



Spatial Economics Research Centre

Friday, 20 July 2012

Whither participation?

There's a strong belief among some academics and large parts of the practitioner community that local engagement/partnership is key to the success of many area based interventions.

Some time ago, I came across an attempt to assess this claim (possibly in the context of Single Regeneration Budget or New Deal for Communities) by looking at whether projects which had strong community engagement did better in terms of outcomes. I remember being surprised that there didn't seem to be any direct evidence that this was the case.

I was reminded of this, in a different (developing country) context, while reading Lee Crawford's recent "Whither Participation?" blog post on [Roving Bandit](#):

Many social programs insist on beneficiary participation in management, claiming that it is valuable and instrumental for program success.

Perhaps, for rich parents who have the luxury of being able to spend time worrying about their children's educations, participating in the Village Education Committee and being given a voice to obtain more resources for their schools is indeed empowering. Poor parents may care just as much about education, but may have no energy left to figure out exactly how to work the system or to figure out what they might be able to accomplish when they are given vaguely defined powers ... perhaps, finding ways to make schools actually work without the community having to worry about it at all would be even more empowering.

Back in England, I can't imagine anything worse than having to meet all of my neighbours after work to figure out how we are going to run the rubbish collection or fix the potholes in the road. That stuff just gets done. Services get delivered without me having to think about it at all. All I need is a mechanism to complain if things don't work, but don't ask me to help you plan how to fix it.

There is a great quote from the earlier paper "[Mandated Empowerment](#)" (HT: [@thrh](#))

Both examples raise concerns about committing ourselves entirely to antipoverty strategies that rely on the poor doing a lot of the work.

When you put it like that, it sounds pretty sensible. The implication of which is not I think "don't consult people," quite the opposite - provide an open platform for suggestions, comments, and complaints. Just consider how much work you are asking from your "beneficiaries."

Which got me thinking. I know outcomes aren't everything, but does anyone know of good evidence in a developed country context (or specifically London) that tells us whether more or less community participation improves policy outcomes?

Posted by [Prof Henry G. Overman](#) on [Friday, July 20, 2012](#)

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[Alan Davies](#) said...

This study looked at eight "successful" cities and the authors reckon "high and sustained levels of public engagement in decision-making were found in many of the cities."

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