

Pathways through participation

What creates and sustains active citizenship?



Briefing paper no.2 - What are the drivers of participation? Participation in context

Introduction

The Pathways through Participation project aims to explore how and why people get involved and stay involved in different forms of participation over the course of their lives. It seeks to increase knowledge of people's pathways into and through participation, and improve understanding of the factors that shape their participation over time.

The project team has completed a literature review bringing together different bodies of literature on participation, which have often been viewed in isolation. The review focuses predominantly on community development, volunteering and public participation, but we also refer to literature on social movements, everyday politics, and ethical consumption.

This briefing paper is the second in a series of summaries highlighting some

of the key points to come out of the review. It explores the current and historical context and the drivers for participation.

Participation: a policy buzzword?

In the UK and across the globe, we have witnessed an explosion of interest in participation over the past decade, and this seems particularly true of public participation (i.e. the participation of individuals in the various structures and institutions of democracy). Advocates of participation see it as a 'good thing' for a number of reasons (see table below). Participation is usually portrayed as a being positive; however, not all participation contributes to what might broadly be viewed as the 'common good', and some forms of participation are particularly exclusionary and divisive. Often quoted examples include gangs, violent direct action movements or neo-Nazi activism.

Public participation	Beyond public participation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strengthens the legitimacy and accountability of democratic institutions• Empowers local communities• Builds social cohesion• Improves the effectiveness and efficiency of public services• Increases political efficacy and self-esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creates a vibrant civil society, an important counter-check to the state and the market• Fosters social capital (i.e. the ties and shared norms between people)• Develops people's confidence and sense of self-determination• Contributes to well-being

A long and rich history

Participation may have become something of a policy buzzword in recent years, but it has a long and rich history, partly because at the very core of participation lies people's willingness to connect and cooperate – an inherent feature of human society. The extent to which people simply work together for mutual benefit and for the greater good, as well as the relationship between individual citizens and institutions of governance have concerned and fascinated philosophers and rulers alike for centuries

The more recent history of participation in the UK tells us that the way in which participation takes place between governments and civil society has ebbed and flowed over time. The 1960s, for instance, saw the introduction of numerous government programmes aimed at tackling poverty, disadvantage and racial tension, with an increased emphasis on public participation and community development. Community activism (embedded in initiatives like the Community Development Projects) was widely influential in the 1970s but this 'golden age' of community work came to an end with the increased political focus on 'markets' and the appearance of identity politics in the 1980s. As the state started to retreat from the direct provision of public services under successive Conservative governments in the 1980s and 1990s, voluntary and community organisations (along with private companies) were increasingly invited to deliver public services - challenging their traditional roles and priorities.

The election of a Labour government in 1997 put participation and community involvement back on the public policy agenda. This government has also looked to voluntary and community organisations – or what it refers to as the 'third sector' – to increase links between the state, communities and

individual citizens. The legal, statutory and financial operating environment for the sector has been strengthened by a number of policy initiatives such as the introduction of the Compact and GiftAid. Beyond the focus on the voluntary and community sector, the government's aim to re-engage directly with individual citizens led to the development of a range of initiatives around participation. These have included citizenship education, volunteering, active citizenship, and a remarkable growth in government consultations at all levels.

Policy and practice drivers of participation

There are numerous political, social, economic, environmental and technological drivers shaping participation now and, potentially, in the future. Below is a brief outline of drivers we think are the most relevant to the current 'operating environment' of participation in the UK.

1. Democratic deficit

Over the last decades, formal public participation, from voting to political party membership to contacting elected representatives, has been in decline in Western democracies. In response to concerns that this drop in public participation is leading to a crisis of legitimacy, there have been numerous initiatives to encourage participation in formal politics such as the introduction of all-postal voting. Despite these initiatives, participation in formal political channels continues to fall. People may be turning away from formal politics, but the Power Inquiry¹ found that over a third of people who do not vote are members of, or active in, a charity, community group, public body or campaigning organisation.

¹ Power Inquiry (2006) Power to the People. The report of Power: an Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

2. Participatory democracy and localism

To enhance democratic accountability, improve public services and contribute to social justice, a range of policies have aimed to involve citizens more directly in local decision-making. The increased momentum for involving citizens at grassroots level is sometimes called the 'localism agenda' and is associated with community empowerment. This agenda provides some response to demands for engagement. Changes in the statutory and legal framework for local government underpin the push to increase local public participation. In 2001, the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) was born, bringing together public sector agencies, community and voluntary organisations and private companies, to develop joint priorities and strategies. Since 2006, local authorities have been required to inform, consult and involve local residents and communities in their activities. In April 2009, a 'Duty to Involve' came into force which requires all local authorities to embed a culture of engagement and empowerment in local services and decision-making.

3. Voice and choice in service delivery

The participation of people in shaping service delivery and holding service providers to account is connected with public sector reform. Whilst the 'choice' component of this driver illustrates the growing influence of market values on the delivery of services, the 'voice' component is more to do with the improvement of the responsiveness of services to user needs. A central tenet of 'voice and choice' is 'personalisation', where users of services 'co-produce' the service they receive. The development of service user involvement in service provision has largely stemmed from social movements such as the disability movement.

4. Individualism, consumerism and self-expression

The apparent shift in culture away from norms of solidarity and associational life towards individualism has not so much affected rates of participation as the ways in which people approach participation. In an increasingly consumerist society, people's expectations of agency, choice and flexibility appear to also apply to participation. Evidence suggests that affluence is associated with a greater desire for self-fulfilment and self-expression. With technological advances in communications, the individual can create multiple and fluid identities and engage in different behaviours and activities more easily, which can in turn create different ways of participating.

6. Global consciousness and world views

Although many people take an interest in their local issues and participate at local community level, recent years have seen an unprecedented rise in individual and collective mobilisation around global concerns. This can be related to an increased awareness (particularly through new communications technologies) of the winners and losers of global neo-liberalism, and to the rise of international sustainable development policies. Direct action against the varied and manifold shortcomings of globalisation - from rising inequality to climate change - have become a feature of the last decade, as the Makepovertyhistory campaign, protests at the G8 summits, and the burgeoning grassroots 'Climate Camp' movement all demonstrate. The growth in ethical consumerism illustrates that, alongside these collective actions, people may also undertake individual acts of conscience.

7. Changing technologies

Technological developments have enabled changes in the spaces in which

participation takes place. People are expressing their values and political identities in new ways, facilitated by increasing interconnectedness. Air travel, satellite television, instant messaging and new technologies such as Web 2.0 are providing new ways for people to organise and take action. Individuals can increasingly bypass existing organisations, using social media and creating their own alternatives for participation. This is leading to the emergence of a greater number of less formal and looser groups and networks. However, there is

evidence that governments are also increasingly aware of the opportunities presented by the internet both for them to advance their own case and to challenge their opponents. New technologies may provide new opportunities for individual and collective action but they are also a source of exclusion, fragmentation and atomisation.

The key developments and drivers shaping participation are summarised below:

Crisis of democracy and new governance spaces

- Formal public participation in decline.
- New governance spaces to re-engage citizens in decision-making and policy-making – the localism and empowerment agendas.
- Citizens 'co-producing' public services – the personalisation agenda.

Civil society: thriving or threatened?

- Development of legal, statutory, financial framework for voluntary and community sector.
- Fears of co-option and over-stretch as the sector is increasingly involved in partnerships and service provision.
- Enduring independence of civil society from the state (e.g. cooperatives, protest).
- Emergence of new forms of participation, particularly online.

Citizen action: individual agency and collective organising

- Associational life is active: people are not apathetic.
- Rising individualism: people's expectations of participation are changing.
- People have different/multiple identities, organise themselves accordingly and belong to a range of communities of 'place' and of 'interest'.
- New technologies have the potential to be harnessed for citizen mobilisation and activism.
- People are organising themselves in more spontaneous, unstructured and informal ways.

Further information

To download the literature review (which includes a detailed reference list) and to comment, go to <http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/2010/01/understanding-participation-a-literature-review/>

For more information on the Pathways through Participation project or to subscribe to our newsletter visit the website <http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/>
Alternatively you can email pathwaysthroughparticipation@ncvo-vol.org.uk

