having sufficient capacity, meaning that benefits will not be distributed equally, thereby having a negative impact on social justice, equality and cohesion. Partnership features at the heart of recommendations about how the *Big Society* agenda should be implemented. Coote (2010) asserts that – in contributing towards the *Big Society*'s goals – partnerships should moderate the relationship between citizens and government, requiring power and responsibility to be shared on an open and equal basis between professionals and intended beneficiaries, to promote social justice and to narrow inequalities.

## Conclusions

There appears to be a close relationship between public participation theory and the stated aims of / the values subscribed to by community development practitioners. Indeed, the relevance of the community development approach in helping to achieve New Labour's policy goals was articulated explicitly by them, and their public participation guidance for LSPs drew heavily on community development theory and practice. However, their policy guidance and practice promoted an instrumental form of participation, failing to grasp the opportunity to support public participation as a developmental process.

The research has demonstrated that the practice of exercising and sharing power by key stakeholders – specifically local authorities – is central to considerations of public participation. The extent to which individuals believe they can exert power and influence over decision-making has affected the way in which they participate in the public realm, and goes some way to explaining the increase in direct citizen action. The prevalence of these forms of citizen participation in specific types of activity seems to prevail over traditional political participation; while the work of LSPs seems to have been located in the realm of developmental participation.

LSPs have faltered in their translation of government public participation policy, failing to translate their stated commitment to transferring power from the state to its citizenry, and potentially further alienating communities from the democratic process this policy was intended to revitalize. In particular, their reluctance to cede power to communities demonstrates state agencies' inability to accommodate the changes needed if local people are to be afforded a genuine opportunity to shape their own destinies. Even where the VCS demonstrated its ability to engage in meaningful dialogue with local stakeholder agencies, and with structures established to facilitate their input, it appears that they were able to make very little impact on the development of local policies and services. Resources to support the development of community capacity to participate were not matched by changes in decision-making processes, leading to frustration on their part as the results of their inclusive processes were often ignored when decisions were taken by LSPs or individual agencies.

Despite having access to ample evidence (based on New Labour's experience) to help shape their own public participation policy, it appears that the coalition government has achieved even less than their predecessors in this area of policy. The stated aims of their *Big Society* agenda have yet to be achieved, as public service reforms seems to have created more opportunities for the private sector to deliver the kinds of services it was suggested could be provided by VCS organisations. The impact of cuts in resources to support public participation in local partnerships and the downgrading of LSPs and other local governance structures means that communities are even more disadvantaged in this regard than they were under New Labour.

Community development, and the values it espouses, would appear to offer a legitimate means of achieving the stated goals of public participation, and could be said to be as important now as it was in 1997, as the symptoms their policies (and those of the coalition government) sought to address continue to prevail. The process of disaffection and alienation from the political system have been shown to be likely to continue as long as people feel disempowered, and the divide between the "haves" and "have-nots" (as Arnstein described them) persists and widens.

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