

Transcript: 'Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement

See the film on the What Works Scotland website whatworksscotland.ac.uk/events/hard-to-reach-or-easy-to-ignore-a-review-of-evidence-about-equality-in-community-engagement

Dr Oliver Escobar, What Works Scotland (University of Edinburgh)

So I'm going to focus on the top lines, so some of the key findings from the review which are not necessarily new but are worth reiterating I believe.

We should thank a range of people - we've already mentioned some of them - in particular our peer reviewer Andy Thompson who is here as part of the panel, Kaela Scott of Involve who is also here but there have been a range of people who helped us to put this together so they are duly acknowledged in there.

And we should say that Ruth has spent quite a bit of time going through the databases. Actually we didn't find as much as we were expecting to find because there is a lot of work and there's a lot of evidence on community engagement, and there's a lot of evidence or work on equalities and inequalities but those two literatures don't seem to talk to each other that often.

There is less than we were hoping for. Nonetheless Ruth did - after going through the usual systematic process that we go through in an evidence review - she did include 70 sources that met our criteria. We focused on the post-99 timeline just to recognize the key milestones in Scottish history and with devolution and so on. We focused particularly on Scottish literature but we did draw as well on literature from the rest of the UK from Canada, Australia, from Denmark and some specific studies that were particularly relevant. There was a range of, there were a range of methodologies in the review, including quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods...

Less mixed methods to start than we were hoping for, some evidence reviews and a lot of toolkits so I don't think we are short of toolkits there are tools out there as you probably know and I think we're now more at the stage of how do we build on all the good work that has been done and how do we bring to the forefront of this debate one core issue, that in my mind underpins everything else, which is power.

And power inequalities is a fundamental cause perhaps of all other inequalities so I'll come back to this. And the literature that the Ruth went through covers a number of policy areas from public policy to local government, social policy and so on and so forth. And we were asking in three key questions: We were asking how the relationship between equality and community engagement conceptualized in the literature? How are people thinking about these two key aspects of the broader participatory democracy landscape? And we want to also understand, what are the key dimensions and factors in the relationship and particularly in terms of the process of engaging itself and the outcomes of the process. And disappointingly there was, it was difficult to find material on the outcomes of community engagement. There is still a lack of a substantial evidence base to demonstrate the power of community engagement. The many of us working in this field have seen it in practice but we also need to tell the stories and document them and the lessons that we take out of them.

And then we were also asking the 'what works' question which is always a tricky one because it's what works for whom, where, under what conditions, and so on and so forth but nonetheless we wanted to see what the literature has to say about the strategies and approaches that might take us in the right direction. So the review is a review of what is already out there and therefore not many

Transcript: 'Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement

surprises; just a reflection and an overview of some of the stuff that has been published over the last 15, 20 years. And we used a lot of key terms. We kept the search fairly open and flexible so we didn't have a very narrow definition of equality. Sometimes equality meant equal treatment, equity, fairness, justice. Sometimes it was equality of opportunity, sometimes it was equality of outcome so in the literature these concepts are fairly fluid and we just wanted to reflect that rather than create a straitjacket and that's how we got to all the studies that made it through the criteria. Obviously inequality usually... the usual understanding of the concept is when a person or group or communities are unfairly or negatively impacted due to where they live, their personal characteristics or circumstances, or their lived experience.

And then community, as we know, is itself another really complex concept so we kept it very open and we think of communities of place, practice and interest, as broad as that: the communities of place of geography, we might have communities of Identity, LGBT for example, or communities of interest, such as women's groups etc.

Then the 'hard to reach' is a label that's been, I think it is fair to say, that is beginning to disappear or, I don't know if it is disappearing, but people are more mindful that is not as easy as that and perhaps it's better to talk about ...

Audience member: 'Seldom heard'.

Yes 'seldom heard' or is it 'easy to ignore'? which to me puts the finger on the power issue which is what this review tries to do. We looked at that, there are two key thematic areas as you will see in the paper: one is equality of access and the other one is equality of influence. So I'll come back to this in a second but equality of access is what it says in the tin, you know, the extent to which people get access to community engagement processes and what we find is that very often the inequalities that are so pervasive in our society then kind of get translated into practices that determine whether people can access or not.

Again, as I said earlier, none of this is new but perhaps is disappointing that after decades of working on some of these issues - I see some people in the room that I knew have been working on these things for 10, 20, 30 years - it's perhaps disappointing that we're still making similar points to those we could make in the eighties or the nineties. Those barriers, as usual, is to do with practical barriers - resources, transport, childcare; it's to do with personal circumstances and personal capacity to engage which might have to do with language, confidence level, education and so on and so forth; socio-economic barriers - -we find that - again it's no surprise - that people who are low earnings, people who might be on the margins of the mainstream of most engagement processes out there are systematically excluded even before these processes begin which is the sign of the process itself tends to exclude people by default by not making a conscious effort to involve those particular groups.

And then there are barriers to do with motivation and this is that vicious circle of participating engagement processes that are disappointing at best, manipulative at worst and which fits that the spiral of cynicism and this is this is a really dangerous game because we have hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of engagement processes every day so you can see that once that kind of spiral of cynicism gets in place and is really difficult to rebuild the relationships between citizens, communities, authorities, organizations and so on.

And then we look at equality in the process and the reason this is so this is one aspect that has been...that we are less familiar with because often when we think about equality in engagement we're thinking about 'how do we get the right mix of people in the room?' But less often we think

Transcript: 'Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement

about 'now how do we make sure that everyone who is in the room or in the process has an equal chance of influencing the process?' We will all be familiar with some of the typical rituals in some meetings: dominant voices, the use of jargon, exclusionary dynamic posturing... all those sorts of things that happen and that tend to diminish the influence that some of the people participating

08:45

may have. So getting access to community engagement does not guarantee the influence over the process or the outcome.

So we need to care, not only about whether we have the right mix in the room but also whether we have the right design and facilitation so that everyone feels they can influence the outcome of the process. And this is what Mario Young, a political theorist, calls internal inclusion or internal exclusion. It's this idea that is no longer enough to care about who makes it into the process, we also need to think about what happens within the process in terms of influencing and shaping outcomes.

There are a number of issues brought by Ruth in the review having to do with language barriers as we'd expect, sometimes to do with English as a second language or the use of common terminology but also, as well, the influence of well-resourced groups and people who know how to play the game and take advantage of existing engagement processes and how that often can be to the detriment of either minority voices or majority voices that just don't find a way of articulating their perspective as forcefully as those groups. When we look at that - I'm going friendly but hopefully it's enough of hook so that you can look into the detail, I'm just giving you the sort of headlines. So that's was our process.

Now in terms of outcome and extent to which community engagement has positive outcomes for those who participate, and for those who don't participate, but may also be affected by the issues considered in that process, we did find some evidence to suggest that there are positive but also negative impacts of community engagement. On the positive side, improved health, confidence, the power of key skills, cohesion and sometimes policies might be improved to make them more palatable by involving people in shaping them so then they might face less resistance.

So on the positive side those are the kind of things that we found in the literature. On the negative side, the literature talks about: pressure, stress, exhaustion. You know, this reminded me when I was going through these findings, it reminded me of the Scottish Attitudes Survey a couple of years ago that showed that 7% of the Scottish population volunteered 13 times or more in the last year. That's seven percent; to me that says that a big part of participation and engagement processes falls in a very small group that are super-engaged and committed while then there is more light-touch engagement going on by others who might not have access or be included or be enabled to participate.

So a lot of pressure on those who get engaged. Often you also find in the literature the disenchantment and the disappointment that comes from outcomes not reflecting the discussions, they include the perspectives and so on that came through the process, a lack of transparency about how the participation of different groups is reflected in the decisions that are taken. But we didn't find much evidence of the long-term impacts. There are very few studies that actually take a long term view and try to say this community that has been have been engagement processes over 10, 20 years and decide the outcome we can document over time - it's not just about measuring, it's not just the numbers, it's also the stories - unfortunately we don't have a lot of long-term studies and that is an indictment of our research system that it encourages us to do very short-term research projects to be honest. There are other issues involved but that's part of the issue.

Transcript: 'Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement

Now something, and again I won't go into the detail, but when Ruth was trying to cluster the different themes that came through in the literature in terms of the key factors when considering engagement and inequality, she came up with these five broad things, and again they are explained in detail in the paper. But we're sharing, perhaps the salient in my view, because it's very seldom we find processes where it's very, very clear and transparent the level of power-sharing

13:11

that the relevant authority or organization or organizer are prepared to put on the table and that undermines the process from the outset. If you are not very clear - you might be familiar with that spectrum of participation from information to empowerment on the ladder of participation and all those different ways - you know, all the different stages and approaches are legitimate.

The problem is when you are, when you are offering one thing and then actually doing another. So, for example, if we think of four key levels: information-giving, consultation, co-production, and devolution or delegation, as four core surface approaches to power-sharing with information being perhaps the least empowering - although there's a key role for it - and information is a first step with consultation being a step in which the organizer still gives the power to decide where what happens but they start about power-sharing in shaping part of the process. With coproduction being a more egalitarian potentially approach to power-sharing by saying 'we all shape the outcome' and with devolution / delegation being perhaps one of the most empowering sides of the spectrum in the sense that it says 'whatever you decide will be implemented'.

Now there's a role for all those different approaches to engagement, the problem comes when you say you're going to co-produce and all you're doing is consulting. Or when you're saying we're going to delegate /devolve power to these local partnerships but actually what you're doing is somewhere in between consultation and co-production. It's the expectations game and we find that there is a lot of lack of transparency in being clear about what is realistic, what is the power that can realistically be shared in this process. A lot of people who participate and get very cynical about these processes will be much more understanding and perhaps enthused if that transparency was at the forefront of all the processes we organize.

Another a key theme in the literature was around partnerships and we know that there are hundreds of partnerships - public and third sector, community sector, some cases private sector. Last time someone counted them was in 2006 and say there are at least 7000 local partnerships That's just one level. I think by now there are probably near 20,000. I wouldn't be surprised, and that's because it has become a sort of a fashionable thing. There are good reasons for it, you know, in some cases and there have been cases where there have been collaborative advantage - which is the advantage you get by doing things together rather than the separate silos - collaborative advantage can be realized through partnership but there is also something to be said - and we have a What Works Scotland review on partnership working and partnership outcomes - that there are real issues, there are real difficulties in partnerships that are mandated. We have a lot of mandated partnerships rather than organic partnerships that emerge because people want to collaborate. We have a lot of partnerships that emerge because they are imposed in some way and that causes some challenges. What we found in the literature is the good partnerships are based on trust and reciprocity in having a sense that 'I cannot do what I need to do unless I collaborate with you'. If you have that sense of interdependence then partnerships tend to work. If you don't have that sense of interdependence, partnerships can be a place for ritualized engagement that might be productive or not depending on the people involved.

Then there's representation. This is a thing that has to do with this notion that there are some people out there who can represent their community, whether that's a community of place, practice or interest. And we're not talking here about representation as in elected representation. We're are

Transcript: 'Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement

talking about community leaders, community representatives, third sector spokespeople who are expected to speak on behalf of - we have built a democracy of intermediaries, it's not just Scotland, it's happening everywhere but it's also under the strong scrutiny and criticism because a lot of people do not see themselves represented by those who are supposed to be representing them and again that's beyond the sort of elected members or even community councils. And what we found is that being a community representative puts a lot of pressure on citizens particularly when they don't have a democratic mandate and yet they are expected to speak on behalf of a particular group or a particular place.

Accountability is a massive issue, it is to do with how then those representatives who occupy spaces in various partnerships and forums and processes, how they keep a link to their community is very problematic. We find generally there is a lot of skepticism in the literature around how good this reliance on intermediaries and representatives actually is and to me that brings us to a key issue which is about the cultures between representatives and delegates.

In a more participatory democracy I think will have more delegates, the difference between a delegate and a representative is that to be a delegate is to be much more attached to their community and needs to have a clear ongoing conversation with that particular community of place, practice or interest, so that then is truly reflective rather than just being someone who because she occupies a particular position in the community or is part of a particular community group is expected to understand the variety of perspectives in that particular community. So I think there is a clear role to think about the role of delegation over representation.

On digital, the digital side of things we didn't find anything particularly surprising. It's crucial. We do need to make sure that our democracy makes the best of the new opportunities but it's also true that is out there it tends to be a use of digital to do the kind of stuff we used to do before rather than to do new things. So we don't have a lot of the exciting sort of crowdsourcing that we see in places like Reykjavik and Barcelona. We have a lot of using some of the new platforms we have a using new social media to do the kind of thing we have always done, whether PR purposes or bilateral conversations. So there is an area for growth in terms of platforms that allow for more sophisticated forms of dialogue and deliberation. And then another thing that Ruth explores is the issue of funding and bureaucracy. And the way she puts it is the bureaucratic burdens generate unnecessarily levels of anxiety and complexity for community groups and some people are radically better equipped navigating funding processes and so on. So that's quite a massive barrier still reflected in the literature.

So let me speed up a little! I find myself getting carried away!

In terms of what works and I'm not going to stop about here because there's a lot of common sense stuff that, for the detail again I invite you to go to the report, but the 'no one size fits all' which we have been saying for years now, remains clear in the literature. Sometimes you do need to do a bit of a bit of research before you develop an engagement process and understand what's the best way. So it's a little bit cumbersome, so involve your community in deciding how they want to be involved. But, but there are ways of doing it that perhaps can draw on research and approaches that can help to develop a process that truly responds to the needs and priorities of the community you're working with.

And then we do need to get better cataloging practice, good and bad. Actually I would encourage - I'm a great believer in bad practice; that's when we really learn. Not in enforcing bad practice but in recording when things don't go according to plan, which is the world of most engagement practitioners. A life of pleasures and pressures of various kinds, trying to do the best and always

Transcript: 'Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement

falling short of the ideal. So there are number of really exciting platforms out there particular Particpedia if you haven't come across it is a crowd-sourced wikipedia of participation stuff for participatory nerds such as some of you in the room. So check out Particpedia, it has lots of cases and you can add your own cases there and it is good that we share these things.

Then the support, and this is this is a key element because, you know, sometimes I think there's a really vibrant civil society in Scotland. Volunteering, actually just under half percent of the Scottish population volunteers in some form or shape, and that's why in volunteering is a way of giving to your society but when it comes to engagement processes that try to involve people in decision-making processes or making policies or in deciding services we need to think beyond volunteering and we need to find ways of lowering the barriers to participation because otherwise there's something called the self-selection bias which means that in the end only a self-selected minority ends up participating in those processes. It has to do with the level of education, income and so on.

So unless all those barriers are lowered it can be quite difficult to make sure that people can participate. There are some sort of cutting edge ideas out there in the literature and some of you might have heard about the universal basic income which some people are saying could be, not just a contribution to the way we do capitalism, but also a contribution to the way we do democracy so there are some interesting things being piloted and considered. Their forging of new partnerships based on a better model of leadership than we usually have. A model of leadership that distributes power across different players and rotates power frequently enough so that no one is put on a pedestal for too long, and that kind of facilitative leadership that is more about bringing people together and getting things done rather than knowing all the answers and taking people in your direction.

Transparency - I touched on that earlier - the transparency between the expectations and the outcomes, and the development of community support services. So while it is sometimes we forget and one of the things that sometimes is difficult to watch is that while the community empowerment agenda is an apparently quite strong in Scotland at the same time there have been lots of CLD - community learning and development departments - that have been shut so what's what's going on? We're losing the workforce and we're expecting to do more of this stuff. Problematic. Participatory budgeting - a big thing going on in Scotland. Sometimes we forget that the places where it worked well, like Belo Horizonte Brazil, these are places where local councils invested in a massive workforce of community organizers to go out there and make these things happen.

So I'm not going to dwell on this, some of these things you will all be familiar with: the use of clear and supportive communication, the key role of facilitators especially when thinking about the internal inclusion that I mentioned earlier - what happens once we are in the room. Facilitation is a skilled practice, that takes a long time and, often we underestimate and that's why we end up having a lot of meetings where there are rituals rather than meaningful conversations.

There is also, it's important that we begin to realize that it's not enough just to involve one particular group that might be more directly affected. If we're talking about public services, policies and programs that affect a range of people we really need to involve a cross-section of the relevant population. We cannot just go to those who are more easily accessible or claim to speak on behalf of others without having a clear mandate.

Technology, I mentioned it earlier. And then, and although we appreciate that the last thing we need is more monitoring, and forms and so on, in the report - and this is a conversation that Ruth and I have had for some time - we do recommend that we do need to monitor better. This is tricky but

Transcript: 'Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement

we need to get better at knowing who is taking part because otherwise we're not going to know that we're making progress, and I don't know if that's about getting better monitoring, I don't know if it's about a particular form, there might be more creative ways of doing that but we need to find a way of documenting what's going on.

So let me conclude with two slides to recap a couple of things. I think, you know, sometimes when we think about inclusion and diversity we think about the obvious stuff – demographic inclusion and the, sort of, making sure that people are invited or a space is open enough that people will come in but actually there are more dimensions to these two things.

With inclusion and exclusion, as I said earlier, these external inclusion - getting access into the process - and then there is internal inclusion – and that's about having an influence during the process and that depends on good facilitation, good process design, making sure that there are several ways of influencing a process. When we facilitate citizens' juries for example, or citizens' assemblies, we often tend to build in anywhere between four and eight ways of influencing the outcome that don't depend on talking. If it only depends on talking then you're giving an advantage to those who know how to play that game so you need different ways of influencing the process that don't rely on one single mechanism. And then diversity, very often we think about the usual – the backgrounds, what we would call in the jargon the demographic diversity - but just as important is what we call discursive diversity, the diversity of perspectives because you can have 100 people in the room but if they all think the same that's arguably less diverse than ten people who think very differently. So from a democratic perspective, is not a numbers game: it's a diversity of perspectives game. And then the diversity of knowledge, expertise, experience and so on.

So I want to conclude with one of the areas that I think really needs further research and it's something that we might consider, I consider, well, one of the key paradoxes in this field, which is what I would call the public engagement paradox. In the last five decades or so there are ever-growing opportunities to participate engagement opportunities, opportunities to be consulted and yet there are ever-growing inequalities. In theory, if there's more participation and engagement, in theory outcomes should be more distributed in more discernable and equitable ways but that's not what we have seen as a society. That's often because we focused a lot on engagement processes without focusing on the broader or structural inequalities issues and my proposition, and I'm hoping that we will get to test this in some way, I'm not sure how, is that perhaps inequalities in health, income, wealth, education, and so on that stem from inequalities of power and influence. And what I mean by that – and these are the kind of things that we can look into - I mean how to explain the paradox. It might well be that we do have engagement processes that are not inclusive, it's only a self-selected minority of the population that gets to influence the agenda and therefore all their priorities got reflected and all that shapes policies and public services. It might also well be that there actually there are engagement processes that are genuinely inclusive, it just happens that they are not properly connected to the final decisions. So this is some of the things that hopefully we need to look into. I'm going to leave it there and thank you for your patience.

[Applause]

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.