Communities in Partnership: Developing a Strategic Voice

Marilyn Taylor

Professor of Urban Governance and Regeneration, Cities Research Centre, University of the West of England
E-mail: marilyn.taylor@uwe.ac.uk

The increasing emphasis on community participation across the globe is well-documented. In the UK, it has been a central theme in neighbourhood renewal policy, where communities are expected to engage not only at neighbourhood level but also to take their place alongside public and private sector players in local strategic partnerships at city- or district-wide levels. Engaging communities beyond the neighbourhood poses particular challenges for the voluntary and community sector infrastructure. This article draws on an evaluation of the UK government's Community Participation Programmes to identify the challenges of scaling up to these levels and how these can be addressed.

Introduction

Over the years, communities across the globe have increasingly been involved in governance at local and neighbourhood levels. The majority of local authorities in England, for example, now have some kind of sub-local participatory governance structure, involving area forums, neighbourhood forums or area committees. These tend to operate across all service areas and typically, although not always, involve individual residents and/or community organisations (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). In the UK, communities are also expected to take a leading role in a range of partnership initiatives in disadvantaged neighbourhoods – the New Deal for Communities, Sure Start and Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders among them. Meanwhile, recent government proposals to devolve more budgets and powers to neighbourhood level have the potential to bring mainstream decision making even closer to neighbourhood residents.

However, not all issues can be resolved at neighbourhood level. As Alcock argues (2005: 328), many of 'the forces behind inequality and exclusion lie outside... the local neighbourhoods where their effects are most acute'. A strategic overview is also necessary for decisions to be made about where to target resources and how to mainstream localised interventions. So, community representatives in England have also been given a place as of right in local strategic partnerships (LSPs) at city- and district-wide levels, whose remit is to develop and implement neighbourhood renewal strategy, co-ordinate partnership activity and ensure that mainstream budgets are targeted more effectively. The UK government has not only required LSPs to include community representatives, it has also invested in the voluntary and community sector infrastructure that is necessary to support this level of engagement through, firstly, the Community Participation Programmes and, more recently, the Single Community Programme.

There are many reasons why governments encourage community engagement. Firstly, given a growing body of work that links social capital with positive outcomes in health, economic vitality and crime reduction, community engagement has been encouraged

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for its own sake as an intrinsic good. Secondly, consultation with citizens and public service users is encouraged as a way of improving the responsiveness of these services. Thirdly, community engagement is seen as a springboard for civic engagement. At the same time, deliberative and participatory mechanisms are being used to revitalise a democratic process that has seen rapidly falling voting figures over recent years. Partnerships with communities are also seen as the way to tackle issues that cut across traditional departmental boundaries and remain resistant to top–down solutions. Indeed, communities are increasingly seen as the first line of defence against a range of social problems.

Despite the current emphasis on engaging communities, however, much of the literature in the UK and beyond suggests that communities still feel marginalised in the new governance spaces (see summary in Taylor, 2003). In part, this is because of 'rules of engagement' which entrench pre-existing cultures and power relationships. The evidence also suggests that many partners lack the capacity or will to engage communities effectively. For their part, communities themselves face many challenges in learning to negotiate effectively and maintain an autonomous and distinctive voice in these spaces.

These challenges are magnified when communities seek to establish an effective voice beyond the neighbourhood. As long ago as 1967, for example, Marris and Rein, analysing the US War on Poverty (pp. 185–186), highlighted the difficulties of organising a coherent constituency around poverty, especially when special funding initiatives were encouraging groups to compete with each other for limited funds. Their analysis still has a strong resonance 40 years later.

This article, therefore, analyses the challenges involved in establishing an effective link between community activity on the ground and decision-making structures at city- and district-wide levels. Drawing on research carried out to evaluate the Community Participation Programmes in England, it examines the development of the Community Empowerment Networks (CENs) that were established in 2001 to support voluntary and community sector engagement with LSPs – their potential, the challenges they face and the prospects for continued strategic involvement in the future.

The Community Participation Programmes

Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), on which voluntary, community and business sector representatives sit alongside public sector politicians and officers, are designed to foster joined-up working across local institutions, to give strategic coherence to the different partnership initiatives operating locally and to ensure that mainstream service budgets are 'bent' towards agreed neighbourhood renewal priorities.

Communities are expected to be key partners:

> Effective engagement with the community is one of the most important aspects of LSP's work and they will have failed if they do not deliver this. (SEU, 2001: 51)

To facilitate this in the 88 neighbourhood renewal priority areas, central government funding was made available directly to the voluntary and community sector to support its involvement in the LSP. There were three Programmes: the Community Chest and the Community Learning Chest – both designed to stimulate local activity, build group capacity and provide opportunities for learning – and the Community Empowerment

Fund which provided funding for a Community Empowerment Network (CEN) in each locality to support networking, cohesion and co-ordination and help local communities to contribute effectively to local governance through the LSP and other partnerships.

In 2004, the separate strands of the Programme were brought together under a Single Community Programme to improve the linkage between the different programmes and also to introduce a sharper focus on the neighbourhood. Further policy developments mean that the three Programmes will, in the Spring of 2006, be absorbed into a Safer and Stronger Communities Fund (SSFC), which will merge a number of the funding streams from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Home Office that are concerned with tackling neighbourhood renewal and devolve these to local authority/LSP level.

Evaluating the Programmes

The evaluation of the Programmes was carried out over a year between 2003 and 2004. It included:

- a survey of all lead organisations in the three Community Participation Programmes to establish the broad picture;
- ten locality case studies, eight from the 88 areas with neighbourhood renewal funding and two from areas just outside the 88. These case studies included a short questionnaire survey of 106 voluntary and community groups from within the eight priority neighbourhood renewal areas.

Workshops with key stakeholders from government offices and local communities were held throughout the evaluation to test out research tools and initial findings.

The 'theory of change' which the evaluation team adopted is illustrated in Figure 1. The Community Chest was established to ensure that representation at a strategic level was firmly rooted in widespread activity on the ground. The Community Learning Chest provided opportunities for people to improve their skills and widen their horizons as the basis for wider engagement. These activities were then expected to feed into the Community Empowerment Network, the role of which was to bring the diversity of community interests together and feed them into the strategic decision-making process through supporting representatives on the LSP and other partnerships and through providing a channel for feedback and accountability to the wider constituency. Put another way, these policies sought to build bonding social capital within communities, bridging social capital across communities and linking social capital between communities and decision makers/service providers in order to achieve neighbourhood renewal targets.

At the time of the evaluation, most CENs had only been up and running for two years. There was considerable variation between localities: in some, there was already considerable experience of working in partnerships, an established infrastructure and a long tradition of investment in the voluntary and community sector; elsewhere, CENs were starting pretty much from scratch. Nonetheless, it was possible to establish the potential of the Programmes across different localities and also to identify the challenges inherent in establishing a community voice at this level.

The potential of the Programmes

The evaluation suggests (ODPM, 2005a) that the Chests were reaching new and unfunded groups that other initiatives and services had not been able to reach. Moving up Figure 1, Chest administrators were also building links between groups by putting new grant recipients in touch with similar groups in their locality. Some invited new grant recipients to join their decision-making panel. This not only gave them a recognition they had never had before; it also widened their perspective, giving them a sense of what was happening beyond their neighbourhood. Although we were not able to follow up the many groups who received Chest funding, we did find examples where groups had progressed from receiving Chest funding to linking with other groups, joining the Community Empowerment Network and developing links with local service providers (ODPM, 2005a: 25).

CENs were also building bridging social capital between different parts of the sector. In many parts of the country, the need to set up a formal structure to feed into the LSP focused voluntary and community sector energies and started to break down divisions and faultlines. One respondent commented:

> It made voluntary and community organisations talk to each other . . . when maybe they had only seen each other as a threat.

Indeed, members of one CEN demonstrated their solidarity by volunteering – in the face of proposed funding cuts – to take cuts in their own grants rather than see others go to the wall (ODPM, 2005a: 29). Elsewhere, CENs were developing structures and strategies to build explicit links between neighbourhood groups and communities of interest – minority ethnic groups, groups of disabled people, gay and lesbian groups and so on – a particularly important task if exclusion was to be broken down within neighbourhoods as well as across them.

Moving further up Figure 1, CENs in all localities had managed to establish a presence on the LSP – although numbers and proportions varied. The central government requirement that LSPs include voluntary and community sector partners had been a major driver in this, especially in localities where there was little history in the public sector of engaging with communities. In more progressive areas, voluntary and community sector representatives were taking up positions of power within the LSP, chairing important subgroups, or even the Partnership itself. Indeed, a separate survey of LSPs (ODPM, 2005b) found that, by 2004, 11 per cent of LSPs were chaired by representatives from the sector – up from 2 per cent in 2002. Because of connections made at the LSP, service providers were also beginning to establish working links with communities beyond the formal LSP setting (see also NAO, 2005).

In the most effective partnerships, there was evidence that CEN representatives had influenced LSP decision making. They had influenced strategies for Neighbourhood Renewal funding and held key positions on LSP sub-committees set up to oversee this strategy. Some CENs had influenced policy towards the voluntary and community sector and on equalities issues (in some localities, CEN representatives were the only minority ethnic members of the LSP). Others had been able to influence the way that LSPs were run, encouraging them to break away from the usual 'rules of engagement' and set up more open and accessible meetings. However, there was little evidence as yet of them influencing the 'mainstream'.
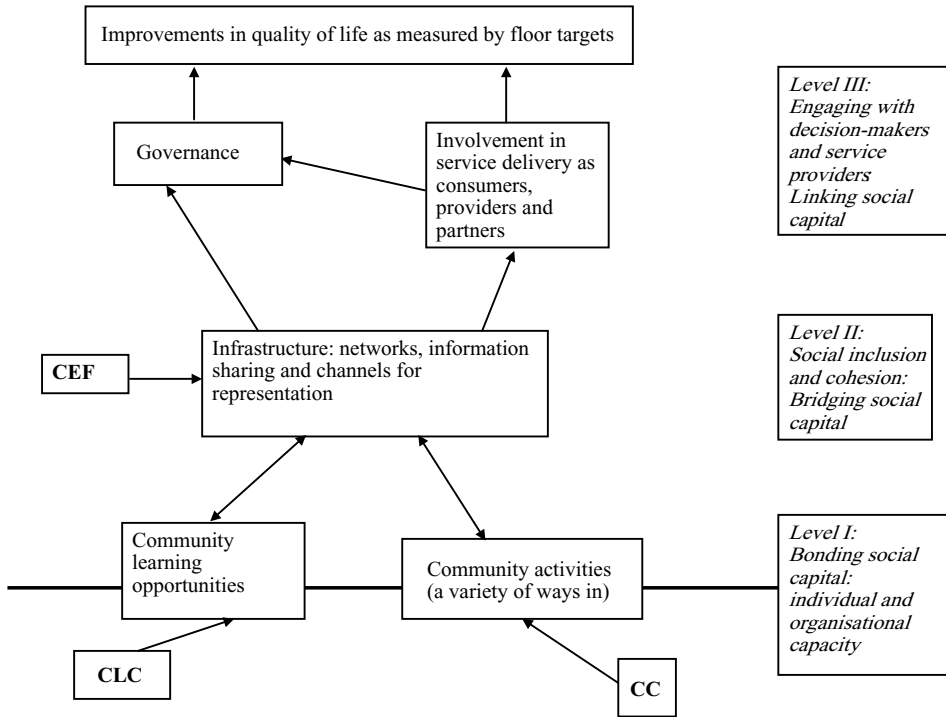
Figure 1.

The challenges of developing a strategic voice

The progress made by the more advanced CENs illustrates the potential of the Programmes. But most agreed that there was further to go at every level of Figure 1. In early performance management exercises, most networks identified outreach and communications as key areas for improvement. Even the most successful accepted that they had further to go if they were to reach the most informal and excluded groups. With a lot of attention focused on getting the CEN up and running, employing staff and establishing systems for electing representatives, communications with the wider sector were often underdeveloped.

Even where they were reaching small and marginalised groups, it proved difficult to interest these in the work of the CEN. Despite the examples given earlier, in most localities there was little effective linkage between the work of the Chests and that of the Community Empowerment Network. In part this was due to the design of the Programmes – in half of the localities, the Chests and the Community Empowerment Network had a different 'lead' organisation. This changed with the amalgamation of the separate Programmes into the Single Community Programme, with one lead organisation. Structure was also a factor. At the time of our study, many CENs were still experimenting with structures: in some, the membership was made up of individual organisations; in others, it was made up of networks based on particular policy areas or communities of interest. In the latter

case, the links between individual groups on the ground and the overarching CEN could be extremely tenuous.

Respondents also acknowledged that the strategic work of the CEN was 'a dry old thing to sell':

> Most groups are focused on their own thing, so any networking initiative struggles. Their own groups take up a lot of energy, they have work and a family etc. It is unrealistic to think that the majority of groups will devote a lot of time to city-wide strategic issues. They will prioritise the things that are closest to home.

Developing the engaged and informed membership that a CEN requires is therefore likely to be a long-term challenge.

A second challenge – at the second level of Figure 1 – is that of creating a coherent constituency out of a highly diverse sector. The evidence suggested that many CENs related either to the more professional voluntary sector or to the more informal community sector, rather than bringing the two together. There were also fault lines between black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and the mainstream sector and indeed between different BME communities. In some localities, where there were deep divisions within the sector, it had proved impossible to set up a CEN within the required timeframe, while in others a rushed start had led to short cuts which were making further progress difficult. There were also problems in localities where the voluntary and community sector already had pre-existing or parallel structures of representation. In some, the arrival of the CEN was used as an opportunity to streamline participation through one main channel, but elsewhere it was either seen as a threat by existing infrastructure bodies or further complicated an already fragmented picture.

A third challenge – moving between the second and third levels – is that of reconciling representation and leadership with widespread participation. LSP partners often complained that CEN representatives were the 'same old faces'. However, further enquiry suggested considerable ambivalence. While partners were often scathing about the 'usual suspects', they could be equally critical of less experienced representatives who found it difficult to look beyond their own particular neighbourhood and take a more strategic view.

There is a difficult balance to be struck at any level between ensuring that CEN representatives have the skills and experience to make a full contribution, on the one hand, and bringing new people on board, on the other. As I have suggested in previous research (Taylor, 2003), the 'usual suspects' are often created by rules of engagement that required representatives to 'hit the ground running'. This is even more likely at strategic level, where operating effectively requires considerable experience. It takes time for people new to strategic arenas to move beyond their more local and immediate preoccupations. Indeed, faced with new elections for CEN representatives, one LSP chair – from the statutory sector – acknowledged that they needed to hang on to their more experienced representatives:

> We need some consistency. We have spent ages building up capacity . . . As they get more experienced and have greater ownership of the agenda, they will have greater parity. If we get a whole new load, we will go back six months.

Partners were particularly critical of the number of paid community workers among CEN representatives. However, respondents pointed out that the level of demand on these

representatives, the timing of meetings and issues about compensation meant that it was not realistic to expect people who were not paid to engage in significant numbers. As one CEN worker pointed out:

> Unpaid community representatives . . . are often struggling to find solutions to their own community issues, sometimes as basic as not having anywhere to meet, at the same time as trying to meet the expectations of a strategic and sector wide perspective on the LSP. This has resulted in a high turnover of representatives in some places, even where there is a very successful network.

The pool of people willing to serve on partnerships like an LSP is always likely to be small. Given this reality, the key to effective representation may not be how 'typical' people are but how 'accountable' they are. However, many CENs recognised that they needed to improve in this respect. Effective accountability requires an informed and engaged membership and this will depend on resolving the issues of outreach and communication discussed above.

The final two challenges – at level III – relate to capacity, in all three sectors. Partners in several localities argued that CEN representatives were not strategic enough. They were also frustrated by what they saw as a preoccupation with 'process'. Where LSP structures or processes were exclusive and inaccessible, this 'preoccupation' was needed. Elsewhere, however, respondents felt that CEN reps were staying in 'comfortable' territory and not getting stuck into the real policy issues. Partners were also frustrated by a tendency among some CEN representatives to get 'stuck in opposition', not willing to engage constructively with partners. Indeed, this frustration was shared by some of the voluntary and community sector respondents in our research, criticising the all-too-common assumption that 'the council cannot be influenced and the business sector is nefarious'. Another commented that, even when the sector did have influence, some representatives were unable to acknowledge that there had been any movement or abandon their 'victim' status.

On the other hand, respondents also highlighted the opposite danger – that some community representatives would be seduced by their new-found status and lose their independent voice. The sheer volume of work at LSP level added to the danger that CENs would find themselves rubberstamping rather than challenging or contributing to LSP decisions.

Ultimately, however, the success of the CEN in engaging at this strategic level depended on the capacity and receptiveness of the LSP itself. There is a great deal of research in the UK and abroad which demonstrates how resistant public sector actors can be to partnership working. This research demonstrates the difficulties partners often have in accepting any challenge or criticism from their voluntary and community sector colleagues, regarding any dissent as 'rocking the boat'. This was especially likely to be the case, in our research, in localities where there was little previous experience of community participation.

The capacity of CEN representatives to have an influence in and through LSPs also depended on the extent to which the LSP had established its own legitimacy and credibility as part of the pattern of local governance in the area. LSPs are themselves new bodies and one disenchanted respondent described the LSP as 'muddling through, responsible for everything, but with authority for nothing'. Where partners saw the LSP as irrelevant or inappropriate, it was unlikely to provide an effective route for community empowerment.

Finally, CEN influence could be sidelined by the need for LSPs to meet 'floor targets' defined by central government. In one of our case study localities, for example, CEN respondents claimed that slow progress in getting voluntary and community sector access to neighbourhood renewal funds was stopped in its tracks when leading civil servants put pressure on to their LSP to do more to meet the centrally driven 'floor targets'. Community involvement took a back seat as larger professional initiatives, which could deliver the required numbers, were given preference.

Meeting the challenges

What are the implications for communities and partners in addressing these challenges?

The task for CENs of bridging the chasm between very small-scale community activity on the ground and city- or district-wide decision-making is huge. The Single Community Programme's focus on the neighbourhood and government's proposed devolution of powers to neighbourhood level might create a stronger foundation for engagement by building up partnership capacity at a level which people can relate to more easily. But cross-cutting structures beyond the neighbourhood are needed if neighbourhoods are not set to compete with one another, if learning is to be shared and if the needs of communities of interest within and across neighbourhoods are to be served. I have referred earlier to the explicit efforts being made by some networks to build bridges between neighbourhoods and communities of interest and it will be important to share learning in this respect as the networks develop. It will also be important to ensure that the focus on neighbourhoods does not squeeze out this bridging work.

Establishing a variety of connections across communities and sectors – formal and informal – will also be crucial. The trust and understanding to underpin effective working relationships across the sectors requires a change to the usual 'rules of engagement' in the public sector. Four two-hour LSP meetings a year – even six three-hour meetings – do not begin to provide the linking social capital that is needed to establish effective collaborative decision making. Many CENs have found that more informal opportunities to meet and discuss issues in between formal meetings have made a great difference to what they are able to contribute.

Combining informal with formal approaches also begins to address the challenges of representation. Involving people in theme groups and using shadowing and mentoring schemes can help people to build experience and confidence. However, partners do need to understand the difficulties of representing and being accountable to a diverse constituency. Our study suggested that CENs will have to work hard to develop forms of accountability and communication that will engage the many groups who are not particularly interested in strategic issues. But, as the responsibility for funding community participation is devolved to local level, it will be equally critical that LSPs appreciate the resources that are needed to underpin effective accountability and make adequate provision.

A number of CEN respondents used the words 'critical friend' to describe the role that they wanted to play on the LSP. But many were still struggling to achieve a significant independent voice on the partnership. The most successful and respected CENs in our study were those who engaged with enthusiasm but who knew what their 'bottom line' was and were prepared to take action if they felt partners had stepped over this line – there were two examples where a CEN threat to walk out of the LSP had actually made partners

take them more seriously. However, this is a tactic that needs to be used sparingly – CENs need to have the sophistication to pick the right battles. The evidence suggests that this is most likely to happen where there is a long history of engagement between the sectors, backed up by investment in the voluntary and community sector infrastructure. This kind of 'linking' social capital is very difficult to manufacture from scratch.

Overall, it was clear from our study that operating at a strategic level requires considerable sophistication from CENs and the capacity to combine a range of different skills:

- to reach out to and engage groups who have not been reached by other initiatives,
- to mediate between different interests within a diverse sector,
- to command respect both from LSP partners and from the smallest groups on the ground,
- to negotiate with considerable sophistication and to support others in doing so,
- to manage a complex programme on limited resources.

However, there are three factors that have made it difficult to secure the skills needed. Firstly, in today's policy environment, with its emphasis on community engagement and civil renewal, staff with these skills are at a premium – CENs are operating in a highly competitive labour market. Secondly, the lack of continuity in central government's own commitment has made it difficult to attract good staff. The Community Participation Programmes have been bedevilled by short timescales: launched initially for three years (of which one at least was absorbed in setting up), then given two more years in a restructured Programme. This does not allow for effective employment practice. As the funding for the Programme is devolved to local level, the future for staff is even more uncertain. The third difficulty lies with communities themselves. Our research suggests that CENs and their lead organisations were often reluctant to invest sufficiently in the high-quality support skills that were needed. Like their partners, they often fail to appreciate the importance of investment in core staff, preferring that funding should go to visible activities on the front-line.

The future for community participation at a strategic level

The increasing emphasis that the UK government is giving to the neighbourhood is welcome, along with its declared intention to devolve more powers and budgets to neighbourhood level. However, action beyond the neighbourhood will continue to be essential if the cases of exclusion are to be addressed. In addition, increasing diversity and fragmentation at sub-local level makes it imperative that the capacity exists at a strategic level to mediate between different interests and claims. If central government is serious about community participation, it will be important to ensure that the local voluntary and community sector has the infrastructural capacity to engage at this level.

The above account – along with a parallel study carried out by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2005) – suggests that CENs are developing the capacity to give local voluntary and community organisations an effective voice at this strategic level. However, at the time when both studies took place, in 2003/4, it was too early to make a firm judgement on the effectiveness of this model, especially in a context where LSPs were themselves new. Our research suggested that the next two or three years would be crucial in establishing whether CEN engagement at strategic level could be effective and that it

would be important for government at central and local levels to give the model time to work.

In the interim, the policy context in which CENs are operating has changed, with the increased emphasis on the neighbourhood that has already been mentioned and devolution of CEN funding to a 'single pot' at local level. Under these circumstances, what are the chances that community involvement at strategic level will be fully tested and given time to work?

In 2006, funding for what is now the Single Community Programme is being devolved to local level as part of a new Safer and Stronger Community Fund which combines a number of different funding streams. There are strong arguments for devolution. There was strong criticism at the outset that the Programme design and timescale had not taken enough account of local differences or the existing infrastructure. An area with no previous history of joint working, no third sector infrastructure and little previous investment in the sector will need a very different approach and timescale than one which already has sub-local participatory governance structures and a strong infrastructure or indeed one with a lot of third sector activity, but where there are deep divisions within the sector. Devolved funding has the potential to be more flexible and sensitive to local context.

On the other hand, both our own evaluation and that of the National Audit Office (ODPM, 2005a; NAO, 2005) underlined the crucial role that central government recognition and funding had played in giving the sector credibility, autonomy and legitimacy on the LSP. Indeed, the case studies that we carried out in areas without this funding found that, despite initial enthusiasm within the sector, it proved impossible to maintain the momentum needed to build a CEN in the longer term and embed LSP representation in the wider sector.

In the Safer and Stronger Community Fund (SSCF), community participation will compete with a range of politically high profile initiatives, including community safety, for funding. Central government has already cut its own funding to the Single Community Programme and suggested that continued small-scale grant provision is not a requirement in the SSCF. This has dismayed those who support the aims of the Single Community Programme and sends a strong message to LSPs and local authorities that future funding for the community participation infrastructure is not a priority. Our research suggests that, given this discretion, while some local authorities and LSPS will recognise the importance of investing in the participation infrastructure at this strategic level, many others will not.

Governance scholars, while acknowledging the importance of the new devolved government spaces that are now evolving, still acknowledge an important 'metagovernance' role for the central state in creating the framework within which these spaces can operate effectively (Jessop, 2003). How this is defined is open to debate – scholars are critical of performance and audit regimes which maintain too much central control over devolved spaces (Flynn, 2002). Nonetheless, central government support for community participation in recent years could be seen as a very positive example of the value of its 'metagovernance' role. Ironically, therefore, although the current rhetoric of devolution might seem best placed to support community empowerment, it is possible that the future of community participation, especially at a strategic level, may well depend on the extent to which central government is willing to continue to exercise this 'metagovernance' role.

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