

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

**Analysis of Pilot Online Discussion Forum
22nd – 26th November 2004**

An analysis of the online discussion facilitated by Bradford University’s International Centre for Participation Studies and the Regional Forum’s Active Partners Unit. This paper has been prepared by Heather Blakey of the International Centre for Participation Studies at University of Bradford.

62 people signed up to the week of debate largely, though not exclusively, people with a professional focus on promoting involvement and participation either through consultancy or paid work. Over twenty actively participated in the discussion.

1. Introduction

The term ‘usual suspects’ expresses some of the frustration and dissatisfaction with the current reality of participation in formal decision-making structures. Underlying this seems to be the view that the system isn’t working, that agencies ought to be involving a wider range of people, that the ‘usual suspects’ are the ‘wrong’ people somehow, perhaps that they are rubber-stamping decisions made elsewhere. In essence, participation is seen not to be delivering change. The Viewpoint discussion reflected on the role of the ‘usual suspects’ in this shortfall. Are the ‘usual suspects’ to blame? Are they standing in the way of wider participation and therefore change? Or are there more fundamental problems inherent in the system, with the consequence that only a limited number of people – the ‘usual suspects’ choose to engage with it?

The overwhelming message from contributions to the discussion was that the criticism implicit in the term ‘usual suspects’ puts the blame on the wrong people. The ‘usual suspects’ may simply be the ones keen enough to get involved despite all the imperfections of the system. If we want to include a wider range of people, it is the system itself that needs attention. As one contributor put it:

while we are “focusing on the leaders as having let [people] down, the real issue of the structure or decision making process and its flaws is not addressed.”

Alongside this core issue, the discussion raised a number of questions about the nature of participation. First and foremost is the question of whether we are talking about participation or consultation, about involvement in decision-making or merely about hearing people’s views.

“There’s a real confusion between ‘involvement’ and ‘consultation’ – i.e.: between really engaging communities in planning and decision-making about things that affect them, versus services asking for answers to questions on

issues they've defined themselves. The two terms are often used interchangeably, but they're not at all the same thing.”

The discussion by and large came down on the side of ‘real’ participation, but it seems clear that the difficulties of engaging people more widely will not be resolved whilst this institutional confusion remains.

The following summary draws together contributions that explore:

- the valuable role played by those labelled ‘usual suspects’
- problems with the situation as it stands
- reasons why people get involved and why they don’t
- what causes the ‘usual suspects’ situation
- what can be done about it

2. Defending the ‘usual suspects’

It was strongly felt that the individuals who are labelled as the ‘usual suspects’ have a lot to offer personally, that agencies should value their input instead of using “such a dismissive phrase [which] is insulting, demeaning and devaluing.” Communities are “enriched by people who are willing to be brave and take the lead.” These are people who have a lot of experience to offer, who are engaged with their communities and who give up their time for free.

Some contributors expressed the view, sometimes implicitly, that working with a small number of committed individuals is more efficient and effective, allowing agencies to “make long-term plans ... and concentrate on delivery rather than spending hours in meeting going over the same issues.” The usual suspects can be counted on if agencies want active engagement, and there is a belief among some that wider participation might weaken the system – “would we be forgiving if services and work took twice as long to implement and complete?”

The idea that the ‘usual suspects’ necessarily acquiesce in rubber-stamping decisions was also questioned, instead suggested that agencies sometimes cope “not happily, but willingly, with people who will argue and criticise ... because they recognise that’s a good way to get new ideas and better improvements.”

Another implicit criticism of the usual suspects is around the idea that they are unaccountable and isolated from the views of their communities – however, for some they are – actually or potentially – “nodal points in a network.” In other words, while they might not be representatives in an elected sense, they are more than isolated voices. It was suggested that agencies can at times prefer to dismiss people as isolated voices because it means that they can pursue their existing agenda even though those people have voiced objections.

The system has the effect of generating small, interconnected groups of people. While, this is not free of problems, contributors pointed out the value of getting know one another “as people,” and developing personal relationships.

3. What are the alternatives to working with the ‘usual suspects’?

There was a clear sense that contributors were seeking, through exploring barriers and motivations, to facilitate a ‘better’ form of community involvement.

However, in line with the arguments above, there were also fears that the alternatives could be a lot worse, for example, services coping willingly with “challenging” participants, because they would “sooner have that than nothing.”

There was also for some an assumption that going beyond the ‘usual suspects’ would mean a dilution of the level of engagement, simply consultation on a wide scale, as opposed to broader engagement at the same level. There are fears here about cost and resources, but also about quality. It may be better to “have the usual suspects than a posh consultancy firm brought in from the outside leading ‘community’ regeneration.”

So, if for all these reasons it is the case that we need to “move away from seeing people who are actually involved in their communities as the usual suspects” what *is* going wrong? Why is participation perceived to be so problematic?

4. The ‘Usual Suspects’ – what’s the problem?

While there is much of value offered by the small group of individuals who do engage with the system, there are also clearly some inherent problems with this situation, not least for the individuals themselves, but also critically in terms of outcomes, of delivering change that is wanted by communities.

Impact on the ‘usual suspects’ (active citizens)

First and foremost there is the recurring issue of “volunteer burn-out,” perhaps inevitable when too few are relied on for too much. Beyond this, the opportunities the system as it stands offers even to these few may be limited by an imperfect understanding of participation: “many agencies, particularly statutory, feel that they are getting [commitment to their priorities] just by you being at their meeting without necessarily making a contribution.”

The problems of insular groups

As it has been pointed out, the fact there are a small number of people circulating round a number of committees means that groups become insular. This is a problem that is not restricted to community representatives – “council officers or councillors call active citizens ‘usual suspects’ because they see them frequently at meetings, but they are themselves usual suspects because we also see them often at the same meetings!” This situation can create “static groups ... stuck in one way of thinking/behaving,” that are “inward looking and out of touch.” It was also suggested that “unknowingly, due to the relationships people build, [they] can be manipulated into doing what is best for the decision-makers rather than the community.”

Transparency and Accountability

It is clear that such groups run the risk of reduced transparency and, at the least, perceived unaccountability. ‘Representatives’ may not have clear lines of accountability to their members. One contributor said: “as a member of one or two groups I think you never asked me if I wanted you to sit on those committees and I have no idea what you said.” Even where ‘leaders’ do truly reflect a section of the community, they “consciously or unconsciously [exclude] less powerful elements - communities are not homogeneous,” creating a likelihood that you “miss out more people than you reach, if you rely on just one or two leaders.” Added to this is the problem of those individuals moving away from the people they represent, for example “where negotiation between opposing view points is progressed by representatives of wider constituencies but where

the lines of communication between representative and constituent is inadequately tended.” This issue of communication is clearly at the heart of whether decision-making processes are seen as participatory or accountable by communities as a whole.

Perhaps a still more fundamental problem lies in the assumption that ‘leaders’ have ‘followers’; “while it is easier for agencies to identify key people they can relate to, this can be a dangerous approach ... because many self styled leaders only represent their own views.” It may, of course, be entirely appropriate for people to “offer their personal input ... without feeling the burden of trying to represent hundreds or thousands of people” – but if this replaces a wider engagement, it is clearly problematic.

This generates a question for agencies of how to “communicate beyond these ‘gatekeepers’ ... [who] more often than not don’t have a mandate [because they] are not ‘leaders’ in that sense.” The danger is that too often they fall into the trap of using “‘leaders’ by consulting them and assuming that that is them consulting the community.”

The ‘Usual Suspects’ as ‘unrepresentative’

The issue of the ‘usual suspects’ is not only that of a randomly selected but too small number of active citizens. Those who become active are in fact “usually from a limited range of people who have the time, strong motivation, networks, articulacy, etc. to gain influence, [tending] to be more similar to those working in agencies than many other people.” This is likely to exclude the most disempowered people, “who are often those with the most experience of issues – working only with the ‘usual suspects’ may be more efficient, but it will tend to give a distorted view of what the issues are.”

The ‘Efficiency Fallacy’

The previous point goes to the heart of what could be described as the ‘efficiency fallacy’:

- “Efficiency might be important in bringing about change, but it isn't enough. You need wider involvement if you want the change:
- to be the *right* change, i.e.: what people really want and need
 - to *work*, because you will almost certainly need community support to make things happen
 - to *last*, because if it's not the right change and people aren't committed to it, then things are much less likely to go on changing/getting better”

This may be seen as the temptation of *efficiency over effectiveness*. The problem was expressed as a “singular reliance on one or a few individuals to be the sole means of involvement or consultation (which is generally less costly and more efficient), rather than using a range of diverse ways to engage people (which requires more time and resources, but is more effective and reflective).”

Impact on wider communities

All the above points relate to the internal effectiveness of the process. There are also seen to be negative effects on those outside the process. The fact that a minority are relied upon to engage with decision-making processes “prevents others within communities from developing a collective way of working, learning and growing together,” even creates “barriers for the participation of others in the community” (because a few individuals are seen to be the only ones with the necessary skills and knowledge). Related to this is the issue of the kind of people who sometimes emerge as leaders – “vocal people ... can easily polarise opinion.”

These are all real dangers attendant on the system as it stands. However, the consensus of the discussion was not to suggest that they are inevitable, but that they are tendencies that can subvert the growth of effective participation, and therefore need to be addressed.

5. The 'Usual Suspects' – why is it happening?

The substance of the discussion reflected a high degree of dedication to the values and practice of genuine participation. The problem is clearly not simply a lack of will. Contributors explored a range of factors that those working to encourage involvement need to take into account.

These included:

- Failure to link participation and change
- Inadequate or unwelcoming processes
- Benefits to agencies of working with the 'usual suspects'
- External constraints on agencies
- Lack of capacity within communities
- Unrealistic expectations of participants

Failure to link participation and change

“I think in many ways what is missing, and what agencies should be offering, is what it is most difficult for them to offer - that is, actual results and change.”

Most people “get involved because they are unhappy, angry or energised about something they want to change - if nothing appears to have changed (even where it has actually done so), then there seems little purpose to be involved any further.” One of the difficulties with focusing on involvement is that it can become an end in itself – it is important to remember that “ultimately, for Mrs. Buggins down the road, the only test is whether her quality of life has improved or not.”

Even when change does happen, it needs to be seen to happen. Sometimes changes are missed simply “because no one has explicit responsibility for telling anyone about it.” Participants are unlikely to engage with consultation or participatory processes a second time unless they see the fruits of their involvement each time.

It also clearly matters who determines what change is needed. People are often put off from getting involved because they feel it is “a done deal” and they are wary of “becoming a rubber stamp.” People need to see that they can shape the agenda; they can be seen as apathetic when it may simply be that they are “interested in other agendas and not the one that is being pushed at that time.”

Faith in the participation process is bound to be dented if consultation leads to other outcomes than the ones identified by the community. One contributor gave the example of an agency whose target group expressed a clear priority of garden safety. This was ruled out as ineligible and never addressed, instead the community got a toy library – despite the fact that toy libraries were nowhere on the list of priorities – “but the agency thought they were a good idea – and this was supposedly Community Led.”

The result can be “huge cynicism ... based on hard experience,” making it increasingly difficult to reach beyond the few ‘usual suspects.’

Inadequate or unwelcoming processes

The ‘meeting culture’ of traditional processes can be very off-putting to many, seen as “restrictive and time consuming – with endless discussions around relatively minor points,” within structures which “divert people into jostling for positions instead of focusing on the task” – processes which are unlikely to encourage people to “give up free time.” As an example, regeneration partnerships were described as having “evolved into quasi-official bodies ... which can be very intimidating.” These factors are not seen to be adequately understood, expressed by the feeling that “agencies ... seem to have the attitude ‘we have asked so be grateful and drop everything to fit in with us’.”

Again, communication is also important – people can’t come forward “if they don’t know what is going on.”

Benefits to agencies of working with the ‘usual suspects’

Problems can be perpetuated by a lack of will to address these problems and move beyond the ‘usual suspects.’ If agencies see benefits in the situation as it is, they are unlikely to invest significantly in seeking wider involvement. These benefits are to do with the perceived efficiency of working with small numbers of community representatives:

- “quick decisions and consistency rather than a constantly changing direction”
- working with leaders can help avoid “the resource-intensive task of engaging large numbers of people” (an issue where consultation is simply seen as a requirement or a box that needs to be ticked)
- the belief that services and work might take “twice as long to implement and complete”
- “If can get to know the same people you find out how they tick and what you need to do or say to get the ‘magic yes’”

External constraints on agencies

Other reasons for the failure to address these issues come from external pressures on agencies. Agencies might genuinely “want to support bottom up initiatives, but in a centralised state with more targets coming down about engaging with communities on pre determined topics decreed by the government, this becomes less likely.” This is clearly a factor in making the agenda relevant to the expressed wishes of communities.

Money is also a factor – the processes “need resourcing on a scale hugely greater than at present.” This particularly relates to the support that is needed for voluntary representatives, who work alongside “paid staff who attend as part of their job with a whole organisation to support them [and] complain about usual suspects!”

A lack of political will can also be a hindrance, expressed by the belief of some elected representatives that people only have “a right to an opinion” if they stand for office and “become part of the process.”

Lack of capacity within communities

People are also put off from participating by doubts over what they can contribute. This may simply be “lack of confidence and seeing themselves as having no experience or skills.” People “don’t want to look silly!”

Unrealistic expectations of participants

The factor of a lack of capacity within communities has to be balanced against a critical view of the expectations of agencies. Sometimes the skills are there, but agencies fail to recognise them. Representatives can be “expected to speak in the “same language”, and to understand the technical jargon and phraseology used by agencies and professionals.” This requirement obviously narrows the pool of potential participants unnecessarily.

People can also be put off by the scale of the task required of them, for example being asked to commit to engaging “their communities in discussion and re-discussion of the matter at issue.” There are issues relating to timescales, a “lack of understanding ... around peoples existing commitments and how this limits their capacity to get involved.”

Finally, people might be more likely to get involved if they weren’t expected to represent a whole category of people – “like getting young people onto a committee (say only one) and then asking the intimidating question “and what do you as a young person think about this”.

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Balancing the above ‘causes’ of the ‘usual suspects’ scenario, a slightly different perspective suggested that the ‘usual suspects’ result *from* participation, rather than being a failure of participation:

“The real sadness would be if the community leader or paid community worker did not move on. This is not to say that either has forgotten their roots, but that with the benefit of experience and engagement their worldview has moved on - they become able to see their roots from a different perspective.”

While it is certainly the case that engagement does promote deeper understanding, the question remains how we enable this deeper understanding to be returned to communities more broadly, how we prevent “a gap appearing” between those who have engaged and those who they formally or informally represent.

6. Why do people decide to participate?

In order to work towards an improved system of involvement, it was pointed out that we need to understand why people *do* get involved, as well as understanding why they don’t.

Participants suggested a number of factors: people get involved if they have the time and the energy, if they are made to feel that they add value, and of course if they enjoy it: “the process should bring some joy into the lives of all those involved - often, processes are made too serious or hard-going.”

However, it is most important of all to understand why people *stay* involved once they are there, and while they might initially come to the process for variety of reasons “curiosity, anger, a desire to make things better” they only stay because – and if – they “see that their involvement makes a difference.”

This understanding should clearly focus the attention of agencies on the “crucial link between involvement and real change.”

7. Moving beyond the ‘usual suspects’: what is needed?

Through exploring what it is about the usual suspects scenario that hinders effective participation, contributors made the following observations about the support, resources and attitudes that can foster it, from “time and imagination” to “adequate resources and the development of a skill base.”

The point was repeatedly made that clarity and honesty are all important, clarity about the level of involvement on offer (consultation, involvement, participation, or control), about what is and is not open to influence, and about what the restrictions are. Being clear about the restrictions means being honest about “the degree of power [that] you have – whether collecting opinions, presenting them to an agency or council, or actually managing a budget which can deliver.”

An important issue relating to power relates to the question of who sets the agenda. This can be difficult, as agencies are themselves constrained by what is an eligible activity for their particular programs. However, if communities express what they want in response to consultation, then there is an imperative that these ‘wants’ should be addressed. The agency asking the question “should help the community it is asking [to participate] achieve its identified objectives, the ‘wants’ – the Community should be resourced so that it can play at least an equal role in achieving the objective. Confidence in the Participation process is only gained if change identified as required by the participant is addressed.”

Even once people are engaged with the process, their status as unpaid and often unresourced volunteers means that their contribution needs to be focused appropriately. There is a delicate balance between the willingness to give up control, and not overloading participants. One contributor illustrated this in reflecting on her experience as a ‘usual suspect’: “I was aware of paid workers setting the pace, time and agendas for the meetings, and frankly I was glad that someone did that because without their valuable input we would have had to do that ourselves and we were not in a strong enough position to do that as well as contribute.”

Finally, effective participation clearly needs commitment from all levels of an organisation: “the real power to change things lies with agencies who hold the money/resources ... they need to believe that it isn't just something they 'must' do to tick a box or follow some rule, but that it will lead to better decisions, more sustainable change, good 'community relations', etc.”

8. Moving beyond the ‘usual suspects’: what can be done?

A number of practical suggestions can be drawn from the Viewpoint discussion, focused on improving the effectiveness of participatory processes.

These relate to:

- Attitude
- Motivation
- Support for active citizens
- Recognition
- Communication
- Structural issues

Attitude

In any process of involvement, the attitudes shaping the process design are very important, starting with an understanding of the implications for individuals within the organisation asking for involvement: “the first thing they should ask themselves is how much control am I willing to give up.” Attitudes to the kind of participants that an organisation is looking to involve are equally important. As mentioned, one of the problems with the ‘usual suspects’ is that they tend to reflect a particular set of skills, generally those automatically valued by professionals within the agencies. If the process is to engage a broader section of communities, it is important to “rethink what is classed as valuable experience/skills” and to “acknowledge that academic skills are not the only skills that are important.”

Motivation

The key point here is keeping focused on the needs of communities, not the needs or agendas of agencies – “local solutions to local problems - it works, keep it relevant and they will take part.”

Participatory methods can of course be used to identify these, making it easier for local involvement to continue through the process of delivery. For example, “Kirklees tenants groups produced “estate manifestos” giving their committees very clear mandates ... helping groups to consult with their members and whole estates/ communities to prioritise what it is they want to achieve.”

Once people are involved many become impatient with the “bureaucracy.” Their motivation is likely to be supported by “looking for a ‘quick win’, even if small.” This will also help participants “demonstrate to the other local people that it is worth getting involved.”

Support for active citizens

In order for people to become involved in a participation process, and even once they are there, they need support. If agencies wish to engage a wider range of people in their processes, it is important to give different kinds of support, for example, the “opportunity to reframe life experience into conscious learning and skills,” alongside “training and development for ‘community leaders’ to learn how the system works and how to use it.”

Other forms of support include “nurturing networks” that provide a structure of “community-owned” support to representatives. These linkages can also be fostered by “supporting the usual suspects in being more inclusive, helping them to conduct consultations themselves.”

Recognition

Active citizens are volunteers. Ways of recognising and valuing their contributions include:

- some form of celebration at an appropriate time, to highlight achievements and to thank people for their contributions (and to have some fun after the hard work)
- paying attention to the status of venues used
- greeting and addressing volunteers in a way that values them and their contribution equally to that of 'professionals'
- access to resources such as networks

Communication

Communication is vital to all stages of the process, in terms of engaging people in the first place, and then letting them know what has changed, but also in terms of demonstrating transparency and accountability. Communication needs to be remembered even when nothing is obviously happening, so that everyone is able to stay with the process throughout.

The form that communication takes is of course also important. In addition to the usual issues of translation, large print and so on, “the way things are written, the language that is used” makes a great difference to the kinds of people that are likely to respond.

It was also felt that new technologies have a role, for example “email/text mechanisms for quick feedback of views on specific issues” (though caution was expressed about not allowing this to replace a “commitment to meet the people, feel the emotion, hear the oppositional view”). An example was given where email was used to connect over 350 local residents in a network, with the result that “it isn't just one or a few people going to meetings, but an increasing pool of local people being created who can get involved in different issues from an informed position.”

Communication channels should be two-way. Suggested feedback mechanisms included “lay monitoring and scrutiny of involvement, with appropriate rights to information and to report” and building into the process a requirement that “those with decision-making responsibilities have to personally return to give a face-to-face account of what they have done as a result of community involvement [as I heard one member of a citizens' panel say recently to a senior manager, “we know who you are now”].”

The final stage of communication is feedback at the end of the process; it is seen to be essential that information about the changes is fed back “to the people who have been involved in the planning, and to the wider community.” It should be added that it is equally important that feedback is at the same level and through the same channels as the original involvement mechanisms.

Structural issues

Structural issues can be difficult for individuals supporting participation processes to affect, but the success of processes can rest on the substance of what is on offer for participants to engage with.

It is clear that the chances of getting the process ‘right’ – and therefore a successful outcome – are increased if people are allowed to be involved throughout the process. Having said that, practical suggestions included: varying the kinds of involvement on offer – “for most people, involvement should be very short (5-10 minutes for the majority on most subjects), with more extensive opportunities for those who are more actively interested, and looking at making the process accessible for participants rather than for

agencies – “going to where people are, not expecting them to come to you, timings that suit their lifestyles, arrangements for disabled people, people who are illiterate.”

A further issue is about the levels at which involvement is offered – people will have greater faith that change will result if they are involved in “genuine decision-making and budget setting, so that their votes/voices really count” – “linking the impact of involvement to real change.” Equally, involvement shouldn’t be a ‘one-off’ but a “cycle: involvement → decision-making → change → feedback → more involvement....

Finally, one contributor mentioned using the newly established Power of Wellbeing to enable structural changes – “local authorities can do anything (unless it is actually proscribed by other legislation) that promotes the social, economic and environmental well being of their community and area.”

9. 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>

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