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NID YW'R PAPUR YMA AR GAEL TRWY GYFRWNG Y GYMRAEG

The need for capacity building in communities

This is a high priority in Wales, given that so much of the country falls within the ESF Objective 1, to which so much funding has been committed, and in which so many hopes have been invested. With the accession of so many countries from Eastern Europe to the EC, it is unlikely that such a chance will come again.

A large proportion of the Welsh population lives in electoral wards which have been identified as suffering from "multiple deprivation" (education, health, employment and housing) and ESF funding is a huge opportunity to give these electoral divisions the chance to redress the disadvantages under which they live. These electoral divisions are often said to be "socially excluded" (a phrase to which we will return).

"Community Capacity Building", therefore would answer many needs – the need to improve the built environment, certainly. The need to improve educational achievement and health provision of and for all within these deprived areas. Above all, however, it seems to offer the possibility that people will take greater responsibility for the conditions in which they live and have a greater influence over the decision-making processes which affect them.

How do we define "communities"?

But what is, exactly, a "community"? And what is meant by "building capacity"? Unless those involved with the process have a *common understanding* (if not a working definition) of these terms, then it is only too likely that much of the effort and resources invested will be wasted. As an analogy, one might consider a building constructed by two teams, one using metric measurements and one using imperial, starting from different ends. There would be obvious gaps and overlaps in the finished structure and its soundness might be in doubt. Would the commissioning agent (in this case the European Social Fund) be satisfied with the result? And what about the people who had to live in it?

It sometimes seems that by "community" we mean only a group of people in one contiguous area – a ward, a housing estate or a village. Now this may have the *potential* to be a community, but we cannot

be sure that it is one at *now*. Physical proximity alone does not mean community.

A group of two thousand people in an airport lounge is not a community, because:

1. They are not committed to the area.
2. They have no formal means of interaction.
3. They are transient.
4. They share no common goal except to leave the lounge as soon as possible.

They may become a community (if only a temporary one) if:

1. Fog prevents departures and their flights are delayed for 24 hours.
2. The cafeterias run out of food.
3. The toilets back up.

The change is explained by *common purpose*, which is (in this case) improving the conditions of their imprisonment within the lounge. The mechanism by which this common purpose is discovered, and translated into action, is *communication* between the (would-be) passengers.

By considering this situation, we can see that without communication there can be no *community*. The ability of the community to achieve its aims (getting the cafeteria restocked and the toilets bearable) will depend on its powers of communication and organisation – which may be latent, but considerable, when the common purpose is discovered.

What is "capacity building"?

The *capacity* of the community – to change unpopular planning decisions, get improvements to school buildings, change anti-social behaviour by young people - depends on this communication. But if there is *no* communication, if the passengers are divided by mutually incomprehensible languages, dietary requirements or overt hostility (Rangers fans off to play Inter Milan while Celtic fans are off to play Real Madrid) this capacity – which is capacity to *improve their environment* will never be developed.

A group of people *to whom things are done* is not a community. A group of people *for whom things are done* might not be a community (the residents of a housing estate, for example). But a group of people which has identified and articulated its needs and which is participating in decision-making *is* a community. And this "community" is not necessarily defined only by geographical parameters (estate, village or ward). It can be extensive, widely separated even, but it remains a community if it can:

1. Identify its needs and aspirations (and prioritise them).
2. Articulate these needs and aspirations within the group and outside to other agencies.
3. Organise and allocate roles within the group according to abilities and experience.
4. Engage in a process of negotiation or co-operation with outside agencies to further these interests.

Outside the airport, we can imagine another group of people, the inhabitants of a small village, who are enraged by an announcement that the number of permitted number night flights is to be doubled.

The residents may of all ages, drawn from different social classes and different professions, but in this case they become a community. They might be (at the beginning) a *single-issue* community, but they have a common goal and will then organise to achieve it (driving out drugs, reducing through traffic, getting speed cameral outside the school). If the goal is achieved – and even more if it is not - then the community may dissolve, although hopefully the skills used and contacts made in the effort to reach the goal will be translated into further activities to enhance communal life.

The importance of dialogue with a community to statutory bodies

Of course, it is difficult for busy public servants to realise that the community may not be just those people living within a defined area. It may seem, at first, that engagement with the community is neither essential or desirable, because explanation and negotiation are tedious and time consuming, and just getting on with the (no doubt beneficial) changes is much easier.

This is a mistaken view. Capable communities are *vital*, because otherwise an organisation (LA, Health Trust, bus company) has no-one with whom it can hold a dialogue, and without dialogue promises of successful action are likely to remain illusory. This is because there are no individuals, or no bodies, which can offer a critical examination of the proposed changes and evaluate their meaning to the community.

This is because the Socratic method works best. It is a process of:

- Bringing forward a proposition.
- Subjecting this to careful and rational scrutiny from several perspectives.
- Subsequent modification in the light of criticism.

This process may go through several iterations.

It seems slow and bureaucratic but it forces the proponent to *examine* and *justify* the proposal in detail. This is why governments need oppositions and companies need unions. It encourages self-examination.

But, obviously, not all "communities" (or, rather, *potential* communities) have yet started the process of communication, articulation, organisation and negotiation. Many lack obvious foci for communication, or have few channels. These communities are likely to be disadvantaged in comparison with neighbours which have experience, however gained, in controlling or modifying their environment.

Regenerating what, and how?

But what is the method by which community regeneration can start? What, in any case, is meant by regeneration? Is it only the improvement of the physical environment and the addition (or safeguarding) of facilities such as public transport links, local post offices, shops and recreational facilities? Is the absence of degradation of the environment (less vandalism, less litter) the same thing as "regeneration". Can the funding body (or commissioning body) say "well, you are regenerated now, and we're off"? If it is something more than that, what is it?

If we return to the concept of the community, we find that many of the Welsh "socially excluded communities" in need of regeneration had, originally at least, *something in common*. What they had in common can be illustrated under three headings.

1. Work

A common experience might have been defined by work – a mine (or factory or shipyard) at which the great majority of the population worked. Certainly this would have described Port Talbot until the early 1980s; a community then defined by its relationship with the British Steel Corporation.

2. Homogeneity

But the majority of the "socially excluded communities" were not only defined by work (in Wales overwhelmingly the village pit) but by being drawn from an initially fairly homogenous population. They were overwhelmingly white, working class - and male dominated. There was also, to some extent, the binding tie of Methodism which was the most frequently professed religion (substantial Irish immigration in the 1850's notwithstanding).

3. Agreed social norms

The common experience of work among a fairly homogenous population led in many cases to the adoption by the community of a set of social values, not written down, but generally understood. This is not to say that people would be overtly coerced into observing the social norms, but the tacit pressure to conform would be high.

All this relates to an age when there were fewer media outlets (no 40 channel satellite TV) and publishing was more highly regulated.

Is it possible to "regenerate" these communities? If we mean to reform communities along the lines of the original identity, then the answer is probably "no".

Ethnic diversity, multi-cultural influences, changes in social and sexual behaviour, the prevalence of private transport and the disappearance of "the works" mean that it would be all but impossible to recreate the original circumstances of the community. Regeneration has to have another meaning (but certainly beyond that of simple improvements of the built environment).

Engaging with the community

How then does the process start? Just because people live in a defined area, it does not mean that they are in communication. The demands of work, childcare, poor transport provision or ill health may mean that many individuals or families may be leading isolated lives. In deprived communities the first language may not be English, or there may be inadequate basic in literacy and numeracy.

So the traditional ways of getting people involved – leafleting homes, putting posters in libraries, halls, post-offices and pubs – may not be effective. Single mothers without support may not be able to attend meetings arranged for after school periods or in holidays.

But there are common interests in all communities and these provide a potential way in to facilitate self development. Contact may be made via:

- Mother and toddler groups.
- Parents at the school gates.
- Clubs.
- Activity groups (darts teams, gardening clubs).
- Young people gathered anywhere they congregate.
- Residential homes.
- School governors.

These are the people who are already there and who will need to:

1. Identify the issues affecting them
2. Express their aspirations for change.

These aspirations may range from the immediate and practical (a covered bus stop) to the unattainable (the opening of a new factory), but only when agencies get a feel for them can any common underlying issues be identified and then explored.

It need not be done on all fronts simultaneously. Identifying one or two major issues may generate interest across the community and a feeling that action is possible. "Capacity building" and "regeneration" start here, but only if led by the people who want to make a change and will gain the benefit.

Providing communities with skills and confidence

However, for regeneration to work, the community will need to discover not only what its common needs and aspirations are, but *what it means to be a member of that community*. This can never be done by any outside agency, and it is not likely to be a quick process.

Artificial limits in terms of funding and support are, therefore, very likely to inhibit real regeneration, because they put pressure on communities and agencies to spend the money and take up the help on offer. This may result in the available funding being spent in quite the wrong areas, on unnecessary objects, before the community has articulated:

- What makes it a community (if it cannot do this then, almost by definition, it is not a community).
- What the members expect of each other.
- Where the community is now.
- In which direction the community would like to go.

It cannot be emphasised too often that this can only be done by the members of the community, and that the largest role agencies can take is to observe and assist this process, and that it cannot be rushed.

Once this initial stage has been reached then the agency workers can start on building the skills and confidence of the community – which is an *activity* oriented, rather than *knowledge* based process.

How will regeneration staff work with communities?

If regeneration workers are to raise confidence and skills within the community, then they must be seen to encourage, not to do, to be asked, not to direct, to offer possibilities, not solutions.

If the community members are not encouraged at an early stage to do things on their own (which includes making mistakes), and everything is done for them by the regeneration, then there will be no gains in confidence or experience. Staff must learn to work as mentors and counsellors, rather than as professionals on behalf of a client group. Success will then be measured by how *little* the agency staff have to do – redundancy being the ultimate aim.

Role of external agencies

As implied above, simply handing over a wish-list of things to be done by outside agencies will not regenerate any community, because once the action has been taken (windows replaced, the playground refurbished) the *capacity* of the community remains unchanged.

But almost by definition the "socially excluded" communities (perhaps an unfortunate phrase, because "exclusion" has connotations of *intention* which are certainly not there) will not contain a high proportion of those with meetings skills, IT skills or much professional expertise.

The first work of regeneration staff, however, is not to develop skills among members of the community so much as to:

- Make them aware that such skills are important.

- Impart confidence that the community as a whole, and individuals within the community, can acquire them.
- Point to sources of professional advice (which may previously have intimidated community members) and how to access them.

Only then can training in capacity building skills begin, and it is probably advisable not to use formal training techniques, but rather "learning by doing". Formal recognition of the skills gained is always possible via the credit framework.

An introduction to IT and internet skills, meetings skills, using the media, drafting letters and press releases and related skills *by using them* would not only increase the confidence of the community as a whole in its ability to relate to external agencies and manage change, but will provide opportunities to individuals for self-development and, perhaps, routes into employment.

Support mechanisms for sustaining community participation

Even in the most advantaged communities (as identified by the Welsh Deprivation Index) participation in capacity building is neither guaranteed nor constant. Communities which interact around a single issue (say noise reduction) may disperse when the issue is addressed, only coming together again if new issues arise.

In these more advantaged communities this may be of little importance, because there will be strong informal links between community members (PTA, WI, sports clubs, professional organisations). If, however, participation is to be sustainable in deprived communities, then a way has to be found of keeping the hard-won skills base intact, and passing them on as long-serving community members move out, or acquire other commitments.

One possible method is bringing in young people at an early age – mid teens onwards. It is vital to engage as many young people as possible, if only because engaging them may increase the confidence of older people and allow a dialogue between generations on opportunities and facilities for young people. Beyond this consideration, the current generation of young people are the parents of the next decade. Bringing them into the decision process, and acquiring skills, will prepare them for an active role in matters which may soon concern them – provision for school and pre-school children, access to health facilities, play facilities and so on.

Nor should planning for sustainable capacity development be restricted to the community. Relations with external agencies - local authorities, health trusts, emergency services may all be improved if there is constant feedback from community groups – a policy, in fact, of maintenance rather than repair. This may help statutory bodies to frame planning more effectively, and use resources more efficiently.

This would mean that the mechanism for community – agency interaction would not have to be rebuilt from scratch every few years. Early exposure of agency staff to the process would inculcate a culture of

listening and participation among staff, so that they are experienced and ready when they come into more responsible positions – a clear process of staff development

Val Thomas, Prif Swyddog, Rhwydwaith Coleg Agored De Orllewin Cymru