

Participation or Pathology: Contradictory Tensions in Area-Based Policy

Pete Alcock

Institute of Applied Social Studies, University of Birmingham
E-mail: P.C.Alcock@bham.ac.uk

This paper discusses some of the tensions revealed in the development and implementation of recent area-based approaches to social policy in England. Such programmes are now a central feature of Government policy practice, although similar programmes have been developed in the past in the UK and other welfare capitalist countries. They reflect concerns to combat social exclusion and 'join-up' service provision. They are also evidence of a shift towards more agency based policy practice – from 'top-down' to 'bottom-up' planning. Thus participation of citizens is a key element in all programmes. Some of the problems of securing such participation are discussed, including in particular the tendency for expectations of participation to lead to pathological interpretations of the causes of (and solutions too) social exclusion.

Area-based initiatives

Area-based initiatives (ABIs) is the term used to describe the plethora of new programmes and projects which have been introduced by the government to provide additional resources for the combating of poverty and social exclusion, targeted on particular local districts or neighbourhoods. As we shall shortly discuss such targeting is not a new phenomenon within social policy; however, there is no doubt that its scale and scope have increased dramatically under the Labour administration since 1997 – the ABI website maintained by the Regional Co-ordination Unit (RCU) of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) lists around 50 separate initiatives (www.rcu.gov.uk/abi). Indeed the growth in the range of ABIs has recently led to a review by government of these within the ODPM (RCU, 2002), leading to the closure of some and the merger of others, although the final outcome of many of these changes is still to be realised. By and large these initiatives apply only in England. There are similar, but distinct, developments taking place within the devolved administrations in the other countries within the UK; but discussion here focuses upon activity in England only.

Within England the recent development of ABIs extends back to the local regeneration programmes of the previous Conservative administration. Of particular importance here was the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), initiated under Major, but continued and extended by Labour into a £5.6 billion programme supporting up to 900 local schemes, although these are now being phased out and have been transferred to the new Regional Development Agencies. However, Labour have introduced a number of new programmes, including the Health, Education and Employment Action Zones which commenced within the first year of office, the Sure Start and Children's Fund programmes (support for work with pre-school and school age children), the New Deal for Communities and

the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (see later), along with many more smaller and more focused programmes addressing issues such as community safety and environmental protection.

The recent and rapid growth of such area-based action is the result of a number of complementary policy developments, which are central to the Labour government's much-vaunted Third Way for policy planning. The extent to which the Third Way is a new and distinctive approach or is merely a pragmatic adaptation of the policy legacy which it inherited has, of course, been widely debated in social policy circles (see Powell, 2000; Driver and Martell, 2000). Most agree, however, that the Third Way aims to plot a middle way between some of the dualisms which have dominated previous policy practice, such as that between structure and agency; and this is particularly true of the area-based approach discussed here. What is also clear is that, in this area at least, it does draw (implicitly perhaps) upon previous academic debates and policy initiatives (Deacon, 2003), and that past policy lessons may remain relevant to future policy planning.

The area-based approach is also linked directly to the government's widely publicised goal of tackling poverty in twenty-first century Britain. Unlike the previous Conservative administrations, Labour has identified poverty as key social problem and its reduction as a major policy goal. More than this, they have embraced a broader notion of the problems of inequity and deprivation, captured by the concept of social exclusion. Without getting into a complex theoretical debate about the nature of social exclusion and its difference from poverty (see Room, 1995; Hills *et al.*, 2002), the government take it to mean more than just monetary or income inequality to include also issues such as health status, housing and environmental circumstances, access to and use of services, and much more (over 50 indicators covering such issues are listed in the government's annual report on combating social exclusion, DWP, 2002). The combating of social exclusion was given a high political profile early in the life of the Labour administration by the establishment of the *Social Exclusion Unit* (SEU).

The SEU is an interdepartmental unit linked directly to the Cabinet Office. It has no significant budget or personnel, being comprised mainly of staff seconded from service departments; and its remit is 'to co-ordinate and improve Government action' and 'to focus on areas where it can add value and address long term causes' (see the SEU website, www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk). In recognition of the potentially limitless scale of this task, the unit has been given a series of selective foci for its work, such as rough sleepers, teenage pregnancies and young runaways. One of its early concerns, however, was that of 'problem estates'; and it was out of this that the SEU's endorsement of area-based action emerged. In a series of papers discussing the evidence on spatial inequalities and the damaging consequences of neighbourhood decline, the SEU outlined the case for locally based responses to social exclusion (SEU, 1998, 2000, 2001). And as a direct result of this the Government established the New Deal for Communities (£2 billion over ten years for project work in 39 target neighbourhoods) and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (£900 million over three years for the 88 most deprived local authority districts, to be spent on local action projects), major planks in the ABI policy drive.

The identification of areas of deprivation, and the allocation of funding for programmes such as neighbourhood renewal, draws heavily on the new Index of Deprivation, developed for the government (DETR, 2000a). This employs a wider range of measures than previous indices and focuses more upon the incomes and circumstances of local residents. However, it retains many of the fundamental contradictions of the 'ecological

fallacy' (most poor people do *not* live in poor areas). This has been reviewed in a recent article on the geography of poverty by Powell *et al.* (2001) which outlines a more sophisticated distinction between 'people poverty and place poverty', pointing out that these lead to the identification of different areas – and different policy responses. As we shall see, these remain critical issues for both the principle and the practice of area-based policy action.

There are other elements within the ABI policy context, however. One of the Prime Minister's comments on the need for co-ordinated responses to problems such as social exclusion was that it should be the role of government to provide 'joined-up solutions' to such 'joined-up problems'. Implicit in the idea of joining-up is some recognition of the fact that in the past much government activity, and most public services, have been developed and administered largely in isolation from each other – frequently referred to as the problem of the 'silo mentality'. The lives of citizens are not broken down into these separate silos, nor therefore should the public agencies serving them be. The recent practice of joined-up government is explored by Sullivan and Skelcher (2002, and see Ling, 2002); and Pollitt (2003) has produced an overview of some of the key questions arising from the literature. All conclude that joining-up is neither a simple nor an immediate solution to the problems of co-ordinating public services, and that, whilst high profile commitment to it is important, such a fundamental change in policy practice cannot just be imposed 'top-down'.

To be fair, most politicians and policy makers do recognise that changing the structure of public services cannot be achieved with a 'quick fix', and that it is in the process of developing and delivering services that change must be embraced and implemented. Critical in the promotion of such change is the new requirement for *partnership* working amongst public, and other, agencies. Partnership is now a key theme underlying new developments within public service provision (Hudson *et al.*, 1999; Huxham, 2000). Sullivan and Skelcher list over 50 multi-agency partnerships operating in 2001/02 (2002: 228–237), and point out that it is at the local level where the greatest 'congestion' of initiatives is felt (2002: 225).

Partnership working covers a wide range of different forms of communication, co-ordination and collaboration, however. Some partnership working is long term and strategic (in theory, though generally not in practice, in the social care field), but much is short term and instrumental (in particular many partnership bodies linked to ABIs, established to meet programme specifications in order to access funds for local project work) (Glendinning *et al.*, 2002); and, as Powell and Exworthy (2002) conclude, it is far from clear that policy makers have thought through the complex contextual problems of turning the good ideals of partnership into good practice in the real world.

Nevertheless the expectation that partnership bodies be established to provide strategic direction for programme activities is a central feature of much area-based activity, most notably in the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) established in all the 88 local authority districts in receipt of neighbourhood renewal funding (DETR, 2000b). In many areas these LSPs will build on past collaborative fora; they are not all starting from cold therefore. However, research on similar bodies by Russell (2001) found that getting such partnerships to move from planning to delivery of services was a challenge that many found difficult, not the least because of restrictions which some partners faced within their own service areas resulting from central government service priorities. Moving beyond the rhetoric of joining-up is still a challenge for all levels of government.

ABIs are therefore a product of both substantive and procedural commitments by the Labour Government. They are a key element in the combating of social exclusion, and they are a leading example of the implementation of joined-up provision through partnership working. They also address the Third Way commitment to a more explicit embracing of the balance between structure and agency mentioned above (and see Deacon, 2003). This is sometimes presented as the need to challenge the 'top-down' approach to planning and delivery, now associated by government pundits with an 'old Labour' approach to securing structural change.

New Labour thinking (or at least rhetoric) embraces 'bottom-up' as well as 'top-down' approaches to policy planning. In other words the development of policy practice (and in particular the project activity arising out of ABI programmes) should be constructed with the local citizens whom it is intended to benefit; and local citizens should be involved in implementing, and monitoring, policy practice. Thus policy programmes will aim to change structural conditions; but they will do so by activating agents to be participants in the process of change. Such activation extends across a wide range of Labour's policy programmes (for instance, in combating unemployment and in pension planning); but in the ABIs it takes on a formal organisational status in the meeting of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' policy planning – captured by the much-vaunted commitment to *participation*.

Participation

Participation of local residents and communities is at the forefront of policy implementation in all ABIs. Early evaluation of the NDCs stressed the importance of including residents and community groups (DETR, 1999: 7), and the guidance on LSPs pointed out that 'attention should be given at an early stage to ensuring that all sections of the community have the opportunity to participate' (DETR, 2000b: para. 2.20). Participation also extends into expectations of the way all levels of government, including local authorities, should now be (re)engaging with their constituencies (Lowndes *et al.*, 2001). The importance of such participation arises from both theoretical concerns and practical pressures.

The theoretical basis is rooted in the more explicit recognition of the need to balance both structure and agency in the planning and delivery of social policy, captured in the aim to synthesise top-down and bottom-up approaches. It extends beyond this, however, to embrace the newfound engagement with 'social capital'. Social capital is the term used to refer to the stock of social relations within a community or society, perhaps best understood as the social networks to which citizens belong. Much recent concern with the concept stems from the work of the US political scientist, Robert Putnam, who claimed to demonstrate the importance of such networks in supporting democratic government in Italy (Putnam, 1993) and later identified their relative decline in the USA in the late twentieth century as a potential threat to future democracy there (Putnam, 2000).

Of course, Putnam's work on social capital is a complex and much contested arena of academic and policy debate (see Foley and Edwards, 1999); but its implications have been taken up by policy makers in a number of settings, including the UK government. In simple terms the government see in social capital a kind of proxy measure for the level of social inclusion and integration within communities (and hence society more generally), generally captured in quantitative analysis of membership of civil society

groups and organisations. Thus the promotion of social capital is an underlying goal of social action programmes. This means involvement and inclusion of communities and citizens within social networks, and the creation or support of networks which promote such involvement. Participation is not just the means to an end here, it is an end in itself; for it is through participation that inclusion and integration become possible.

At the same time, however, participation is also the means by which it can be ensured that policy programmes deliver the social changes that local citizens and their communities need. The essence of the 'bottom-up' approach is the recognition that policy makers (and policy practitioners) do not know best what the priorities for local social services should be. It is local people who know what they need, and hence they should be involved in the process of determining priorities, and developing and delivering service provision. The government talk about this as the need to develop 'local solutions to local problems'; and, in order to tailor policy programmes to particular local circumstances, local citizens must be able to participate in policy planning. If this participation is to be meaningful, however, it must extend beyond a procedural involvement (a seat at the table) to the acquisition of power over the decisions made (a voice in the debate), explored in more detail in the research by Anastacio *et al.* (2000) and Burns and Taylor (2000). This means not just involvement, but empowerment.

The notion of empowerment captures both the theoretical and the practical goals of participation. Creating or entering into new social networks will give citizens access to (some of) the social processes that shape their lives. The social capital that they thus acquire has a real value for them in enriching their social lives. In practical terms too having the power to influence the development and delivery of local services, indeed even becoming a part of that delivery process, means that 'bottom-up' policy planning becomes a realisable goal, and the configuration of service provision will shift to reflect local needs. These are bold, and laudable, goals. However, they are not entirely new ones, and in practice they face major tensions and contradictions.

Problems

Area-based action to promote social inclusion and regeneration through the empowerment of local people is not a new idea. In the UK it can be traced back to the Urban Programme, Community Development Projects and other 'positive discrimination' initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s (see Berthoud *et al.*, 1981). Indeed it can be traced back to the US 'War on Poverty' programme of the early 1960s, on which most of the later UK programmes were modelled. The War on Poverty famously promised to deliver 'maximum feasible participation' of local citizens through involvement in locally based project planning and delivery (Marris and Rein, 1972: 215).

This is not place to review the successes and failures of these previous area-based programmes, although commentators at the time were more than equivocal about the former, arguing that there were fundamental flaws in the neighbourhood approach to combating poverty (see, for instance, Lees and Smith, 1975, and CDP, 1977 on the UK; Marris and Rein, 1972, and Piven and Cloward, 1972 on the US). In their review of area-based policies in the 1970s, Eyles (1979) and Hamnett (1979) pointed to contradictions at the heart of the 'areal response' to social problems, in particular if these were intended in practice as a substitute for commitments to secure broader social and economic change at the national level; and this challenge remains at the centre of policy development today.

Maximum feasible participation is intended to challenge the structural tendencies and top-down approaches of past policy planning. This means a challenge to these processes and to the people who have developed and operated them. There is a great deal of paternalism within public policy provision, bolstered in many cases by an extensive bureaucracy. This has empowered the policy practitioners and has excluded local citizens. Practitioners may not willingly embrace a shift in the locus of this power; and, more significantly perhaps, local citizens may have little experience of, or confidence in, new initiatives which promise to transform this. And this is likely to be compounded, of course, where there is experience of previous attempts which have not succeeded. The legacy of paternalism will not easily be challenged by the newfound commitment to empowerment, especially if this is, in itself, perceived by some as a top-down policy priority.

The implementation of participation itself is also far from a simple matter of energising and activating citizens to take a voice and a share in local policy making. Many of the policy documents refer to the participation of citizens and communities – which citizens and what communities? Community is one of the most widely used (and misused) concepts, in particular within public policy rhetoric about engagement with ‘the community’. Taylor (2003) provides a useful summary of most of these debates, and suffice it to say that her conclusion is that community is a slippery, and a contested, concept with different protagonists using it to mean different things at different times. Citizen involvement is also obviously problematic. All citizens cannot get involved in everything, and clearly some citizens are more likely to get involved in some activities than others. To be fair government policy makers do appear to recognise the need to avoid participation by ‘the usual suspects’ (DETR, 2000b: para. 2.20); but quite how the most marginalised and excluded individuals are to be empowered, at the expense in practice of the more articulate and concerned, is not really addressed.

What such participation would certainly require is a commitment to develop the capacity of marginalised citizens and communities to take a more active role in their local social affairs. The need for such community development is not a new concern, of course. It was a major feature of the debate, and the practice, within the earlier neighbourhood action programmes (Baillie, 1975), and is now a well-established area of academic and policy concern (Craig and Mayo, 1995). It is now frequently referred to as ‘capacity building’ (see Demos, 2003). It is a recognised item on the agenda of ABI programmes and a key requirement of many of the projects funded by these. But building capacity is a long-term challenge. It is a goal to which all local project work can (and should) aspire; but it is goal which will take long-term investment before tangible results are likely to be achieved. And here the commitment to participation comes into conflict with some of the other pressures on the area-based action programmes of the new century.

ABIs are a high profile element of the Labour government’s policy commitments to promote social inclusion and improve the delivery of public services. Governments expect to be judged on the success of such programmes. Indeed the current government has publicly endorsed such judgements by establishing extensive academic evaluation of its programmes and by publishing regular reports upon the achievements of them, for instance the annual report on poverty and social exclusion, which includes data on changes in a range of indicators of social inclusion (DWP, 2002). Thus the government needs results, and cannot wait for the long-term investments which capacity building needs to deliver these. Indeed, the reporting requirements associated with many of the ABI

programmes encourage managers to identify 'early hits', and these are used in government publicity, for instance the SEU magazine *Inclusion*.

The demand for early hits reveals a contradiction at the heart of the government's practice within the ABI programmes therefore. Achieving greater social inclusion is a long-term challenge, and yet the ABI programmes are all on short-term budgets with the expectation of making a difference which can be felt, and publicised, now. This is at odds with the fundamental basis of community development, as Alison West, from the Community Development Foundation, put it in a report on the NDCs in the *Observer* (7 July 2002):

The real problem was that the money came first and then the capacity building was supposed to take place. It was the wrong way round – it was trying to make people run before they could walk.

However, alongside this practical contradiction within the participation agenda there is another theoretical one, which exposes some of the potential dangers of the shift in the balance between structure and agency which lies behind the new Labour social inclusion programmes.

Pathology

Local citizens and communities are encouraged to participate in the programmes designed to improve local services and regenerate their local areas because this will ensure that future provision reflects local needs, and through this the process of empowerment will make local people active agents in their own social improvement. No longer will citizens be the passive recipients of services designed and delivered by others, and through the social capital that they acquire from the new networks within which they now operate their capacity to shape the social world more generally will be enhanced. Whatever the practical difficulties, therefore, the empowerment of local agents appears to be an unqualified good.

However, this shift towards agency-based social change contains another contradictory tension, that of pathologisation of the social exclusion problem. The expectation that local citizens can be, and should be, the agents of local regeneration suggests that this is so because it is they who are the authors of their current misfortunes. This looks like a classic case of 'blaming the victim'; and it was a tendency identified as early as 1971 by the American critic of the US War on Poverty, Ryan, in a book entitled just that. He argued that social problems were being identified as being associated with the circumstances of those experiencing them and then policy makers were constructing 'humanitarian action programmes' to get people to correct these themselves (Ryan, 1971: 8). 'Helping the poor to help themselves' was a slogan widely used within the US War on Poverty lexicon.

It is unlikely that politicians and policy makers in the new century would subscribe to such an overtly pathological model of social improvement. However, in a more covert form it is an ever-present danger in the shift towards agency-based, bottom-up social planning. In particular, for instance, the insistence on local solutions to local problems can suggest that all such problems and solutions are locally based. In the case of broader economic forces (such as those leading to the closure of local employers) or of broader

public service shortcomings (such as lack of health or social care places) this is clearly not so. And achieving change in private industrial investment or public spending on health and social care is not a solution which is open to local agents, no matter how capable and active they become. As Clark and Hopkins (1968: 256) concluded in their evaluation of the US community action programmes of the 1960s:

deprivation in many areas... may not be responsive to programmes of amelioration and community action. The problems of poverty cannot be resolved as if they were isolated from the wider economic, social and political patterns of the nation.

Of course, the Labour government do recognise the importance of these broader economic, social and political forces. Economic policy has been geared directly towards the aim of providing a secure framework for forward industrial investment; and expenditure on public services in order to improve delivery to citizens is at the top of the political agenda. Labour is not in practice abandoning structural responses to social development. However, there is a danger that these broader economic and social commitments do not connect well with the rhetoric of social activation within the area-based social inclusion programmes, where the pressure is on to show what local people can do. At a fundamental level of policy development and delivery there is a continuing failure to join up thinking and practice here.

This lack of joining up is evidence of a theoretical tension within the structure and agency continuum; but it also has practical consequences for the operation of area-based policy action. The (misplaced) belief that local problems require local solutions, may lead some national (on international) actors to assume that they have no role to play in these. National agencies thus may not see the need to engage with the local policy agenda. One early example of this within the new ABI policy drive was the contradiction between the national service framework objectives of health service agencies and the local community priorities of the Health Action Zones (HAZ). As with other ABIs the HAZs were initially established with a brief to 'harness the dynamism of local people' (NHSE, 1997), and most sought to work locally to establish local priorities for action. However, centrally imposed service aims (such as reductions in coronary heart disease) meant that local NHS agencies were under pressure work to these and other traditional health service priorities, rather than joining-up with bottom-up local agendas (Barnes *et al.*, 2001).

Conclusions

Reviewing area-based policies in 1979, Hamnett concluded that, 'A concentration on area-based explanations of deprivation is likely to obscure the fundamentally structural rather than spatial or pathological origins of deprivation' (1979: 257). This is a warning that those seeking to alter the balance between structure and agency through area-based action today would do well to heed. The challenge which is posed for ABIs is to deliver on commitments to locally driven policy making through participation and empowerment, without at the same time passing the burden of social change onto local citizens and communities, and permitting other external agencies to opt out. This means retaining broader commitments to structural change in economic and social policy; and at the same time ensuring that the mainstream agencies responsible for these do join-up with

the local partnership agenda. This is not an impossible challenge; but, as argued here, it does require an embracing of the theoretical and practical problems involved in delivering genuine participation within area-based action, and a recognition of the tensions posed by any drift towards pathology in 'bottom-up' approaches to policy planning. In particular it requires a cautious re-assessment of some of the rhetoric about the imperative to be seen to 'making a difference' – as is often the case in such circumstances, early hits are not always evidence of accurate shooting.

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