



## ***Usual Suspects or Community Leaders – What’s the Difference?***

**Summary of Pilot Online Discussion Forum  
22<sup>nd</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> November 2004**

### **Background**

This summary examines the current reality of community participation in formal decision-making structures, particularly within the context of economic regeneration. It is based on a participative on-line discussion project, facilitated by Bradford University’s Centre for Participation Studies, and the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Forum’s Active Partners Unit. The aim of the project was to create a space for practitioners to reflect upon current practice and issues, and to exchange views across a range of cross-sector experiences.

62 people signed up to join the discussion from the voluntary and community sector and from public sector agencies. Of these 62, 21 people contributed comments to the forum, whilst others followed the debate but did not post to it.

The discussion was facilitated to the extent that “starter questions” were posed each morning, but the discussions were open and user-led. 62 contributions were received in total. The discussion was summarised and presented at a seminar, where further and more directed discussion took place. An evaluation was undertaken about the processes and value of structured online discussions.

Discussions reflected the fact that in practice, “community engagement” often involves only a limited number of individuals – who may be perceived either as “community leaders”, or, in a more negative light, as “usual suspects”. This summary draws attention to the more problematic aspects of engaging communities through a limited number of “representative” individuals, and considers whether this system has merit as a method of community involvement, or whether it is indicative of fundamental problems inherent in common engagement processes.

### **What is community participation?**

The on-line forum raised a number of questions about the nature of participation – and highlighted the confusion between “involvement” and “consultation”. Those who took part in the forum predominantly took the view that real participation is about engaging communities in planning and decision making at all stages of a process, rather than consulting them about pre-defined agendas. The fact that consultation and involvement are very different, yet are often used interchangeably under the banner heading of “participation”, was identified as one of the reasons why communities may feel disempowered and therefore disinclined to engage.

This in turn can result in the responsibility for engagement becoming invested in a single individual - the “usual suspect”.

### Usual Suspects – an asset or a problem?

Contributors to the discussion identified that those often disparagingly referred to as “usual suspects” may have much to offer personally. The notion of unaccountable representatives was challenged, as individuals may be linked in to wider networks and therefore have the capacity to express a broad spectrum of views, even if they are not representative in an elected sense. It was also acknowledged that it may be more efficient, at least in the short term, for a partnership to engage with a small number of committed and experienced individuals, rather than to risk a delay to the delivery of services by seeking to develop active participation from the wider community.

However, contributors also drew attention to inherent problems within representative structures that allow only for the participation of a small group of individuals. These include insularity, lack of transparency and accountability, “volunteer burn-out” where too much responsibility is placed on individuals, and the danger of “gate-keeping”. Furthermore, by virtue of the fact that they are in a position to participate in decision-making, the “usual suspects” may be those who are the **least** excluded within their communities, and therefore lack the experience to present an accurate view of the issues. It is worth noting that others besides the “usual suspects” may equally well have the requisite qualities to participate in decision making – but that current processes may prevent them from doing so.

Also, there is a danger that communities may become further disempowered by effectively surrendering their roles as active citizens and passing the responsibility for decision making to a self-styled “community leader”.

Ultimately, the discussion indicated that it was inappropriate to criticize the “usual suspects”. The root cause of dissatisfaction amongst contributors was the inherent limitations of consultation systems, which do not include the wider public in a truly participative way – and the “usual suspects” may also find themselves disadvantaged by this situation.

### Why does it happen?

#### *“The Efficiency Fallacy”*

There is a temptation for partnerships to prioritise efficiency over effectiveness. Reliance on one or a few individuals to be the sole means of involvement will always be less costly, quicker, and more *efficient* than involving a wider group through diverse participative methods. However, it may be less *effective* in so far as any subsequent action may not truly reflect the needs and wishes of local people, and therefore may not be successful or sustainable in the long term.

#### *External Constraints*

Sometimes a failure to involve the wider community is not due to any lack of will, but can be a result of procedural obstacles or a lack of expertise in participative methods.

### *Failure to link Participation to Change*

There needs to be a perception within a community that involvement will result in real change. If there is no change, or change that does not accurately reflect the aspirations expressed during the process, this will result in cynicism, and disinclination by all but a limited few to continue their involvement. Also, if a community is not given an opportunity to shape agendas, but is expected to respond to or “rubber stamp” an agenda that may not reflect local concerns, it is likely that people will respond with apathy. One contributor cited an example of a consultation process which resulted in a clear priority from the community – but this was dismissed as “ineligible”, and the agency’s own suggestion was funded instead.

### *Inadequate Resources*

Resources are a factor – in terms of money, time and capacity - both within communities and external agencies. Amongst communities, a lack of confidence, confusion over the technical jargon used by professionals, and constraints on individuals’ time can all present barriers to wider engagement.

## **Conclusions and recommendations - is there an alternative?**

- To move beyond the “usual suspects” requires clarity and honesty about the level of involvement on offer (consultation, participation or control) and about what is open to influence and what is not.
- There needs to be a change in attitude and motivation to keep the focus on the needs of the community rather than the needs of the agency. Clearly, this may need to happen within the context of the constraints on agencies in terms of what are “eligible actions” within their programmes, but without a focus on issues relevant to local people, wider community interest cannot be sustained.
- Within the community people need support to become active citizens and need to be valued and recognised as volunteers. The “usual suspects” can be supported to be more inclusive, and to carry out participative consultation.
- Communication plays a vital role at all stages of the process, even when nothing obvious is happening. The form that communication takes is of particular importance, as this will determine the kinds of people likely to respond. Two-way communication is the key to transparency and accountability, so that those with decision-making responsibilities can account for what has been done in response to community involvement.

## **Project Evaluation**

Of the 62 people, who signed up to join the online discussion, sixteen returned an evaluation form.

- 62.5% of respondents had read most or all of the contributions.
- 75% of respondents found the online forum useful or very useful
- 87.5% of respondents would be interested in taking part in a future forum
- Participation was cross-sector, with just over half being from the VCS sector, and the rest mostly from the statutory / public sector.
- Over a third of respondents described themselves as being “Usual Suspects!”

## Moving the Debate Forwards

The subject of the “usual suspects” is often framed in a way that focuses attention on individuals, but the online discussion made it clear that the way these individuals are embedded in social structures does not favour wider engagement and participation.

While the discussion avoided blaming individuals, the consensus was that the “usual suspects” are a problem because of what their existence tells us about the weaknesses of participatory processes. This is most clear in the perception that participation does not lead to change. However, the situation also exposes the lack of critical reflection from people and agencies supporting such processes, on issues of representation and participation, leadership and accountability.

These issues are central to answering the question of what social structures and social processes would favour wider, more effective participation, and how we could go about promoting them.

## Further Information & Contact Details

Full documentation of the discussion is available from both the Active Partners Unit and from the University of Bradford. This documentation is also available from the Active Partners Website: <[www.regionalforum.org.uk/activepartners/other.php?id=28](http://www.regionalforum.org.uk/activepartners/other.php?id=28)>

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