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Diagnosing and Remediating the Failings of Official Participation Schemes: The CLEAR Framework

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*Drawing on extensive research, the article proposes a diagnostic tool for assessing official schemes to encourage participation and discusses remedial measures that might be taken to tackle problems. According to the CLEAR framework, people participate when they **can**: when they have the resources necessary to make their argument. People participate when they feel part of something: they **like** to participate because it is central to their sense of identity. They participate when they are **enabled** to do so by an infrastructure of civic networks and organisations. People participate when they are directly **asked** for their opinion. Finally, people participate when they experience the system they are seeking to influence as **responsive**.*

Introduction

This article outlines an investigative audit of the practice of public authorities in engaging their citizens in decision making and consultative processes at the local level. This investigative tool aims to help policy makers and practitioners understand what may block and what might drive citizen participation in their communities, thereby helping them to enhance citizen engagement. It is investigative rather than judgemental. The aim is to enable policy makers and practitioners to understand the factors that support and, more importantly, hold back engagement with their communities.

The two opening sections discuss the key themes of the article. The first section considers why a strong dialogue between elected representatives and citizens is a vital element in renewing and sustaining democracy in the twenty-first century. The second section outlines the growth in official attempts to engage citizens in decision making, drawing on the UK experience at the local level.

The third and central section of the article establishes the key elements of the investigative audit. Drawing on extensive research, the article proposes a diagnostic tool for assessing official schemes to encourage participation and discusses, in outline, remedial measures that might be taken to tackle problems.¹ The tool is based on the argument that citizens engage depending upon the resources they have access to, the extent to which they feel engaged in a wider community, whether they are helped to participate by supportive organisations, if they are mobilised and if they experience

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(or anticipate) a response. The framework is summarised by the acronym CLEAR. The concluding section of the article reviews the challenge of applying the framework in practice and considers the future prospects for officially sponsored participation initiatives.

Democracy and engagement

Some theorists take a 'realist' view of democracy and do not expect large-scale participation beyond voting. It is up to our leaders and representatives to make decisions, once we have chosen them (Schumpeter, 1943). This very narrow view of democracy is not widely held amongst academics and theorists of democracy today. As Saward (2003) shows, the narrative of democracy has moved towards a more participative interpretation. Citizen engagement has become central to the very rationale of democratic politics in the eyes of most observers. Critics argue that realists have a profound distrust of their fellow men and women and, as a result, have produced a very limited vision of democracy. A more positive view of citizens and what they can achieve leads to a stronger commitment to participation. Such 'strong democracy' enables people to see beyond their immediate self-interest and engage in collective decision making that is transformative and positive (Barber, 1984). Democracy should be more than a protective device against leaders who take the wrong decisions, it should be about providing opportunities for ordinary citizens to get involved and engaged.

The positive case for activism does not rest only upon the normative position that democracy provides a vehicle for self expression. There are also practical arguments in favour of activism, given the complexity of our governance systems and the prospect that participation could lead to more effective learning and better decisions (Newman, 2001). The argument is that a properly organised democracy increases our capacity to address fundamental social problems. It might have been appropriate to limit democracy to a protective role when government itself was similarly restricted. However, with the rise of welfare and other public spending to between a third and a half of the wealth of nations, government is no longer an institution that can be separated off: it is *de facto* a part of every aspect of our lives. We need therefore a more extended capacity to debate and exchange with government than that afforded by the simple act of voting. At the same time, the state is no longer a local or even a national institution; it also takes a supra national form of which the development of the EU is one of the strongest expressions in the world. We need a way of influencing those institutions that take decisions for us on the global terrain as well as at the national, regional, local and neighbourhood levels (as in Held's (1996) model of 'cosmopolitan democracy').

The key question becomes the appropriate form and role of democracy in this changed setting. The focus on engagement in modern democratic theory rests upon a conception of democracy as a process of continuous exchange between governors and governed. Democracy helps to provide solutions by enabling us to exchange and learn from one another. As the late Paul Hirst (2000: 27) argues: 'Democracy in this sense is about government by information exchange and consent, where organized publics have the means to conduct a dialogue with government and thus hold it to account.' Confirming the democratic credentials of governance requires the extension of rights to consultation to the widest possible range of issues and the construction of a dialogue that allows space for the involvement of the disorganized many as well as the organised few.

In a democratic system the participation of all (all of the time) is not required; rather its defining characteristic is its openness to all. The value of openness does not require or assume large-scale and continuous direct participation. It rests its case on the richness of democratic practice and the availability of options for extending participation. These options should operate without making overwhelming time demands and in a way that enhances the broad representativeness of those involved. Activism should not be regarded with suspicion but recognised as a key driver and value of democracy. Engagement enables people to achieve a fuller expression of their interests by debating and sharing ideas with others. It also enables people to come to terms with the complexities and challenges of the modern government. Engagement is not something to be afraid of; it is something for democrats to welcome.

At the local level, the main focus of democracy is provided by its formal and elected representatives, but there is a challenge in ensuring that those representatives draw upon the insights and understandings of a wide range of citizens. Many people prefer to spend their time on non-political activities. Citizens may well decide, on reasonable grounds, not to avail themselves of opportunities to participate, believing that their interests are already well-protected (or at least not threatened). In many instances, when 'normal' representative politics is working, further public participation may be unnecessary. On other occasions, participation may be blocked because citizens are not given, or are not able to take advantage of, the opportunities: they may face social and economic constraints that limit their time and capacity for political activity. In looking beyond democratic theory to the practice of politics, the reasons behind engagement and non-engagement remain something of a puzzle. When is non-involvement down to contentment and when does it reflect processes of exclusion? The audit approach developed in this paper is about enabling public authorities to test their capacity to deliver participation options to citizens that want to take them up.

The rise of officially sponsored participation

There has been a considerable growth in the range of officially sponsored participation schemes. As the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee (2001: paras. 75–78) puts it:

Our broadest conclusion from the very wide range of evidence sessions that we have held is that the period since the middle 1990s has seen an explosion of interest in involving the public more frequently, more extensively and in much more diverse ways in the conduct of decision-making within the public services ... Much of the progress in public participation methods has come and will continue to come at the local level.

The Committee recommends a continuing period of experimentation. What is required is a search for different ways of engaging citizens.

In earlier work, we have identified five main types of officially sponsored participation (Lowndes *et al.*, 2001a):

- *Consumerist methods* – forms of participation that are primarily customer-oriented in their purpose and are mainly concerned with aspects of service delivery. Key examples include complaints/suggestions schemes and service satisfaction surveys.

- *Traditional methods* – enjoying a long history of use in local government, such methods include public meetings, co-option of citizens on to local authority committees, and consultation documents sent out for comment.
- *Forums* – activities which bring together on a regular basis the users of a particular service, residents of an area, individuals concerned with specific issues (for example, community safety) or those with a shared background or interest (for example, minority ethnic groups). Key examples include neighbourhood committees or forums for young people or for black and ethnic minority citizens.
- *Consultative innovations* – new approaches to the established principle of consultation, aimed at engaging citizens on particular issues (rather than in a sustained dialogue), e.g. interactive websites, focus groups, citizens' panels and referendums.
- *Deliberative innovations* – new methods that encourage citizens to reflect upon and discuss issues affecting them and their communities, for instance through citizens' juries, visioning exercise, community planning schemes and issue forums.

The extent to which such methods are used by UK local authorities is evident from two census surveys in 1998 and 2002 (Lowndes *et al.*, 2001a and b; Birch, 2002). Traditional and consumerist methods have a strong showing in both periods. Consulting the public through public meetings and consultation documents is close to universal local authority practice. Consumerist techniques such as service satisfaction surveys and complaints/suggestion schemes have also become commonplace. Indeed when asked if their authority had ever used these techniques, 98 per cent had used service satisfaction surveys, 94 per cent had used complaints schemes and 93 per cent had used public meetings and consultation documents (Birch, 2002: 17). The widespread use of these techniques reflects their relatively low cost in organisation and resources and the straightforward way in which they are understood and valued by both local authorities and many members of the public. Traditional techniques saw relatively steady growth in their use by local authorities from 1990, with question and answer sessions rising from a very low base to being used by half of all councils by 1997. Consumerist techniques appear to have taken off from the early to mid 1990s, achieving saturation coverage in local government (Birch, 2002: 14–15).

Both surveys show the wide use of forums in which issues can be thrashed out and debated. There is no strong pattern of growth or decline in these approaches between 1997 and 2001, but there is evidence of their extensive use. For example, in 2001 three quarters of authorities had used service user forums and two thirds had engaged citizens through neighbourhood or area forums. Where there is much more spectacular evidence of growth is in the use of some of deliberative methods and innovative approaches to consultation. Interactive websites, focus groups, citizens' panels, community planning and visioning exercises all saw sharp increases in use between 1997 and 2001. Before 1997 there were only a handful of local authorities using these techniques, but their numbers have risen substantially (Birch, 2002: 16). In the 2001 survey, 75 per cent of local authorities had used citizen panels, 91 per cent focus groups, 55 per cent visioning exercises, 52 per cent interactive web sites and 73 per cent community planning methods (Birch, 2002: 17).

Despite the relatively high level of attention they have attracted, two techniques remain unusual within the participation armoury. Between 1997 and 2002, only 21 per cent of local councils had used a referendum and 16 per cent a citizens' jury. Referendums

have been required in councils considering the introduction of a directly elected mayor (see Stoker, 2004); they have also been used to advise local authorities on the setting of their budgets (Milton Keynes, Bristol and Croydon). Referendums are expensive to run and generally reserved for consultation over major issues. Citizens' juries have probably not delivered on the promise held out for them by early advocates. There are doubts about costs and also, more importantly, concerning the representativeness of jurors' views and the openness of the process to manipulation (Smith and Wales, 2000).

What is clear is that public authorities now do participate to a greater degree than ever before (see the comprehensive review provided by Smith, 2005). But do they know what they are doing? Do they understand what drives participation and what is likely to turn citizens off? It appears that public authorities have developed a much wider range of consultation techniques and forms of engagement. There remains a considerable challenge around making these approaches work effectively.

Developing an audit tool

Some approaches offer an audit of democracy which assesses achievements against benchmark standards (see, for example, Beetham and Weir, 1999). They are judgemental in approach. In particular, when auditing democratic governance they promote key normative principles and try to judge how far systems of governance live up to those principles. These approaches provide useful, time-specific, scorecard assessments of the general state of democratic governance in a country, although they can also suffer from the limited reliability of the evidence they use in the auditing process. They offer only an incomplete understanding of the underlying causal connections between particular institutional devices and desired normative outcomes. From a reformer's standpoint, these kinds of audits can help understanding of what more needs to be done, but they provide little insight into how to do it.

The diagnostic tool offered here is narrower in focus: it is concerned with citizen participation rather than democracy in general. But it seeks a deeper understanding of the causal factors driving or inhibiting citizen participation. As such, it aims to provide a greater degree of support for policy makers and practitioners trying to make positive changes to their practice of citizen consultation and engagement. The tool takes a diagnostic stance rather than a judgemental approach. The investigative approach that we advocate is about understanding the range of ways in which the overall goal of greater citizen engagement might be promoted. It gives public authorities the opportunity to analyse their own particular, context-specific approach to engaging citizens – and the ways in which it might be improved.

The tool focuses upon officially sponsored participation initiatives. At the same time, however, the tool places an emphasis on understanding participation from the citizen's perspective: what needs to be in place for citizens to participate. In this respect it is a bottom-up tool. It is important for policy makers to understand what citizens think about their participation initiatives and how they might be developed or improved. The diagnostic tool gives public bodies a way of looking at their initiatives from the perspective and position of citizens.

The diagnostic tool is based upon the CLEAR model (see Table 1). It offers public authorities an investigative method for understanding where the strengths and weaknesses

Table 1 Factors promoting participation: it's CLEAR

Key factor	How it works	Policy targets
Can do	The individual resources that people have to mobilise and organise (speaking, writing and technical skills, and the confidence to use them) make a difference	Capacity building, training and support of volunteers, mentoring, leadership development
Like to	To commit to participation requires an identification with the public entity that is the focus of engagement	Civil renewal, citizenship, community development, neighbourhood governance, social capital
Enabled to	The civic infrastructure of groups and umbrella organisations makes a difference because it creates or blocks an opportunity structure for participation	Investing in civic infrastructure and community networks, improving channels of communication via compacts
Asked to	Mobilising people into participation by asking for their input can make a big difference	Public participation schemes that are diverse and reflexive
Responded to	When asked people say they will participate if they are listened to (not necessarily agreed with) and able to see a response	A public policy system that shows a capacity to respond – through specific outcomes, ongoing learning and feedback

of their existing participation infrastructure are, and helps to identify policy responses that might be pursued.

The CLEAR model develops from the theoretical and empirical insights of a large body of research into participation. It argues that participation is most effective where citizens:

- **Can do** – that is, have the resources and knowledge to participate;
- **Like to** – that is, have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation;
- **Enabled to** – that is, are provided with the opportunity for participation;
- **Asked to** – that is, are mobilised by official bodies or voluntary groups;
- **Responded to** – that is, see evidence that their views have been considered.

'**Can do**' refers to the socio-economic arguments that have traditionally dominated explanations for variations in local participation rates (Verba *et al.*, 1995; Pattie *et al.*, 2004). It is the argument that when people have the appropriate skills and resources they are more able to participate. These skills range from the ability and confidence to speak in public or write letters to the capacity to organise events and encourage others of similar mind to support initiatives. It also includes access to resources that facilitate such activities (resources ranging from photocopying facilities through to internet access and so on). These skills and resources are much more commonly found among the better educated and employed sections of the population, those of higher socio-economic status. This is why the lowest levels of participation (electoral and non-electoral) tend to be in the most deprived areas (Rallings and Thrasher, 2003; Lowndes *et al.*, 2006a).

Skills and resources for participation are not related only to income or social class. Some skills rest on an individual's resources: their education or more broadly their capacity for engagement. The facilities and capacities available in different communities are also important. It is possible for public, voluntary or community bodies to intervene to make up for socio-economic limitations in equipping citizens with the skills and resources for participation. Faith communities, for instance, have been found to provide opportunities for the development of civic skills among those who would otherwise be 'resource poor' (Verba *et al.*, 1995: 18; Lowndes and Chapman, 2005).

The 'can do' factor can be enhanced by capacity building efforts aimed at ensuring that citizens are given the support to develop the skills and resources needed to engage. In Britain, urban regeneration schemes (like New Deal for Communities) have invested heavily in capacity building, but faced challenges of geographical coverage and long-term sustainability – alongside the challenge of reaching the most excluded sections of the community. The Home Office's new national programme, 'ChangeUp', aims to coordinate such work across the voluntary and community sector, covering areas such as volunteering, leadership, mentoring, governance and financial management.² There is no guarantee, however, that skills developed in this way will catalyse participation in public decision making (such resources may be directed towards self-help efforts within communities). Other factors that drive participation need to be taken into account.

'*Like to*' refers to the importance of people's felt sense of community as a basis for engagement. The argument is that, if you feel a part of something, you are more willing to engage. Evidence from many studies confirms that where people feel a sense of togetherness or shared commitment they are more willing to participate (Etzioni, 1995; Tam, 1998). This concern for a sense of attachment to the political entity where participation is at stake has been given new impetus in recent years in relation to debates about social capital. Networks of formal and informal sociability are seen as creating norms of trust, mutuality and reciprocity, which enable people to work together and co-operate more effectively. High levels of social capital are, in turn, associated with more responsive democratic institutions: citizens expect, and representatives provide better government (Putnam, 1993, 2000).

Sense of community can be a strong motivator for participation. Conversely, an absence of identity or commitment to a locality can militate against participation. Again we argue that this factor can be addressed by policy makers and practitioners seeking to promote participation. The most important initial step in diagnosis is to gain an understanding of the sense of loyalties and identities held in various communities. It is not easy to manipulate or change these feelings held about the communities in which people live, but it is possible to give people the opportunity to believe that they are part of a wider civic identity built around the municipality. Recognising and promoting a sense of civic citizenship and solidarity can help develop a positive environment for community engagement. Such is the intention of policies directed at 'civil renewal', which focus upon citizenship education, community development and the engagement of activists and leaders in partnerships for governance and service delivery. Less ambitiously, public policy makers can at least sign up to the 'precautionary principle', by establishing that interventions will not actually *damage* stocks of social capital – as has so often been the case in the past (in urban development, school and hospital reorganisation, land-use planning, etc.).

It is possible that, even if people feel partly engaged with that wider community, they may still choose not to participate. As we argued earlier, people may let others do the participation work for them or feel that their elected representatives are doing a good job. As with other elements of the diagnostic tool, the choice about whether to participate remains with the individual citizen. The point of the diagnosis is to understand what needs to be done to ensure that citizens have a choice.

‘Enabled to’, as a factor driving participation, is premised on the research observation that most participation is facilitated through groups or organisations (Parry *et al.*, 1992; Pattie *et al.*, 2004). Political participation in isolation is more difficult and less sustainable (unless an individual is highly motivated) than the mutually reinforcing engagement of contact through groups and networks. Collective participation provides continuous reassurance and feedback that the cause of engagement is relevant and that participation is having some value. Indeed, for some, engagement in this manner is more important than the outcome of such participation. The existence of networks and groups that can support participation and provide a communication route to decision makers is vital to the vibrancy of participation.

Research shows the relevance of civic infrastructures to facilitating or inhibiting participation (Lowndes *et al.*, 2006a). Where the right range and variety of groups exist to organise participation, there tends to be more of it. Policy development is particularly important in this area, given the demise of many traditional bases for mobilisation, especially on a cross-issue basis (e.g. mass political parties, trades unions and traditional women’s organisations). There is an important role for local authorities in developing compacts with the voluntary and community sectors to ensure they have routes into decision making, and are not seen only as potential service contractors. Investing in the governance and capacity of ‘umbrella’ organisations is also important – councils of voluntary service, race equality councils, tenants’ federations and civic societies. Such bodies can enable groups that have a quite different primary purpose (e.g. sporting or cultural) to act as participation platforms on issues of concern to their members, and to provide points of access for decision makers seeking community opinion. A willingness on the part of decision makers to open multiple umbrellas is vital: no one body can be representative of civil society as a whole. Support to specialist community networks that engage marginalised groups is of particular importance.

‘Asked to’ reflects the finding of much research that mobilisation matters. People tend to become engaged more often and more regularly when they are asked to engage. Research shows that people’s readiness to participate often depends upon whether or not they are approached and how they are approached (Verba *et al.*, 1995). Mobilisation can come from a range of sources but the most powerful form is when those responsible for a decision ask others to engage with them in making the decision. Case studies have demonstrated how open political and managerial systems in local municipalities can also have a significant effect by extending a variety of invitations to participate to their citizens (Lowndes *et al.*, 2006b).

The variety of participation options for engagement is important because some people are more comfortable with some forms of engagement such as a public meeting, while others would prefer, for example, to engage through on-line discussions. Some people want to talk about the experiences of their community or neighbourhood, while others want to engage based on their knowledge of a particular service as a user. Rather than seeking ‘balance’ or ‘representativeness’ within every participation exercise, public bodies

need a broad repertoire of approaches to reach different citizen groups (Lowndes *et al.*, 2001a: 453).

The nature of the 'ask' is also important (IPPR, 2004). Participation can be mobilised by the use of incentives (e.g. honoraria), through establishing a sense of obligation (as in the case of jury duty), or by offering bargains/exchanges (where participation is accompanied by investment). The focus of the 'ask' is also important. It could be directed at a particular neighbourhood or a larger cross-authority population. The sustainability of participation is relevant: can the 'ask' be sustained and will citizens keep responding? Who is being asked is another issue. There is a dilemma between developing 'expert citizens' and rotating/sampling involvement to get at 'ordinary citizens'. The 'asked to' factor proposes that municipalities critically review the range and the repertoire of their initiatives and seek to build a capacity for reflexivity and learning into their participation strategy.

'Responded to' captures the idea that for people to participate on a sustainable basis they have to believe that their involvement is making a difference. Research shows that one of the biggest deterrents for participation is citizens' perception – or previous experience – of a lack of response (Lowndes *et al.*, 2001a: 452–453; Audit Commission, 1999). For people to participate they have to believe that they are going to be listened to and, if not always agreed with, at least convinced that their view has been taken into account. The 'responded to' factor is simultaneously the most obvious but also the most difficult factor in enhancing public participation. But it is also the factor most open to influence by public policy makers. Leadership and decision making arrangements – in political and managerial domains – play an important role in determining whether groups of citizens are able to gain access to those with power, whether decision makers have a capacity to respond and whether certain groups are privileged over others in terms of the influence they exert (Maloney *et al.*, 2000; Lowndes and Wilson, 2001; Lowndes *et al.*, 2006a).

Meeting the challenge of the 'responded to' factor means asking public authorities how they weigh messages from various consultation or participation events against other inputs to the decision-making process. How are the different or conflicting views of various participants and stakeholders prioritised? Responsiveness is about ensuring feedback, which may not be positive – in the sense of accepting the dominant view from participants. Feedback involves explaining how the decision was made and the role of participation within that. Citizens need to learn to live with disappointment: participation will not always 'deliver' on immediate concerns, but remains important. Citizens' confidence in the participation process cannot be premised upon 'getting their own way'. Ideas of natural justice are important here: participation is necessary to ensure that citizens get their case heard, and that it receives impartial judgement. If something affects you, you should be able to make your case and have it listened to: but you cannot be guaranteed a positive outcome.

Conclusions

Our diagnostic tool enables policy makers to look at citizens and ask questions about their capacities, their sense of community and their civic organisations. It also asks them to examine their own organisational and decision-making structures and assess whether they have the qualities that allow them to listen to, and take account of, messages from citizen participation.

To apply the tool requires three stages of activity. The first involves refining the questions and challenges to be addressed in any particular setting. The second rests on a commitment to a multi-perspective evaluation of the state of citizen participation in the municipality (involving activist and non-activist citizens, community groups, politicians and public officials). The third involves coming to a judgement about priorities in terms of the factors that need to be addressed, and how.

We have passed the first flush of commitment to participation among public authorities. The CLEAR framework aims to enable policy makers and practitioners to reflect on their current practice and analyse the obstacles to engaging citizens and how they might be overcome. Our article offers a challenge to those that sponsor participation. Getting people to participate is not a simple task. There are blocks that stem from lack of capacity to participate or a lack of engagement with political organisations or issues. Long-term measures can address these blocks, but building community capacity or a sense of citizenship are not challenges from which policy makers can expect easy or quick results. Deep-seated structural factors are clearly at work in shaping people's resources and attitudes. But the behaviour of politicians and managers is also important – and here change is more straight-forwardly in the hands of policy makers. If we ask people to participate in a committed and consistent manner and respond effectively to their participative inputs, they are far more likely to engage.

Notes

1 The diagnostic tool offered here was developed out of research funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council under its Democracy and Participation Programme. The research examined the reasons behind local variations in levels of public participation, drawing on survey data for all local authorities and case studies of eight contrasting localities (Award L215252039). For more details see Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker (2006a and 2006b).

2 For more information see <http://communities.homeoffice.gov.uk/activecomms/sup-vcs/changeup>

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