



Capacity building for community-led regeneration

Facilitating or frustrating public engagement?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of European Union Objective 1 funding on the development and formalisation of a neighbourhood-based group situated in a regeneration area in the UK. The role, function and impact of a Community Empowerment Network (CEN) (funded by the Labour Government as part of its Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy) is also examined and assessed.

Design/methodology/approach – The findings of the paper are informed by a critique of the policy literature and the ways in which “leadership” roles and responsibilities are played out within neighbourhood settings. The empirical research derives from an analysis of the role and practice of CENs in England.

Findings – The paper argues that the external initiatives restrict the autonomy and independence of community based groups. Furthermore, the paper makes the point that such externally driven programmes are often located within neighbourhoods with little reference to identifying the needs or priorities of residents.

Research limitations/implications – There are important lessons here for policy makers and practitioners in public policy to reflect upon. The paper seeks to draw connections between the literature on community development and planning/regeneration management. These links are important to sustain and to open the discussion to a broader audience of researchers and practice managers.

Practical implications – The paper raises questions concerning how local residents/groups can be facilitated into articulating their needs and exercising agency in terms of changing the decision-making/resource allocation processes.

Originality/value – The paper adds to understanding the practice of empowerment networks.

Keywords Regeneration, Empowerment, Community planning, England, Public policy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The engagement of local people in regeneration schemes that target their localities is considered to be as incontestable as it is pervasive (see, for instance, Arnstein, 1969; European Commission, 1997; SEU, 1998, 2001; Atkinson, 2000; Foley and Martin, 2000). In both policy and practice, and across the wide and varied spectrum of activities that comprise schemes (from physical redevelopments of community facilities and the reconstruction of housing stock, to “softer” programmes such as up-skilling or adult education), the perceived wisdom is that locals should not just be the *objects* of regeneration, but should be active partners in it. However, the engagement of local people – communities – in the governance and management structures that steer and deliver neighbourhood regeneration programmes is fraught with difficulties and challenges (see Diamond, 2002; Diamond and Liddle, 2005). Their prospective involvement brings a range of pressures and obligations for actors that may be ill-equipped, or even unwilling, to meet them. They are, after all, “recruited” into such activities, not for their professional knowledge and expertise of regeneration processes, but precisely because they are “ordinary” “lay” people. They can bring a lived experience of their localities,



and possess insights and perceptions that are (often debatably) representative of the wider local population. Given this promise, considerable effort is expended to build the capacity of the community to engage in regeneration.

Against this backdrop, this paper discusses the impact that capacity building (or facilitation) has upon the autonomy of community-led partnerships. It illustrates how, on occasion, and despite the best efforts of those involved, such facilitation may be, at best, unhelpful, or at worst, even obtrusive.

The article draws upon observations from a qualitative (ethnographic) study of a community organisation, operating within a UK neighbourhood. The group was established by the local authority to “lead” a partnership to bid for a small proportion of a European Union Structural Development Fund package earmarked for the wider region. The support for this development was provided by an “infrastructure organisation”; namely a Community Empowerment Network (CEN), though assistance was also derived from other actors, namely a local authority and community and voluntary sector support organisation.

Critical moments during the organisational development and formalisation of the group are examined and critiqued. The article does not aim to question the conceptual notions underlying, and the unenviable task of encouraging, community engagement with governance initiatives. In fact, it is recognised that without such support, the case study organisation would not have existed at all. Rather, attention is drawn to consider how the group’s “support” led to a degree of dependency upon infrastructure organisations and facilitators, and ultimately restricted the group’s activity and eroded its autonomy. The paper concludes by detailing how such support may in fact serve not to facilitate such groups, but to frustrate and impede their activities and aspirations. That said, as shall also be alluded to throughout the paper, not all potential for autonomous behaviour is circumscribed.

“Facilitating” engagement in regeneration programmes

Neighbourhoods and communities – at the heart of regeneration practice

Statutory actors operating at various spatial scales, are acutely aware that engagement with formal processes of governance appears to be decline:

the majority of people [do] not think that they could influence decisions affecting the local area, and even fewer felt that they could influence decisions affecting Britain (Home Office, 2005, p. 41).

It is argued that local people perceive traditional statutory actors to be inaccessible, unresponsive, and inadequate (Burns *et al.*, 1994; Lowndes, 1995). The state, and by extension its strategies of governance, face a legitimacy crisis (Habermas, 1976) – or a “legitimacy deficit” (Beetham, 1991). This is perhaps best illustrated by the (general) downward trend in electoral turnout in all forms of democratic elections across the UK over the past fifteen years (see e.g. House of Commons, 2004; Curtice, 2005), and an associated decline in trust in public institutions (MORI, 2003). With this in mind, public and social policy initiatives that do not have documented participation or “buy-in” from targeted communities, are often dismissed as being aloof, distant, or is lacking legitimacy.

Partly to address these issues, many programmes have constituted the “community” as central to attempts to tackling “neighbourhood” disadvantage and, by extension, as integral to decision-making processes. Social and economic regeneration is, the ethos of these schemes suggest, something that should be done *with*, rather than done *to*, local people. But the challenges that face those desiring to engage local people in governance are many, and at times they seem insurmountable. Such frustrations originate from a

range of sources. It has been proposed, for instance, that such challenges are deeply embedded within communities, perhaps being sourced from intra-community tensions or through poor relations between the community and public agencies (Goodlad and Meegan, 2005, p. 202). These challenges become all the more pertinent when it is noted that the socio-economic contexts of disempowered areas are not conducive to engendering participatory strategies (Goodlad and Meegan, 2005).

Community engagement (in general governance and administration) requires the achievement of a triad of qualities, namely: *resources* to enable empowerment, such as political and legal rights, funding, and the social capacity required to create mobilisation networks; *opportunities*, such as those provided by institutional arrangements, for example, decentralisation; and finally, the *motivations* for people to exert their rights (Oldfield, 1990). Many state-led (or “top-down”) attempts to facilitate engagement in regeneration schemes attempt to achieve this triad of attributes in order to create a virtuous cycle of engagement “draw[ing] ever widening groups of people into the political arena” (Oldfield, 1990, p. 155).

In the UK, successive recent Labour Governments’ (1997-present) public policy, including service delivery, and decision-making, has been targeted on local spatial contexts; in the community, neighbourhood[1] or the estate, though often with mixed results (Wallace, 2007, p. 2). Neighbourhoods have, in essence, become *sites* of governance, within which policies are enacted and services are delivered; *spaces* of governance wherein forums for interchange between the state and citizens are established; and *spheres* of governance, through which decisions are taken through multiple networks and interactions (as discussed by Lepine *et al.*, 2007, pp. 12-13). These “Area Based Initiatives” (SEU, 1998) have been described as the “localisation of the social”, or the local spatialisation of national policy domains (Amin, 2005, p. 615). The involvement of local communities in governance is also promoted at other spatial scales (see, for example, European Commission, 1995, 1996, 1997; Atkinson, 2000).

Theoretically, such new modes and tiers of governance have been promoted because they have a closer degree of spatial and metaphorical proximity to “the governed”. They aim to “place communities at [their heart]” (Lepine *et al.*, 2007, p. 5), and have ambitious ends – proclaiming to tackle disadvantage and to give “locals” a greater say in how “their” places are managed and administrated, to manage physical and economic development, to improve service provision[2], to encourage democratic renewal, and to generate socialisation and citizenship (Lepine *et al.*, 2007, p. 7). More particularly, “partnership working” at local levels, which “draws together relevant agencies and the voluntary and community sectors” for public service reform, is assumed to be a critical component of regeneration policy (as cited in Diamond, 2004, p. 179). It has further been proposed that governance proximity and civil renewal schemes, strengthens the legitimacy of government institutions, and ensures the delivery of better quality services (ODPM/Home Office, 2005).

Nationally, post-1997, these efforts were supported and co-ordinated by strategic governmental bodies such as the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) (later to become the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit – NRU). In 1998, the UK Home Office established the Communities Department, housing several sub-units. This included the Active Community Unit (ACU), specifically formed to support voluntary and community activity, and partially aimed to develop the capacity of local people to *engage* with the aforementioned agendas. Illustrating the rationale behind these initiatives, in the foreword to *Bringing Britain Together* – which details the basis for these statutory interventions – then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, proclaimed that schemes would invest

in skills, opportunities, and education for those living in the most deprived areas of the UK, there by both *facilitating* and *complementing* the physical regeneration of areas (SEU, 1998, emphasis added). The “community itself”, a later document proposed, is the most powerful resource in addressing a range of social ills (SEU, 1998, p. 68), while another document from the same Unit recognised that successive governments had failed to “harness the knowledge and energy of local people” (SEU, 2000, p. 7).

In summary, communities, usually attached to specific geographical sites (neighbourhoods[3]) have become both a target and tool of governance, usually at the behest of a range of governmental tiers[4]. Overall, three core themes have been pursued by these initiatives: democratic renewal, performance and service delivery improvement, and community capacity building (Barnes *et al.*, 2004, p. 270). It is with the latter of these – efforts to facilitate “community” engagement in regeneration schemes that underline and support the types of initiatives detailed thus far – with which this paper is primarily concerned.

Community “capacity building” for regeneration leadership

As suggested, there has been a great investment of resources and time in creating opportunities for communities to engage with regeneration initiatives. “Communities”, however, may be deficient in terms of skills and capacity, networks, or in moral cohesion, thus limiting their ability to assume greater responsibility for governing (see, e.g. Oldfield, 1990; Taylor, 2003). Indeed, it has been recognised that the sheer complexity of many aforementioned policy initiatives can make engagement with governance immensely challenging (Miller *et al.*, 2000). Recognising these deficiencies there has been great emphasis placed on training or capacity building for local people (see, e.g. Wood, 2000; Newman, 2001; Kearns, 2003; Diamond and Liddle, 2005). As Wood (2000) summarises, locals must develop certain skills and knowledge in order to articulate concerns, and in order to engage in processes that may help tackle them. Notably, the European Commission has distinguished between communities lacking the capacity to engage with regeneration programmes (level I communities) and those in possession of these qualities (level II) (European Commission, 1997). Under such circumstances, it was proposed that level I communities should receive support for capacity building as *prerequisite* for social and economic regeneration (European Commission, 1997 – see Atkinson (2000) for a further discussion).

Securing a precise definition of even this aspect of “capacity building” is challenging. Indeed, governmental imprecision when discussing such issues has been critiqued (Osborne and McLaughlin, 2004). There is, for instance, a lack of clarity regarding precisely *who* is the target of initiatives. Throughout policy, but also in academic accounts, attention is drawn, often rather loosely, to the capacity of “local communities”, with no clear indication of what “a community” is, or precisely where it may be “found”. In broad terms, “capacity building” refers to the practical support provided to communities to contribute to governance as equal partners, or to enable the wider community to engage in the opportunities provided by economic and social regeneration (Diamond and Liddle, 2005). Theoretically, capacity building holds the potential to help communities understand decision-making processes, to communicate more effectively at differing tiers of governance, to take decisions, and to eventually “manage their own destinies” (Schuftan, 1996, p. 261).

Here, attention is drawn to the first aspect of capacity building; the support provided to facilitate the engagement of local people in governance. More particularly, focus is turned toward efforts made to build the organisational and managerial

capacity of local communities to assume responsibility leading regeneration programmes.

In practice, capacity building takes a variety of forms, but has been summarised as being the development of *skills*, the development of *structures*, and the provision of practical *support* (Diamond and Liddle, 2005, p. 148). Drawing upon the work of Southern (2002), they identify these to include organisational and financial planning; human resource management; strategic management; performance management; marketing management; relationship management; technology management; and risk management. They add to these, “managing change”; “negotiation/conflict resolution”; and “local political awareness” (Southern, 2002, pp. 143-4).

Capacity may be built – or support provided – by a range of agencies, including agencies of the state, or perhaps through a body loosely belonging to what has been termed “voluntary and community sector” *infrastructure*. They “play a supporting, co-ordinating, representative, policy making and developmental role for other voluntary and community organisations” (Home Office, 2004, p. 40). They often operate at “interfaces” between other governance actors, facilitating input and providing guidance and negotiation (Piper, 2005, p. 20). This intervention may take place either to support the engagement of people over the course of a scheme, or it may even provide the catalyst for the establishment of community-led initiatives.

One example of these infrastructure organisations is CENs. These were primarily established to help local communities pursue the UK Government’s Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy (through Local Strategic Partnerships)[5], as well as to develop community engagement within other neighbourhood renewal initiatives (Home Office, 2004). They mainly assisted community networks operating in the most deprived parts of England, and advocated the community and voluntary sector at strategic tiers of governance[6].

Ties that bind – the restrictive nature of community capacity building governance

Despite the promise offered for the engagement of local communities in the governance and delivery of regeneration initiatives, efforts have been critiqued, both in practice and in terms of their general aspirations. Schemes, and even the facilitation required to support the “up-skilling” of communities can, instead of empowering localities, serve merely to capture actors within formal power arrangements. So, while many welcome governance opportunities, particularly given the promise of greater resources for their activities, others are, we are told, “concerned about the impact on the autonomy of communities and on the voluntary sector” (Craig and Taylor, 2002, p. 131).

The involvement of sections of the community in any form of governance comes with two conditions (Blaxter *et al.*, 2003): first, they must accept existing structures, conventions, and rules of engagement; and second, through their very presence, the “community” accepts responsibility to deliver the goals of the process (Blaxter *et al.*, 2003). Groups can become, in such instances, preoccupied with “top-down” forms of fiscal and operational accountability often at the expense of “bottom-up” forms of accountability that may help to ensure that groups are representative (Taylor and Warburton, 2003, p. 336). “Community leaders” face many issues in connecting to their grassroots supporters (Purdue, 2001), and may risk “co-option”, that is, “engagement without tangible gain” (Cochrane, 2007, p. 62).

Turning to the structures and spaces of governance provided by regeneration initiatives, it has been identified how “rules” (that regulate activity) and “norms” (that

establish expectations of appropriate behaviour) must be adhered to and respected (Barnes *et al.*, 2007, pp. 58-63). These can ultimately determine and confine interaction between actors, representing a process of “incorporation whereby citizens were drawn into” discourses and institutional practices “through repeated cycles of exchange” (Barnes *et al.*, 2004, pp. 275-6). Partnerships established in order to deliver certain services, or to contribute to the governance of a particular area, may in fact be manipulated in a variety of manners and to a range of ends (Rowe, 2006). Against the context of such assessments, local governance, often the target for action (as is returned to later in this chapter), becomes a manifestation of centralised control, with “government spreading its tentacles down to neighbourhood[s]” (Lepine *et al.*, 2007, p. 11).

Others describe how the organising of a wide range of governance actors in a “structured, stable manner”, create dilemmas, potentially “institutionalising” them, and negating possible “personalised, arbitrary, and unpredictable modes of operation” (Diamond, 1999, p. 250). In practice, restrictions upon the activity of actors are enacted through regulation, incentivisation, and surveillance (Richards and Smith, 2002). Behaviour deemed appropriate by the state is rewarded, and rules and regulations are violated at the risk of sanctions in terms of access to funding, or in opportunities for engagement. Such “tight management strategies” (Deakin, 1996, pp. 31-3[7]) though often necessary to ensure services are provided in a uniform fashion (Tam, 2001; BRTF, 2005), often exerts actors under severe strain.

Not only, then, does governance become more complex (Miller *et al.*, 2000; Davies, 2004), or congested (Cowell, 2004, pp. 514-5) with the time and effort expended on management increasing[8], but engagement may also steer or restrict otherwise independent and autonomous actors (Taylor, 1990; Smith and Lipsky, 1992; Billis, 1993). Under such circumstances, governance practices do not decentralise control, for instance to communities, but serve to recruit subordinated partners into government processes (Clarke and Glendinning, 2002). While there may be *some* degree of autonomy for *some* actors:

[...] this autonomy is bounded; is circumscribed by central direction and resource control; is subject to surveillance and evaluation; and is vulnerable to termination or takeover. (Clarke and Glendinning, 2002, p. 46)

Against this context, the provision of support (i.e. capacity building) for engagement not only provides many challenges as noted earlier, but may too erode the autonomy of actors (Diamond, 2008). By extension, Schuftan’s inability to chart the process of incorporation/cooption inherent within many regeneration schemes has been critiqued (Diamond, 2004).

The provision of financial resources is particularly critiqued in this regard. Actors or communities may, for example, become dependent on the state or other actors for training or for funding, again leading to them being institutionalised or captured. Furthermore, not only can the pursuit of funding encourage some organisations to alter their goals and aspirations, but the acceptance of funding is often accompanied by a set of stringent reporting regimes superficially, at least aimed to provide accountability both for the local community, and the grant giving body. Demonstrating this, groups engaged in activities for which it receives payment from the state may neglect the important function of campaigning or even confronting power holders, either as the result of coercion, self-censorship, or even simply because they lack time for entering advocacy activities (Parkes *et al.*, 2004, p. 319). Furthermore, it is also recognised the need to secure *sustained* funding (along with the training required to manage this) similarly places organisations under a range of burdens (Goodlad and Meegan, 2005, p. 205).

Others argue that funders can be more interested in *how* money is spent than in the merits of projects, creating further tension between maintaining standards of accountability and fostering innovation (Moseley *et al.*, 2001; Daly, 2008). Such accountability and management arrangements have been criticised as being overtly complex or even “alienating” (Lindsay, 2001; Davies, 2004). Government itself has recognised that funding practices “have put up unnecessary barriers or placed unnecessary regulation on third sector bodies, and the move towards contracts has been a difficult transition in some areas” (DCLG, 2006, p. 58).

These pressures have been summarised as the need for voluntary groups to become “professionalised” in order to manage accounts, volunteers, and staff (Lindsay, 2001, pp. 119-21). Drawing on the work of Rose (1999) on “advanced liberal governmentality” Cochrane has outlined how public service reform, and the pursuit of new urban managerialism, has created a range of “self-policing professionals” (Cochrane, 2007, p. 47). Elsewhere, attention is again drawn to the “perennial threat” of the institutionalisation of groups, with a warning that community-led partnerships must ensure they do “not develop the characteristics of organisations they seek to avoid, e.g. hierarchy and bureaucratic management” (Martin, 2004, p. 30).

Community engagement in regeneration – illustrating the limits of capacity building

Significant practical effort has been expended to create opportunities for communities to engage with economic and social regeneration schemes. However, significant academic attention has been turned to explain how such modes and processes of governance, rather than generating subsidiarity, may in fact bind or institutionalise communities into conventional modes of governing. Attention has also been drawn to consider how practical support – such as funding – may bring challenges to the autonomy of community based organisations. But less attention has been paid to how *engagement* with community infrastructure bodies, and the “support” or capacity that they provide, steers communities, or may generate a state of dependency.

The empirical inquiry presented here explains how transactions between an emerging community-led partnership and community infrastructure supporters (including a CEN) affected the ability of the former to act with autonomy. Drawing upon qualitative interviews, ethnographic observations, and documentary analysis, the study analysed a small “alliance” that formed the nucleus of the community-led partnership. Key moments of its development and formalisation are critiqued to describe how such support may in fact, not facilitate community involvement in regeneration, but frustrate it.

Background to the case study

The group was established at the behest of the local authority to access funds designed to underwrite social capacity building, and ultimately, to contribute to the economic regeneration of the wider region. This took place after the local authority had noted that an under-spend of European Union Objective 1 funds[9] could be channelled to the area which was by all accounts “deprived” and “marginalised”. The group’s early minutes report that the group was informed that funding would *only* be granted if a new community-led partnership was established. This partnership was required immediately in order to meet stringent EU budget-spend deadlines.

The group was composed of local volunteers, several of whom had previous experience in locally organised groups, and were therefore identifiable to elements of

the local authority. “Seed corn”[10] local authority funding was used to hire a vacant premises in the “target community”, which would eventually become a community resource centre. The group was managed by five “trustees” (drawn from the community) who acted as the group’s board, and a small band of volunteers who ran a second hand shop, also established by the group. Trustees listed their core interests as: attempting to sustain a small community centre; increasing awareness of the group’s activities in the community; youth work; to act as a facilitator for training local residents; the organisation of “open” public meetings; and the conduction of area wide consultations and often rather confrontational campaigns on major issues (such as planning schemes) that affected the area.

Within the first few weeks of its formation, and under the guidance of the local authority’s community development manager, the young group undertook a consultation event which identified “community priorities”. This formed the basis of a business plan eventually submitted to the regionally co-ordinated European Union European Structural Development Funds Objective 1 funding stream[11]. Local authority funding was also used to generate some “match funding” a core component of the partnership’s overall composition and a non-negotiable aspect of Objective 1 funding criteria. This arrangement, and the rather rushed nature of the drafting of the initial business plan, was the source of many problems for the group over the course of its lifetime.

Shortly after its establishment, a development worker from the local CEN was introduced to the community group, ostensibly to provide build capacity, to support the writing of the Objective 1 funding bid, and to act as a conduit to Objective 1. The CEN development worker also provided advice to the group members on keeping records, developing and adopting a constitution, and in the conduct of meetings. The group was one of several that the CEN development worker dealt with across the city, the CEN being Objective 1’s preferred body for such capacity building.

The restrictive potential of facilitation

As reported in the group’s minutes, under the advice of the CEN the group “worked towards” formal status, either to become a company limited by guarantee, or by gaining charity status. A representative from Voluntary Community Services (VCS)[12] was asked to attend the next meeting to outline the options open to the group. It was clear that trustees had no experience in such matters and found this formalisation process an immense challenge, even with this support from infrastructure organisations. Illustrating this challenge a local authority employee who arranged initial meetings of the partnership admitted that community development work can be “jargony”, creating “hoops through which a group must jump”. Given that the group was spending public money, she continued, there were a set of “absolutely legitimate formalities they have to cover”. Against this context, she described the CEN as the “arms and legs” of the group before they employed their own development team.

The CEN was, therefore, a critical gatekeeper for the group, and upon whom the group relied to navigate the complicated funding procedures. Because of the urgency with which the group was formed, the group’s 10,000 “word” business plan was written almost entirely by the CEN. It was not fully understood by trustees, who only realised the gravity of their obligations months after the funding was granted. A representative of Objective 1 candidly observed that the CEN wrote and submitted the business plan on behalf of the group partly to “save time”. The group, she continued, in an interview, were

not familiar with the details of the document which contained objectives that “they just couldn’t do, or that were not realistic”. In light of this, she said:

[...] the CEN perhaps didn’t provide the support they should have done. And a lot comes down to capacity. It is a small group and is run just by volunteers [...]

Group meetings, even over a year after its establishment, were regularly attended by the CEN development worker. They were also preoccupied with attempts to gain capacity, to generate familiarity with rules and procedures of conduct, and in understanding the precise details and implications of the business plan. Trustees reported that they felt forced to “play by the rules” established by funders and required a great deal of assistance in learning how to engage with complicated accountancy and administrative structures.

Later, capacity was “built” to support the group in delivering services and in providing the foundations for the employment of a community development team. Though necessary to gain funding, trustees again perceived rules and regulations surrounding this development unnecessary bureaucratic burdens. Trustees found these pressures distracting from the practical aspirations that they had believed they were pursuing when they volunteered to lead the community-led partnership. In contrast, the CEN development worker defended such formality. Acknowledging that it was a hindrance for trustees, he said it was ultimately a form of protection for groups managing funds.

Piecing together £100,000 of match funding proved exceptionally demanding for the group. Without such financial support the group would have been ineligible for EU funding, such were the preconditions for “partnership” building and co-operation. The CEN arranged with Objective 1 to accept volunteer and trustee time “in kind” as match funds – an unusual agreement. But on several occasions Objective 1 reneged upon agreements regarding match funding and threatened to withhold payments. This occurred when key staff left the body for alternative positions[13]. They had depended upon the CEN to take care of such issues. Critically though, as such arrangements unravelled, the group was left somewhat helpless. They lacked the capacity, and did not possess the requisite knowledge in order to either understand, or attempt to address problems as and when they arose. These issues took some time to rectify, further frustrating trustees who were already reticent to spend the money as directed by Objective 1[14].

The group viewed the CEN (or more particularly, its development worker) as something of a figure of authority – or a representative of Objective 1 – in these and similar matters. But as such, the CEN came under regular criticism for, not only frustrations on the part of trustees regarding spending restrictions, but for every twist and turn in the management of what ultimately was a partnership formed with great urgency. Even though there was evidence that the CEN development worker was himself frustrated by the seemingly Byzantine administrative procedures and obligations, it was he who had to manage the group’s frustration during meetings.

The development worker admitted to making two errors in the group’s constitution that had to be repealed by a vote at the group’s Annual General Meeting (AGM). Trustees were furious regarding this error, later describing it as “very unprofessional”. Additionally, the VCS, which advised the group on financial management issues, made an accountancy error in the AGM report. These occurrences further undermined confidence in the guidance and support provided by facilitators.

These mistakes, and other issues outlined here, led to the proposition by the vice-chair that all contact with the CEN should be “cooled” and should first be sanctioned

by trustees. The CEN's advice was, he suggested, increasingly unreliable and contradictory, though "well meaning". In a critical moment, trustees supported this proposal, with the group chair proclaiming: "we should stand on our own two feet and do more things for ourselves". Against this backdrop the trustees eventually dealt directly with Objective 1 so that, the chair said, "nothing gets lost in translation". If mistakes were to be made, another reasoned in an interview, group trustees themselves "should make them", "should take responsibility" for them and "should learn from them".

Somewhat ironically, along with an erosion in the confidence of the CEN to provide advice, a concerted effort was made on the part of the group to develop greater independence and autonomy. But it is important to note that the group's chair was grateful for support provided by those charged with building the group's capacity. Illustrating this, and the tension that arose, the group's chair opined in an interview:

I don't hold anything against [the CEN development worker]. There have been a lot of unforeseen things [...] and this jargon – it doesn't help. If things are written in plain English we could understand it better, but when things are jargonised then you tend to rely on other people, and I'll never do that again [...] we have made mistakes, but that is how you learn.

Discussion and conclusions

The engagement of "communities" is a revered and integral aspect of economic and social regeneration programmes, and of governance processes more generally. Spaces of governance, and the structures of support that underlie them, often originating from within the state at various administrative and governance scales, may genuinely serve to facilitate community engagement. But as discussed, such initiatives emerge against challenging contexts, and bring with them "new rules of engagement" (Craig and Taylor, 2002, pp. 143-4). Statutory initiatives generate the spaces, opportunities, encouragement and support for engagement with the inhabitants of neighbourhoods, that is, local communities. However, they raise serious issues, not least regarding the degree to which communities are "captured" or are restricted.

Regeneration schemes are undoubtedly complex, and bring with them a confusing array of partners operating in alien structures and processes. Moreover, engagement precipitates a host of obligations and responsibilities for community organisations, for example, in accounting for funds or ensuring regulatory standards are met. This itself often places considerable pressure upon organisations that are, it must be remembered, essentially voluntary in nature. Against such regeneration governance landscapes, support for engagement through capacity building is frequently deemed necessary, both by local people and by scheme sponsors.

The empirical evidence presented here has been drawn from a wider and detailed ethnographic case study. It illustrates how a great deal of explanation and understanding can be drawn from methodological approaches that pay diligence to the micro-relationships between governance actors. Due to the limitations of space, only a snapshot of the relations between the "community-led" partnership and the bodies that provided support has been provided. It is also critical to note that the study has no pretence of being necessarily representative of the work of CENs. This case, and any such case, must be analysed against the context of its own particular circumstances. That said, and with these important caveats in mind, attention is now drawn to consider some of the generic lessons that may be extracted from the analysis.

The case clearly illustrates the critical role that may be played by capacity building ("infrastructure") organisations in supporting and facilitating community engagement

in regeneration schemes. Given the challenging circumstances within which regeneration schemes are generated, and the complicated and often confusing funding, accountancy, and bureaucratic structures that accompany them, such bodies often require considerable assistance. The community may be “infantilised” in such circumstances through “unnecessarily strict systems and controls” in a genuine, but disempowering, attempt to ensure statutory funds are accounted for (Rowe, 2006, pp. 211-12). Not only, then, did regeneration regimes provide a great many restrictions for the group themselves, but as has been illustrated, facilitation to alleviate these strains may provide a further series of demands upon groups.

Capacity building or infrastructure organisations undoubtedly act as *navigators* for groups – helping communities (albeit often under the guise of “partnerships”) acquire and manage funds. The case study also illustrated how facilitators act as an important conduit or negotiator on behalf of groups. It negotiated with the group’s principal funder on their behalf, helped the group to meet accountability obligations, and “translated” material into a form that could be consumed by the group.

Under such circumstances, intermediary bodies, clearly assume a critical *developmental* role. However, in the case presented here, such was the depth of support required to navigate the quite overwhelming complexities of funding initiatives, and the tight timescales within which they operate, support was rather more considerable and rather more rushed than appropriate. In many respects, the partnership was created somewhat “shotgun” in order to achieve resources (Rowe, 2006, p. 212). Critiques of these and similar such circumstances have been noted elsewhere. For instance, it has been suggested that more space and time should be provided for establishing the “fundamentals” of governance structures (Coaffee and Deas, 2008, p. 181).

Community organisations may in summary develop a significant degree of *dependency* upon facilitators such as CENs. There is evidence to suggest that this reliance knitted a handful of local people into partnerships, partly helping to legitimise statutory intervention in the locality, but also illustrative of a degree of “capture”, whereby groups formalise, develop and replicate norms and procedures of action (Barnes *et al.*, 2007). Although seemingly necessary to generate capacity for groups to engage fully in governance processes, prevailing circumstances may in fact result in communities being marginalised and with lines of accountability being significantly undermined. Rather than being at the “heart” of regeneration schemes, they may well by passed the very procedures through which they are theoretically supported. Perhaps most worryingly, this can generate a degree of distrust and disappointment in communities that are already somewhat disillusioned with those in power and authority.

Broadly, the case presented here is a classic tale of community co-option and conformity, albeit one that adds a new dimension to the observation of these tensions through an examination of the role of bodies that supposedly build community capacity. However, pressures on the independence and autonomy of governance actors are “nothing new” (Taylor, 1990, p. 6). Despite the attention on the pressures exerted upon the voluntary sector, there “will probably be more room for manoeuvre than many fear” (Taylor, 1990, p. 17). Attention has been turned to consider how communities are not necessarily incorporated into external agendas. Despite, and perhaps because of the restrictive environments within which they operate, community groups such as the one detailed here, may desire to become more independent and autonomous; or in their own words: “to stand on their own feet” and “to make – and learn from – their own mistakes”. The outcomes are in fact more negotiated than is

often perceived to be the case (Cochrane, 2007, p. 64). Therefore, capacity becomes something that is *developed* rather than *built* in a linear style.

Although much attention has been directed toward the expenditure – in terms of the financial resources and time invested – of capacity building or infrastructure organisations in regeneration initiatives, practitioners and academics alike must interrogate the price that this may have for the independence and autonomy of community groups.

Facilitation, of the type detailed here, creates many paradoxes for communities contributing to – or even leading – regeneration schemes. Difficult balances must be struck and maintained: while there is an appreciation of the need for “good management”, inappropriate demands from funders and regulators do indeed seriously risk the commitment of volunteers and management committee members (Taylor, 1996). Infrastructure organisations often possess a great deal of power and responsibility in processes of regeneration governance. Their precise role and affect must, therefore, be critically evaluated.

Notes

1. Terms that themselves are contested – see, for example, Taylor (2003).
2. See, for example, Chapman *et al.* (2008), for a discussion of recent initiatives to encourage the “third sector” in service delivery.
3. Terms such as “neighbourhood” and “community” are pervasive throughout such policies, and are often ill-defined and used interchangeably.
4. These initiatives have been furnished a host of labels, including “active citizenship”, “new localism”, “democratic renewal”, and “community planning”, with policies enacted “through voluntary and community-based activity, self-help and responsible lifestyle choices” (Newman, 2001, p. 144).
5. In the past funded by the Government’s Single Community Programme (SEU, 2001, p. 51; ODPM/Home Office, 2004, p. 27).
6. For a full overview of the aspirations of such intervention, see NRU (2001).
7. Deakin was referring specifically to the contracting of social care service provision to the voluntary sector.
8. This, in itself, potentially undermines the ability of community actors to resist external agendas (Taylor, 1996).
9. One of three priority objectives of European Structural Funds. Objective 1 funding is directed toward regions of the European Union that have a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of less than 75 per cent of the EU average. The case study neighbourhood was designated as eligible for Priority 4a funding. It aims to ferment “community-managed strategies” and to “provide a way for those that are most excluded to be part of economic and social renewal”. Priority 4b funding is reserved for more developed communities or “communities in migration”.
10. Funding provided in order to support the capacity of a project during its formative phase.
11. This bid, for £100,000 (augmented with a further £100,000 of “match funding”), was successful. In time, it permitted the group to retain the aforementioned premises, to employ their own community development worker and an administration officer who would pursue the aims of the group (as identified by the business plan), and to search for sustainable funding.
12. Another group which aims to facilitate community organisations, offering advice on charity accounts and legal and operational issues.

13. Objective 1 concluded allocating funds in December 2006 (with all funds to be spent by December 2008).
14. The strict ring-fencing of spending posed many frustrations for the trustees.

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