

The value and role of citizen engagement in social innovation

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TEPSIE

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1. Introduction

The idea that citizen engagement is critical to the development and implementation of social innovation is regarded by many as a self-evident truth. In this, social innovation follows trends in two closely related discourses – international development and democratic renewal. In both of these, the value of participation and engagement has arguably taken on the status of orthodoxy. Billions of pounds are spent on community-based and community-driven development projects by international institutions such as the World Bank.¹ Development projects that do not include a participatory element are frequently seen as unethical or invalid.² And government projects are often seen as illegitimate if they do not include forms of citizen engagement such as consultations, surveys or citizen panels. For example, in the UK, the ‘Duty to Consult’ local residents, businesses and third sector organisations on council services is a statutory requirement that all municipalities must fulfil. There have also been myriad programmes across Europe to support and encourage citizen engagement and public participation – notable examples include the European Year of Volunteering in 2011 and the European Year of Citizens in 2013.

Yet the widespread belief in the importance of participation and engagement does not seem to be based on strong empirical evidence of its benefits. Many researchers have noted the paucity of evidence related to these concepts. For example, Linda Nicholson, who conducted a review of a range of new forms of political engagement argued that “the rapid increase in both use and nature of civic participation activity in public policy making does not appear to be grounded in empirical evidence of what works and why”.³ The UN report, *People Matter*, which is otherwise very positive about the role of participation, concedes that “globally, no systematic study is available to demonstrate the associational relationships, positive or otherwise, between participation and developmental or ‘instrumental’ benefits.”⁴

Instead, endorsement of these ideas seems to rest on the moral and normative force attached to notions such as ‘participation’ and ‘engagement’. Raymond Williams noted in 1976 that the notions of participation and empowerment are ‘warmly persuasive’.⁵ Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock, advocates of participation, argue that terms like these “evoke a comforting mutuality, a warm and reassuring consensus, ringing with the satisfaction of everyone pulling together to pursue a set of common goals for the wellbeing of all”.⁶ Some also make the argument that the practices of citizen engagement and participation hold intrinsic value. For example, Siddiqui Osmani states that “the act of participation is valuable in itself, quite apart from any value it may have in helping to achieve other good things”.⁷

¹ G Mansuri and V Rao, ‘Community Based and Driven Development – A Critical Review’, *The World Bank Research Observer*, vol. 19:1, 2004

² F Cleaver, ‘Paradoxes of participation: questioning participatory approaches to development’, in *Journal of International Development*, vol. 11, pp. 597-612, 1999

³ L Nicholson, ‘Civic Participation in Public: Policy-Making: A Literature Review’, Scottish Executive Social Research, p. 4, 2005

⁴ UN, ‘People Matter: Civic Engagement in Public Governance’, New York, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008

⁵ R Williams, *Keywords*, Picador, London, p. 76, 1976

⁶ A Cornwall and K Brock, ‘Beyond buzzwords: “Poverty reduction”, “participation” and “empowerment” in development policy’, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Overarching Concerns, Programme Paper Number 10, p. 2, November 2005

⁷ S Osmani, ‘Participatory Governance: An Overview of Issues and Evidence’ in *Participatory Governance and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*, United Nations, 2006

In this paper, we argue that calls for participation and engagement should not be “an act of faith...something we believe but rarely question”.⁸ It is inadequate to rely on the moral force and persuasiveness of these concepts. If we want to claim that wider participation from citizens in the social innovation process is an important goal, then we should have good reasons for why this is useful or valuable.

We argue that there is a real need for caution in the way engagement and participation activities are discussed and implemented. First, the links between participatory activities and their supposed benefits are often not well established. This does not prove that these links do not exist (it is always methodologically difficult to track causation). But it does, at the very least, raise the possibility of a substantial waste of resources if participatory activities fail to realise the benefits they were established to generate. Second, it is not only that participatory activities may not deliver the beneficial outcomes they promise; in some cases engagement and participation activities can be harmful and lead to negative outcomes. This is especially the case when participation activities are undertaken without a clear purpose, in a way that is unfocused and does not take local contextual factors into account.

Does this imply that we should reject calls for greater engagement? Not at all. We argue that engaging people will always be a necessary feature of the development and implementation of innovation that genuinely meets social needs. There are a number of key reasons why this is the case. First, citizens have specific knowledge of the challenges they face that no one else can claim; engagement processes therefore enable a better understanding of problems that an innovation might address. Second, citizens can be the source of innovative ideas; engagement processes can uncover or tap into these ideas. Third, engaging citizens enables contributions from varied and sometimes unexpected sources, which introduces divergent thinking; these diverse perspectives add particular value when we are trying to solve tough problems. Fourth, where citizens have been involved in the design, development and implementation of a social innovation or in a decision making process relating to that innovation, the innovation is more likely to be seen as legitimate than if it had been developed without such a process. Fifth, many of the challenges that social innovations aim to tackle, such as obesity or climate change, absolutely require the participation, co-operation and ‘buy-in’ of citizens, because they depend on fundamental changes to behaviour and attitudes.

One of the difficulties with a concept like engagement is that it is so broad and potentially carries a multiplicity of meanings.⁹ Andrea Cornwall has described it as “an infinitely malleable concept, used to evoke and signify almost anything that involves people.”¹⁰ So it’s important that we begin by explaining how we understand the terms ‘citizen engagement’ and ‘social innovation’ and the relationship between the two.

Defining our terms: citizen engagement and public participation

⁸ F Cleaver, ‘Paradoxes of participation: questioning participatory approaches to development’, in *Journal of International Development*, vol. 11, pp. 597-612, 1999, p. 597

⁹ A Cornwall and K Brock, ‘Beyond Buzzwords, “Poverty Reduction”, “Participation” and “Empowerment” in Development Policy’, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Programme Paper No. 10, 2005

¹⁰ A Cornwall, ‘Unpacking ‘participation’: models, meanings and practices’, *Community Development Journal*, 43 (3): 269-283, 2008

Citizen engagement and public participation are two terms which are often used interchangeably.¹¹ They refer to a broad range of activities which involve people in the structures and institutions of democracy or in activities which are related to civil society – such as community groups, non-profits and informal associations.

Citizen engagement and public participation are often distinguished from public communication and public consultation. The last two terms suggest a one-way flow of information (from the state to the public and vice versa) rather than a dialogue between the state and the public. Others argue that public consultation is a form of public participation. One useful definition of public participation is provided by the International Association for Public Participation. They examine the different goals of public participation from the point of view of the state.¹² This is laid out as a spectrum of participation that moves from inform to consult, to involve, to collaborate, to empower.

Spectrum of Public Participation

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public participation goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.

Source: International Association for Public Participation (2007): Spectrum of public participation

Although these concepts suggest an incredibly diverse type of activities, we can identify three defining features of engagement or participation. First, people take part in engagement activities voluntarily – participation can be incentivised, but it cannot be coerced. Second, engagement or participation require some form of action on the part of citizens – participants are not simply passive recipients. Third, participation and engagement activities are usually directed towards a common purpose or goal. This means that they are often strongly connected to a social mission.

Defining our terms: citizen engagement in social innovation

We define social innovations as new solutions (products, services, models, markets, processes etc.) that simultaneously meet a social need (more effectively than existing solutions) and lead to new or improved capabilities and relationships and/or better use of assets and resources. Examples include microfinance, fair trade, new models of eldercare, preventative interventions in health and criminal justice, holistic early years’ care, co-production and online platforms which enable sharing, mass collaboration and peer-to-peer learning.

¹¹ And in this paper we use ‘engagement’ interchangeably with ‘participation’.

¹² International Association for Public Participation, ‘IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation’ <http://www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/spectrum.pdf> Viewed on 1 August, 2012

Citizen engagement in social innovation refers to the many ways in which more diverse actors can be brought into the process of developing and then sustaining new solutions to social challenges – essentially how citizens can be involved in developing social innovations and in social projects which are innovative.

The term ‘citizen’ can sometimes imply a focus on people as political actors and on their relationship to the state. However, the field of social innovation is concerned with the action of all sectors, and the overlapping spaces between them, not just the public sector. This means we are concerned with the interactions at the interfaces between all four sectors (public-private, public-informal, public-non profit, private-non profit, private-informal, non profit-informal), not just the interface between the public and informal sectors. And indeed, we use the term ‘citizen engagement’ to refer to the ways that all organisations from across sectors draw people into social innovation activities.¹³ That is, we use the term ‘citizen’ because we think it is preferable to ‘user’, ‘client’ and ‘customer’ (which implies a particular kind of relationship) and ‘people’ and ‘public’ which are too vague and potentially imply action by groups of people rather than individuals.

Activities we identify as engagement or participation in social innovation differ considerably in their character: some are individual (e.g. making a donation), some are collective (e.g. taking part in a demonstration); some involve a long term or formal commitment (such as being a school governor) while others might only be done once or twice, or on an informal basis (such as signing a petition or some forms of volunteering). These activities are all forms of engagement that relate to social innovation, but their connection to specific innovations will vary. For example, some types of activity are closely related to the initial development of a social innovation, such as taking part in a co-design process. Others will be more about sustaining or delivering that innovation, such as being part of a time bank or being on the board of a social enterprise. There are also a host of activities that might not be connected to particular innovation projects but play a vital role in raising awareness of a social need and driving calls for innovation (for example, taking part in a campaign, signing a petition or joining a protest).

Limitations to the concept of citizen engagement

As we have noted in other papers, ‘engagement’ only makes sense where we are engaging people *in something*.¹⁴ The concept is therefore most applicable for social innovations where there is a clear driver of the process, such as a public sector body, social enterprise or development agency that is driving the innovation activity and needs to incorporate more views, ideas and resources. The concept of engagement therefore frames the relationship between those being engaged and those doing the engaging in a uni-directional way. This is especially problematic in the context of ‘citizen engagement’, which focuses on the relationship between the citizen and the state. Just as the state needs to consider when and how to engage citizens, citizens also need to decide on what basis, how and when they want to be engaged. As Robin Murray argues, “where one of the key issues in the social economy is the changing productive relationship between citizen and state – how far responsibility for social provision moves from the state to the informal sector, the changing

¹³ Using and adapting the definition from the Oslo Manual, we define social innovation activities as all scientific, technological, organisational, financial and commercial or other steps which actually, or are intended to, lead to the implementation of social innovations. Some innovation activities are themselves innovative; others are not novel activities but are necessary for the implementation of social innovations. Social innovation activities also include R&D that is not directly related to the development of a specific social innovation.

¹⁴ A Davies, J Simon, R Patrick, W Norman, ‘Mapping citizen engagement in the process of social innovation’, A deliverable of the project: “The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe” (TEPSIE), European Commission – 7th Framework Programme, Brussels: European Commission, DG Research, 2012

relationship that results, and its significance for innovation – it is important to frame the relationships reciprocally, with many layers and dimensions, rather than through the narrower prism of how the state can engage its citizens.”¹⁵ In this sense, the concepts of co-production, co-creation and other forms of collaboration form an equally important part of the conversation about citizen engagement and social innovation.

This focus on ‘engagement’ also leaves out various forms of citizen action – much of which is highly relevant to social innovation. Indeed, some of the most radical activity within social innovation happens outside of an institutional context. As Andrea Cornwall points out, there are “spaces that people create for themselves” that have “an entirely different character from most invited spaces”.¹⁶ When people collaborate to share resources or information via online networks, or take part in new models of support and care, or set up informal community groups, it makes little sense to think of them as being ‘engaged’ or drawn into an engagement process. Rather, their action itself constitutes the social innovation. This kind of citizen led action is discussed by Manuel Castells in his book *Aftermath*.¹⁷ In it, he describes the emergence of alternative economic practices – radical new ways in which citizens are forging a new capitalism. Castells describes the way in which citizens in Barcelona are coming together to provide goods, services and support, using, for example, barter networks and social currencies, and organising through networks and co-operatives.¹⁸ This is also the subject of a short paper on current forms of citizen action in Greece, which have emerged as a result of the current economic crisis, which forms part of an accompanying TEPSIE paper on ‘Case studies of citizen engagement in social innovation’.¹⁹

It is clear that citizen led and collective social action is critical to the generation and production of social innovations. However, it is also true that institutions play a vital role in driving social innovation. These organisations need to understand how they can effectively engage people in the production, implementation and evaluation of social innovation projects. In this paper, we take an organisational perspective.

*The approach of this paper*²⁰

Since social innovation is a relatively new field of study, there is no existing body of literature that looks at the value of forms of participation with a specific social innovation lens. But this does not mean that we explore this subject in a vacuum. The concepts of engagement and participation have been discussed in discourses on international development, civic renewal, public services and business and technological innovation. Our approach in this paper is to draw on some of these different literatures to assess the value of engagement in social innovation activities.

In chapter 2 we review some of the evidence for particular benefits of engagement activities, for both communities and individuals that participate in them. In chapter 3, we look at some of the

¹⁵ R Murray, unpublished paper, 2012

¹⁶ A Cornwall, ‘Unpacking “participation”: models, meanings and practices’, *Community Development Journal*, 2008

¹⁷ M Castells, J Caraça and G Cardoso, *Aftermath: The Cultures of the Economic Crisis*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012

¹⁸ Our partners in the TEPSIE project have published a separate paper looking specifically at these forms of citizen action in the Greek context. You can download this paper at siresearch.eu

¹⁹ A Davies, J Simon, ‘Citizen engagement in social innovation – a case study report’. A deliverable of the project: “The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe” (TEPSIE), European Commission – 7th Framework Programme, Brussels: European Commission, DG Research, 2012

²⁰ This paper forms part of the TEPSIE project. It is a deliverable within Work Package 5 of the project, which examines the relationship between citizen engagement and social innovation. For more details of the TEPSIE project, see www.tepsie.eu

arguments related to the ways that participatory activities can cause harm as well as generate benefits. In chapter 4, we look at why engagement might be particularly useful for social innovation. We conclude by suggesting a way forward based on understanding the role and value of specific types of activity rather than attempting to make generalisations about the value of citizen engagement per se.

2. Benefits of engagement: assessing the evidence

Engagement and participation activities are usually thought to have particular benefits for the communities in which they take place and for the individuals who get involved. Participation has been a key policy priority in both community and international development in the past two decades, so the evidence is best developed in these fields. In this chapter, we draw on these literatures to assess the strength of arguments that engagement activities create value in various ways. The relevant literature is extensive, so the material here is intended as a snapshot of some of the key arguments and debates rather than a comprehensive or systematic overview. To help us organise the material clearly, we make a distinction between benefits that accrue to individuals and society more broadly, but we acknowledge that in practice these two issues are closely related.

2.1. Benefits of engagement: for society

2.1.1. Social capital

It is widely argued in the literature that public participation can build social capital – engagement activities bring people together, strengthen and extend their social networks, foster trust and shared values and thereby enable further collective or community action. One of the first theorists to examine social capital was French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who argued that “social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.”²¹ He distinguishes social capital from economic and cultural capital. Bourdieu uses the concept of social capital to explain the dynamics of social class relations and social inequality; for him, social capital is a resource, used by the middle and upper classes, to cement their position and exclude the working classes from wealth and power. The same term is used in markedly different ways by Robert Putnam, who popularised the concept in his book, *Bowling Alone*. Putnam defines social capital as “features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives... Social capital, in short, refers to social connections and the attendant norms and trust.”²² For Putnam, social capital is the glue that keeps communities together and has a wide range of positive benefits for both individuals and communities.

Social capital is widely seen as a major determinant of health and wellbeing.²³ In international development, developing social capital through public participation is seen as particularly important in post-conflict societies.²⁴ Empirical evidence also suggests that social capital can have a

²¹ P Bourdieu and L Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Note that Mark Granovetter’s insight that weak ties are more likely than strong ties to act as bridges to novel or more timely information is also highly relevant to the concept of social capital. This analysis highlighting the importance of weak ties is something we are likely to return to in the context of diffusion of social innovations. See M Granovetter ‘The strength of weak ties’, *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 6 pp. 1360–1380, 1973,

²² R Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2000

²³ See for example, A Morgan, and C Swann, (eds.) ‘Social capital for health: issues of definition, measurement and links to health’, London, Health Development Agency, 2004.

²⁴ This is echoed by Osmani, who describes how, “In post-conflict, post-transition and other fragile societies, broad-based participation in public affairs is being promoted as a means of creating the social capital necessary for

positive effect on economic growth, encourage higher rates of labour market participation, increase educational and occupational attainment, improve academic performance and children's intellectual development and improve government effectiveness, amongst other things.²⁵

There is a distinction between various forms of social capital - bonding, bridging and linking social capital - and different kinds of activities strengthen different forms of social capital. Putnam draws a distinction between bonding social capital, which refers to the relationships and links between people with similar interests or identities – such as friends, family and other close knit groups – and bridging capital, which refers to the links between people or groups who have different interests and identities. Michael Woolcock introduced another category of social capital, using the term 'linking social capital' to describe vertical links or ties with those beyond the community, usually in positions of power or authority.²⁶ In research commissioned by the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) in the UK, Begum, Jochum and Yates highlight the important role of voluntary and community organisations in generating and mobilising these three different forms of social capital.²⁷ Unsurprisingly, those organisations working with or catering for a relatively homogenous group tend to be best at developing bonding social capital, while those organisations which work with a range of people or communities and work collaboratively tend to be better at developing linking or bridging social capital.

However, some argue that the link between social capital and political participation is not clear or consistent. Research by Vivien Lowndes and Gerry Stoker, for example, found that trust, attachment to the local neighbourhood and attitudes to other people, were poor predictors of levels of participation.²⁸ Instead, Lowndes and Stoker highlight the importance of 'institutional filters', namely organisations or institutions which play a critical role in 'converting' social capital into political participation. According to their research, the most important institutional filters are: party politics and political leadership; public management and in particular, the role of local authorities; and civic infrastructure, namely the relationships and networks between civil society organisations.

Others problematise the concept of social capital itself and point to the negative effects it can have on individuals and communities. Roger Waldinger's research in the United States, for example, describes how the strong bonds and relationships that tie individuals together can also exclude others.²⁹ Waldinger studied the ways in which ethnic whites (Irish, Polish and Italian immigrants) controlled various unions and construction work in New York. He suggested that "the same social relations that enhance the ease and efficiency of economic exchanges among community members implicitly restrict outsiders."³⁰ In other cases, close-knit communities can place excessive burdens

building a cohesive society." In S Osmani, 'Participatory Governance: An Overview of Issues and Evidence' in *Participatory Governance and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*, United Nations, 2006

²⁵ V Jochum, 'Social Capital: Beyond the Theory', London, NCVO, 2003; A Portes, 'Social Capital: Its origins and applications in Modern Sociology', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24:1 -24, 1998; JS Coleman, 'Social capital in the creation of human capital', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 94, pp.95-121, 1998

²⁶ M Woolcock, 'The place of social capital in understanding social and economic outcomes'. *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, vol. 2, 11–17, 2001

²⁷ H Yates and V Jochum, *It's who you know that counts*, London, NCVO, 2003; and H Begum, *Social capital in action*, London, NCVO, 2003

²⁸ V Lowndes, L Pratchett and G Stoker, 'The Locality Effect: Local Government and Citizen Participation', Final Report, 2002

²⁹ R Waldinger, 'The Other Side of embeddedness: a case study of the interplay between economy and ethnicity' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol.18, 555- 580, 1995

³⁰ Ibid

or claims on group members or place undue restrictions on individuals' freedoms.³¹ As Alejandro Portes highlights, social capital can consist of group solidarity that becomes a negative force leading to what he terms 'downward levelling norms'. These are experienced by groups united by common adversity and who can become resistant to individual success stories because they undermine the group's cohesion. Downward levelling norms operate to "keep members of a downtrodden group in place and force the more ambitious to escape from it."³² As such, social capital should not be seen simply as a positive force; it can bring about negative effects for both community members and non-community members.

This evidence calls for some caution amongst policymakers and civil society leaders when advocating citizen engagement as a way of building social capital. First, the links between social capital creation and participation are unclear. Second, there are reasons to think that social capital in itself may not always be a beneficial end to strive for – indeed, social capital is not unproblematic and policymakers and practitioners alike should be aware of its possible negative impact.

2.1.2. Social cohesion

It is widely assumed that various forms of public participation or citizen engagement can contribute to social cohesion – often considered a basic building block of well functioning communities, critical for building trust and respect for others, reducing crime and creating a sense of belonging.³³ This assumption is based on contact theories developed by Gordon Allport and others in the 1950s.³⁴ Allport argued that bringing people together from diverse backgrounds would help overcome negative stereotypes or prejudiced assumptions and encourage understanding, tolerance and trust. There is empirical evidence to suggest that activities, which encourage interaction between individuals from diverse backgrounds, can increase trust, understanding and so on. In particular, there is evidence of the positive effects of direct contact with groups such as the elderly, children with disabilities and those with mental health problems.³⁵ As such, contact based approaches are widely recognised as an effective way of resolving community conflicts and tensions.

Miles Hewstone makes clear that it is not the simple act of participation itself that will lead to social cohesion.³⁶ Rather it is the way these activities are practiced. In his studies of the effect of contact based approaches in challenging attitudes to mental ill-health and disabilities, he suggests five enabling conditions which must be present for these approaches to be successful. He argues that members of different groups must be included on equal terms, and should only be brought together in situations where stereotypes are likely to be disproved, where participants get to know each other properly and where inter-group co-operation is necessary. Furthermore, equality must be widely perceived and accepted as a social norm. These are high standards that engagement activities will have to meet if they are to contribute towards social cohesion.

2.1.3. Empowerment

It is often thought that participatory activities will empower citizens by providing a mechanism to for them to voice concerns, desires and preferences and thereby shape public policies and other

³¹ A Portes, 'Social Capital: Its origins and applications in Modern Sociology', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24:1 -24, 1998

³² Ibid

³³ V Jochum, B Pratten, K Wilding, 'Civil Renewal and Active Citizenship', London, NCVO, 2005

³⁴ G Allport, *The nature of prejudice*, Reading, MA, Addison-Wesley, 1954

³⁵ M Hewstone, 'Inter-group contact: panacea for prejudice?' *The Psychologist*, Vol. 16, No. 7, 2003

³⁶ Ibid

decision making processes. As such, participation is one of the key objectives of community development, international development and civic renewal. From the development literature, the two case studies most often used to illustrate this relationship are participatory budgeting processes in Porto Alegre in Brazil and the People’s Planning Campaign in Kerala, a radical experiment in decentralisation.³⁷ In the literature on public participation in the UK there is also some empirical evidence and case studies which show that participation can empower citizens and local communities. For example, people interviewed as part of the ‘Pathways to Participation’ project felt that they had been able to impact their local communities – for example, by being able to provide new community facilities and services, saving existing ones from closure, providing new forms of support for vulnerable members of the community or providing a range of cultural and other activities to enrich the lives of community members.³⁸

It is important, however, to distinguish between various forms of empowerment. Some make a distinction between subjective empowerment (the feeling of being able to influence decisions) and objective empowerment (actually being able to influence decisions). Others draw a further distinction between subjective, de facto (actual control) and de jure empowerment (empowerment by law, enshrined in rights etc.).³⁹

In their extensive review of the effects of various forms of participation on empowerment, McLean and Andersson conclude that “the evidence indicates that highly participative voice mechanisms such as deliberative forums, citizens’ juries or citizens’ summits are most likely to provide citizens with subjective empowerment. However... they all also have the potential to deliver real de facto empowerment depending on the context in which the mechanisms are operating.”⁴⁰ This study also provides some evidence that choice and exit mechanisms such as direct payments and individual budgets can deliver both subjective and de facto empowerment. In addition, some participatory budgeting processes also led to de facto empowerment. This study found that even public petitions, which are a very shallow form of participation, can lead to de jure empowerment. Consequently, the authors conclude that the level of empowerment achieved depends not only on the type of activity, but on how well the activity is carried out, as well as a host of other contextual factors.

Even though participation in various kinds of public activity may lead to feelings of empowerment, many things need to be in place for this to result in genuine de facto empowerment. Mike Kesby highlights that “while individuals may ‘feel’ empowered during or immediately after participation in a project, cognitive transformations at the individual scale are unlikely to bring about significant changes in dominant frameworks without being reinforced through collective social action”.⁴¹ Andrea Cornwall agrees that much more is needed for ‘empowerment’ than simply giving people a voice - institutional changes and political will are needed to convert commitments to participation into something tangible. And this will need to be complemented by ‘from below’ action that supports collective activities. As Cornwall notes, “both of these processes take investment, time and persistence: they cannot be achieved by waving a magic wand, convening a participatory

³⁷ See for example A Fung and E Wright, *Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, London, Verso, 2003

³⁸ E Brodie et al, ‘Pathways through Participation: What Creates and Sustains Active Citizenship?’ Final Report, 2011

³⁹ S McLean and E Andersson, ‘Activating Empowerment: empowering Britain from the bottom up’, Involve & Ipsos Mori, London, 2009

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ M Kesby, ‘Tyrannies of transformation: a post structural and spatial understanding of empowerment through participation’, Paper presented at the conference, ‘Participation: from Tyranny to Transformation’, Manchester, IDPM, February 2003, p. 27

workshop or applying a few PRA [Participatory Rural Appraisal] tools, and hey presto, there is empowerment!”⁴²

2.1.4. Development and democracy

Within the field of international development, and policy circles especially, the idea that increasing citizens’ voice through various forms of participation will make public institutions more accountable to citizens and responsive to their needs is widely accepted.⁴³ Public participation is therefore seen as critical in achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), such as poverty reduction, gender equality and universal primary education. According to the UN, “engagement is regarded as an important governance norm that can strengthen the decision-making arrangements of the state and produce outcomes that favour the poor and the disadvantaged. In this light, engagement emerges as conducive, if not critical, to attaining the MDGs”.⁴⁴

The evidence, however, is mixed. In an extensive review of the empirical evidence relating to citizen engagement in transparency and accountability initiatives (defined here as initiatives which aim to promote “accountability and transparency of public decision making and the delivery of public services”), John Gaventa and Rosemary McGee examine a range of initiatives across five sectors: public service delivery (with a particular focus on health and education); budget processes; freedom of information; natural resource governance; and aid transparency.⁴⁵ They point to a number of studies that demonstrate the benefits of citizen engagement in transparency and accountability initiatives. These include, in some settings: lower levels of corruption, new democratic spaces for citizen engagement, empowering local voices, better services and budget utilisation, and increased responsiveness from the state and other institutions. However, overall, the authors found that “much of the current evidence base relies on untested normative, positive assumptions and under-specified relationships between mechanisms and outcomes”.⁴⁶ They also highlight that “virtually none of the literature gathered explores possible risks or documents negative effects arising from TAIs [transparency and accountability initiatives], although some begin to note these at an anecdotal or speculative level.”⁴⁷ The authors are reluctant to draw general conclusions from these studies, claiming that “the evidence base is not large enough – i.e. there are simply not enough good impact studies – from which one can begin to assess overall

⁴² A Cornwall, ‘Unpacking “participation”: models, meanings and practices’, *Community Development Journal*, 2008

⁴³ It might be worth mentioning the work of development economist Albert Hirschman, who argued that the threat of exit (the ability to vote with one’s feet and leave) was insufficient in putting pressure on firms, organisations and states to improve the services they offer. Instead, he argued that exit should be combined with voice (crudely, the ability to complain) to generate improvements. It is interesting to note that he also argued that voice without the threat of exit was equally unlikely to prove adequate in forcing change. In summary, “easy availability of the exit option makes the recourse to voice less likely. Now it appears that the *effectiveness* of the voice mechanism is strengthened by the possibility of exit. The willingness to develop and use the voice mechanism is reduced by exit, but the ability to use it with effect is increased by it. Fortunately, the contradiction is not insoluble. Together, the two propositions merely spell out the conditions under which voice (a) will be resorted to and (b) bids fair to be effective: there should be the possibility of exit, but exit should not be too easy or too attractive as soon as deterioration of one’s own organisation sets in.” See A Hirschman, *Exit, Voice & Loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organisations and states*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, p.83, 1970

⁴⁴ UN, ‘People Matter: Civic Engagement in Public Governance, New York’, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008

⁴⁵ J Gaventa and R McGee, ‘Review of Impact and Effectiveness of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives: Synthesis Report, Prepared for the Transparency and Accountability Initiative Workshop’, Institute of Development Studies, October 14 – 15, 2010

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p 8

trends.”⁴⁸ However, as they point out, a lack of evidence does not mean that there is no relationship between public participation and accountability or transparency, or that such initiatives cannot bring about significant positive benefits.

Another major study was recently undertaken by the Development Research Centre.⁴⁹ Their stated aim was to test the proposition that “participatory, rights-bearing forms of citizenship will contribute to more responsive and accountable forms of governance, which in turn will be pro-poor”.⁵⁰ Although the authors found more than 30 examples of where public participation had improved outcomes in the field of health, education, water, housing and infrastructure and evidence of citizen action shaping service provision (largely through successful campaigns), they conclude that the relationship between participation, development goals and more equitable outcomes is far more complex and nuanced than is generally understood. Even if participation can lead to a range of benefits, “citizen engagement cannot be expected to cut poverty overnight, especially in more fragile democratic contexts. There is a long and arduous process that occurs between the time when people feel powerless and marginalised and when, perhaps many years later, they are cooperating with the government to reduce maternal mortality, for instance, or mobilising for improved health services, or demanding that their vote counts.”⁵¹

This sentiment is echoed by Alina Rocha Menocal and Bhavna Sharma in their evaluation of the effectiveness of donor support for Citizens’ Voice and Accountability (CVA) initiatives.⁵² The authors found no clear link between poverty reduction and initiatives of this kind, stating that: “all case studies suggest that the effect on development of CV&A in particular, and democracy more generally...is neither direct nor obvious, and no evidence can be found within the sample, of a direct contribution of CV&A interventions to poverty alleviation or the meeting of the MDGs.”⁵³ They argue that such initiatives do contribute to positive outcomes and benefits but that these rarely match the high expectations of funders. They point to a large discrepancy between programme effects and the stated aims and expectations of funders: “A critical factor leading to the observed limited nature of results is related to the fact that donor expectations as to what such work can achieve are too high, and are based on misguided assumptions around the nature of voice and accountability, and the linkages between the two”. Overall, they highlight a tension between “the long-term processes of transforming state-society relations and donors’ needs/desires to produce quick results.”⁵⁴

Impacts (in terms of greater accountability and greater responsiveness to social needs) are also determined by the form of engagement (or type of ‘voice mechanism’). Matthew Andrews uses evidence from South African local government reforms and over 50 case studies from the literature.⁵⁵ He suggests that what matters is certain features of citizen voice, namely whether the

⁴⁸ Ibid., p 21

⁴⁹ The Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability (Citizenship DRC) is a global research consortium funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). It is co-ordinated by the Institute of Development Studies <http://www.drc-citizenship.org/> Accessed on 8th January 2013

⁵⁰ J Gaventa and G Barrett, ‘So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement?’ Working Paper, Volume 2010 Number 347, IDS, CDR, 2010

⁵¹ DRC, ‘Blurring the Boundaries: Citizen Action across States and Societies, A Summary of Findings from a Decade of Collaborative Research on Citizen Engagement’, 2011

⁵² A Rocha Menocal, and B Sharma, ‘Joint Evaluation of Citizens’ Voice and Accountability: Synthesis Report’, London: Department for International Development, 2008 p 55

⁵³ Ibid., p v

⁵⁴ Ibid., p v

⁵⁵ M Andrews, ‘Voice Mechanisms and Local Government Fiscal Outcomes: How Do Civic Pressure and Participation Influence Public Accountability?’ In A Shah, (ed.) *Public Expenditure Analysis*, Washington, DC, World Bank, 2005

voice mechanism is broad or narrow in its focus and whether it carries any influence. Where the mechanism lacks influence, there will be no positive effects. Where the mechanism does have influence, it can yield benefits in terms of greater accountability. And where the mechanism is narrow in its focus, governments can become more accountable but to narrow interest groups and can therefore be susceptible to capture by these groups.

Similarly, research on activities that engage citizens in the monitoring of public services suggests that success depends on the context of that participation. Martina Björkman and Jakob Svensson investigated citizen monitoring of public health interventions in Uganda.⁵⁶ While these activities in general do seem to lead to improvements in terms of accountability and responsiveness, results were less positive where the community is more ethnically diverse and where disparity of incomes is greater. They therefore argue that, “social heterogeneity, and specifically ethnic fractionalisation, adversely impact collective action for improved service provision”.⁵⁷

It is clear that it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between engagement activities and greater state responsiveness to needs. This is an area where research remains quite sparse; where it does exist, it tends to focus on the context in which activities were carried out, the type of activities undertaken and the immediate consequences or effects.

2.2. Benefits of engagement: for individuals

We have seen that it is difficult to draw confident conclusions from the evidence about the benefits of engagement on wider society. Can we be more certain about benefits at a more individual level? In this section we look at evidence related to two specific types of individual benefits: greater capabilities and confidence, and stronger citizenship skills. Some of these arguments are made in relation to specific engagement activities, and others are made using the broader concepts of ‘participation’ or ‘engagement’. Where possible we indicate the types of activity that are being used to make these arguments.

2.2.1. Capabilities and confidence

The idea that various forms of participation can develop individual participants’ skills and capacities and enhance their self-esteem and confidence is often mentioned in the literature on public participation. And there are numerous studies that argue that participation can lead to specific benefits such as increased levels of political efficacy, personal development through the acquisition of new skills, greater self esteem and self confidence.⁵⁸ For example, in the final report of the ‘Pathways to Participation’ project in the UK, Véronique Jochum and colleagues found that participation delivered a range of benefits to participants.⁵⁹ The authors interviewed a number of people that had taken part in participation activities and found that interviewees reported ‘instrumental benefits’ (such as skills, connections and networks, self-help and improved access to

⁵⁶ M Björkman, J Svensson, ‘Power to the People: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment on Community-based Monitoring in Uganda.’ *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124:2, 2009, pp. 735-69

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ M Barnes and P Shardlow, ‘From Passive Recipient to Active Citizen: Participation in Mental Health User Groups’, *Journal of Mental Health*, vol.6:3, 1997. Quoted in ‘Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power: The Local Government White Paper’, Evidence Annex, London, HMSO, 2008

⁵⁹ E Brodie, T Hughes, V Jochum, S Miller, N Ockenden and D Warburton, ‘Pathways through Participation: What Creates and Sustains Active Citizenship? Final Report’, Involve, 2011

job opportunities) and ‘transformative benefits’ (such as new friendships, a heightened sense of community, confidence, greater sense of self-worth and greater wellbeing).⁶⁰ These findings are echoed in the work of psychologist Albert Bandura who argued that participation could play a role in developing participants’ self efficacy⁶¹ and confidence.⁶²

In the UK, there is considerable evidence of the individual benefits of participation from studies of engagement in healthcare settings. A study by Christine Farrell, which explored 12 Health in Partnership projects in the UK, found that patient involvement in health care led to a range of benefits for both patients and healthcare professionals.⁶³ Benefits reported by patients included greater confidence, a reduction in anxiety and fear, a better understanding of personal needs, enhanced levels of trust in healthcare providers, increased capacity to seek information from external sources, and better relationships with healthcare professionals.

Similarly, Jennie Popay and colleagues review the evidence for the effectiveness of community engagement initiatives that aim to address the wider social determinants of health. Their review covers engagement activities relating to a broad range of issues including housing, transport, employment, social inclusion, neighbourhood renewal, and poverty reduction. A number of studies they looked at reported positive socio-economic benefits (such as increased access to training opportunities and informal skills development) as well as personal benefits (such as increased confidence and self esteem). They also found evidence in a number of studies that participation could reduce individuals’ fear of crime, a finding echoed in a report published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in the UK.⁶⁴ However, the authors also show that the evidence on the personal benefits of participation can be mixed. In particular, some of the benefits mentioned above can be frequently undermined by negative consequences of participation such as disillusionment, disengagement and consultation fatigue.⁶⁵ In some cases, participants also reported personal costs, such as increased emotional stress, often resulting from disapproval or criticism from the wider community for having taken part in such activities.

Reviews also emphasise that positive personal outcomes such as these will only accompany certain types of engagement. For example, a recent review from the Department of Communities and Local Government in the UK notes that the acquisition of skills was most likely in cases where engagement was ‘deeper’ and recurring. This suggests that collective forms of engagement (which bring people together to discuss, act together etc.) are more likely to provide participants with benefits than individual, one-off forms of engagement (such as voting in an election, making a donation, signing a petition or making ethical consumer choices).

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Self- efficacy refers to “beliefs in one’s capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and course of action needed to meet given situational demands” (Wood and Bandura, 1989, p 370)

⁶² A Bandura, *Self-efficacy: the exercise of control*, New York, Freeman, 1997

⁶³ C Farrell, ‘Patient and Public Involvement in Health: The Evidence for Policy Implementation, Department of Health’, London, UK, 2004

⁶⁴ Marilyn Taylor et al, ‘Making Connections: An Evaluation of the Community Participation Programmes’, ODPM Research Report 15, London, ODPM, 2005

⁶⁵ J Popay et al, ‘Community engagement in initiatives addressing the wider social determinants of health: A rapid review of evidence on impact, experience and process, Universities of Lancaster, Liverpool and Central Lancashire

2.2.2. Citizenship skills

Another common argument for participation is that it can help to create and strengthen citizenship skills, and thereby strengthen future prospects for public participation.⁶⁶ This line of argument can be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville who argued that citizen involvement in informal associational and voluntary life has an educative quality, acting as a ‘school of democracy’, which helps prepare people to play a full role in democratic institutions.⁶⁷

The notion that participation can improve and strengthen future democratic participation comes across clearly in the literature on international development. For example, Andrea Cornwall and Vera Schattan Coelho explore the ‘democratic potential’ of a range of ‘participatory sphere’ institutions and initiatives, including hospital facility boards in South Africa, participatory policy councils and community groups in Brazil, India, Mexico and Bangladesh, participatory budgeting in Argentina, a public deliberation process in Canada, NGO participatory fora in Angola and Bangladesh, community fora in the UK and social movements in South Africa.⁶⁸ Reviewing evidence from these, they argue that “participatory sphere institutions can become ‘schools for citizenship’.... in which those who participate learn new meanings and practices of citizenship by working together.”⁶⁹

Similarly, the research findings of the Development Research Centre (DRC) also stress the important role played by associational life.⁷⁰ These authors look at three forms of citizen action: membership or affiliation to local associations and non-governmental organisations (for example co-operatives or trade unions); public fora (for example, planning councils) as well as self-organised social movements and campaigns (the Brazilian rainforest movement, resistance to dams in India, the international campaign for universal education, etc.). They refer to two studies in particular. The first, from Brazil, found that people who had taken part in protests were more likely to then take part in more institutionalised participatory budgeting processes.⁷¹ The second, from South Africa, shows how citizens that had learned campaigning and advocacy skills during the anti-apartheid movement were now using those same skills in the fight against HIV/AIDS through the establishment of the Treatment Action Campaign which calls for equal access to HIV prevention and treatment services for all.⁷² These cases illustrate the way in which participation can develop skills and confidence which can then be used in the future: “the benefits of citizen action accrue, such that enhancing skills in one arena can strengthen the possibilities of success in others.”⁷³

⁶⁶ J Gaventa, N Benequista, ‘Blurring the Boundaries: Citizen Action across States and Societies, A Summary of Findings from a Decade of Collaborative Research on Citizen Engagement’, 2011

⁶⁷ A de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2000

⁶⁸ A Cornwall and V Coelho, (eds.) *Spaces for Change? The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas*, London and New York, Zed, 2007

⁶⁹ A Cornwall and V Coelho, (eds.) *Spaces for Change? The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas*, London and New York, Zed, 2007. See also, G Baocchi, ‘Participation, activism, and politics: the Porto Alegre experiment and deliberative democratic theory’, *Politics and Society* 29(1): 43-72, 2001 and L Avritzer, *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002

⁷⁰ DRC, ‘Blurring the Boundaries: Citizen Action across States and Societies, A Summary of Findings from a Decade of Collaborative Research on Citizen Engagement’, 2011

⁷¹ P Houtzager, A, Gurza Lavallo and A Acharya, ‘Who Participates? Civil Society and the New Democratic Politics in São Paulo’, Brazil, IDS Working Paper 210, Brighton, IDS, 2003

⁷² S Friedman, ‘Gaining Comprehensive AIDS Treatment in South Africa: The Extraordinary “Ordinary”’, in J. Gaventa and R. McGee (eds), *Citizen Action and National Policy Reform, Making Change Happen*, London, Zed Books, 2010

⁷³ DRC, ‘Blurring the Boundaries: Citizen Action across States and Societies, A Summary of Findings from a Decade of Collaborative Research on Citizen Engagement’, 2011

Although we have highlighted some case study evidence here, most of what is written about participation activities being ‘schools of citizenship’ or ‘schools of democracy’ tends to focus on the conceptual or theoretical basis for such a claim. There is limited empirical evidence to suggest that participation can either strengthen future participation or that participation can confer citizenship skills to participants. Where particular cases do show such outcomes they tend to be used to illustrate the potential benefits of participation, rather than being used to make generalisations that such a relationship exists. As Archon Fung argues, what he refers to ‘minipublics’ (various participatory fora such as deliberative polls, citizen summits, and participatory budgeting) “defy generalisation precisely because the values they advance and their consequences for democratic governance depends upon the details of their institutional construction.”⁷⁴ Fung suggests that participation activities are more likely to contribute to the development of democratic skills when they take place often and regularly, than when they are a one off event or take place infrequently. He also contends that citizens are more likely to develop citizenship skills where the activity has concrete consequences for them.

Similarly, Cornwall and Coelho, who are positive about the role of public participation, call for realistic expectations about what such activities can achieve. They argue that impacts can only be seen over time and need to be situated within particular contexts, noting: “these cases drive home the point that participation is a process over time, animated by actors with their own social and political projects. Most of all, they emphasise the importance of contextualizing participatory sphere institutions with regard to other political institutions and situating them on the social, cultural and historical landscapes of which they form part.”⁷⁵

2.3. Conclusion

Reviewing the evidence related to the benefits of engagement and participation, it seems that there are four common themes:

1. *Engagement alone cannot address major societal challenges*: Participation activities cannot in themselves realise some of the ambitious goals set out by their proponents (such as a reduction in poverty, gender equality, accountability in government). The realisation of such goals depends on much more than the simple existence of various participatory activities. They will require changes in law, institutions, attitudes and norms. For example, a forum for citizens to express their views on healthcare provision will only produce better, more responsive services if there is some connection from that forum to decision makers with real power, along with the political will to enact change.
2. *Designed for specific outcomes*: Engagement activities which are designed to have specific outcomes (e.g. a greater sense of empowerment, greater confidence and self-esteem, community cohesion etc.), may well achieve those particular outcomes. However, this does not mean that all citizen engagement activities or that citizen engagement per se will always or can always expect these outcomes. If the engagement activity was not designed with a particular outcome in mind then it is unlikely that other benefits will be produced as an extra or additional benefit or as a by-product of the process. For example, it is unlikely

⁷⁴ A Fung, ‘Recipes for Public Spheres: Eight institutional design choices and their consequences’, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Volume 11, Number 3, 2003, pp.338-367

⁷⁵ A Cornwall and V Coelho, (eds.) *Spaces for Change? The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas*, London and New York, Zed, 2007

that one-off and online forms of citizen engagement will lead to greater social cohesion or social capital.

3. *The importance of effective execution:* Whether or not a certain form of engagement will produce a particular benefit will depend entirely on the way it is practiced and the context in which it operates. For example, whether volunteering for a timebank will lead to greater skills and confidence will depend on how long a commitment this is, the opportunities for interaction with others and the qualities of those interactions and so on.
4. *Inconclusive and insufficient evidence:* As noted in the introduction to this paper, the normative force of engagement has often taken the place of detailed examination of, or evidence, for its benefits. There are few clear links between the practice of participation and the benefits it is supposed to deliver. And tracking the impact of participation is particularly challenging because many of its goals - such as 'empowerment' or 'social cohesion' - are often ill-defined and therefore difficult to measure or quantify. Social cohesion, for example, has been described as a 'quasi-concept' because it is grounded in a 'vagueness' that makes the concept "adaptable to various situations, flexible enough to follow the meanderings and necessities of political action from day to day. This vagueness explains why it is so difficult to determine exactly what is meant by social cohesion".⁷⁶ Far more research is needed to better understand the impacts and outcomes of engagement and participation activities.

We need to take these lessons into account when thinking about citizen engagement in social innovation. At the very least, these conclusions should make us cautious about the way we talk about the potential of citizen engagement in social innovation. In the next chapter, we look at a further reason for caution: the risks of harm associated with the practice of citizen engagement.

⁷⁶ P Bernard, 'Social cohesion: A dialectical critique of a quasi-concept', in *Lien social et Politiques*, no. 41, 1999, p. 47-59

3. The risks of citizen engagement

So far in this paper we have examined some of the arguments and evidence related to the value of engagement and participation activities. We have argued that participation is a complex space and the extent to which it creates various benefits will depend on careful consideration of the form of engagement, its context and supporting structures around it. However, the decision to undertake engagement activities doesn't simply carry the risk of failing to deliver the outcomes it is expected to achieve; where engagement activities are undertaken without taking local contextual factors into account, there is also a risk of creating harm and causing a worse outcome than if no such activity had taken place. In other words, we need to be cautious about our approach to engagement not just because we need to be aware of the ways it might fail to deliver the outcomes we expect; we should also be cautious because engagement activity might lead to various harms.

This point is well illustrated by John Gaventa and Gregory Barrett's meta-case study analysis of a ten-year research programme on citizenship, participation and accountability. This analysed a non-randomised sample of 100 research studies of four types of citizen engagement in 20 countries. Over 800 outcomes of citizen engagement were recorded from these studies. Gaventa and Barrett coded these 800 outcomes and while 75% were coded positively, the remaining 25% were negative. As illustrated in the table below, for each of the categories of positive outcomes they identified, there is a correlating negative outcome. For example, while some participatory activities do promote social inclusion, enabling the inclusion of new actors and issues in public spaces, they can also reinforce social hierarchies and the exclusion of particular groups or individuals. Similarly, while some activities can lead participants to feel a greater sense of agency or empowerment, other engagement activities can create a sense of disempowerment and a reduced sense of agency among participants. And with regards to creating more responsive states, while citizen engagement can lead to greater accountability, it can also lead to violent or coercive responses by states. The authors note that they were surprised by "the number of times in which reprisals, force and violence were used by authorities in response to greater citizen voice." Gaventa and Barrett conclude that "While 'good change' can happen through citizen engagement, there are also risks... Positive outcomes of citizen engagement can be mirrored by their opposite."⁷⁷

Figure 2 - Outcomes of Citizen Engagement

Positive	Negative
Construction of Citizenship	
Greater sense of empowerment and agency	Disempowerment and reduced sense of agency
Practices of citizen participation	
Increased capacities for collective action	New skills and capacities used for 'negative' purposes

⁷⁷ J Gaventa and G Barrett, 'So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement?' Working Paper, Volume 2010 Number 347, IDS, CDR, 2010, Page 59

New forms of participation	Tokenistic or 'captured' forms of participation e.g. astroturfing ⁷⁸
Deepening of networks and solidarities	Lack of accountability and representation in networks
Responsive and accountable states	
Greater access to state services and resources	Denial of state services and resources
Greater realisation of rights	Social, economic and political reprisals
Enhanced state responsiveness and accountability	Violent or coercive state response
Inclusive and cohesive societies	
Inclusion of new actors and issues in public spaces	Reinforcement of social hierarchies and exclusion
Greater social cohesion across groups	Increased horizontal conflict and violence

Source: Gaventa & Barrett, 2010

In the remainder of this chapter, we look at two themes related to the risks associated with engagement: who participates and how is participation practiced?

3.1. Who participates?

Research from the UK and US has shown that people who take part in civic or associational life tend to be those with higher socio economic status, the well educated, employed and affluent.⁷⁹ But to be effective, participatory activities should aim to represent and include the interests of the whole of society. Activities which fail to do this can cause harm or lead to negative outcomes. In what follows, we explore some of the risks associated with activities which are not inclusive or representative.

3.1.1. Co-option

Who takes up opportunities for engagement activities and how can we be sure that they will speak in a way that represents collective interests as opposed to their own, specific areas of concern? Shah and Guijt in their book *The Myth of Community* explore how much participatory work naively assumes that a 'community' can be treated as a cohesive whole without its own conflicts and power dynamics. The apparently neutral approach of many participatory activities (which are often positioned as open to all individuals and all opinions) in fact hides "a bias that favours the opinions and priorities of those with more power and the ability to voice their views publicly". Specifically, they argue, this has resulted in inadequate involvement and understanding of the needs of women, since "the language and practice of 'participation' often obscures women's worlds, needs and contributions to development, making equitable participatory development an elusive goal".⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Astroturfing refers to campaigns which are paid for by organisations, but seemingly fronted by non-partisan, grassroots actors. The idea is that these non-partisan grassroots actors lend credibility to the campaign. Information about the organisation funding the campaign is not widely accessible.

⁷⁹ See for example, J, Wilson and M Musick, *Volunteers: A social profile*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008

⁸⁰ I Guijt and M K Shah 'The Myth of Community: Gender Issues in Participatory Development', London, Intermediate Technology Publications, 1998, p. 1

Giles Mohan also highlights the way that techniques such as Participatory Rural Appraisal⁸¹ can often ignore powerful interests at the intra-community level. He argues that “the danger of this from a policy point of view is that the actions based on consensus may in fact further empower the powerful and vested interests that manipulated the research in the first place”.⁸²

In a paper for the United Nations, Jean-Philippe Platteau also reflects on the need to take account of the existing power structures within communities when planning participatory activities.⁸³ He highlights a number of studies that have shown that where power asymmetries are deeply embedded, the risks are high that “the local elite will distort information in a strategic manner and opportunistically capture a substantial portion of the benefits of external assistance”.⁸⁴ Summing up, he argues that “when social differentiation and power asymmetries are strong, decentralised or participatory development is tantamount to participation by the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor”.⁸⁵ As he notes, this presents a key dilemma for those working in development policy, since “the areas where inequalities are the highest and most entrenched, and where one would like to implement participatory approaches in order to correct them, are also those where these approaches are least likely to succeed.”⁸⁶

3.1.1. Self exclusion

As well as the likelihood of participatory processes being co-opted by elite groups, there are also issues around self-exclusion. Discourses on participation can sometimes suggest that as long as we get the processes and techniques right, people will participate. As Andrea Cornwall notes “participatory initiatives tend to be premised on the idea that everyone would participate if only they could”.⁸⁷ But this neglects the many reasons people might have for non-participation. This is a theme explored by Frederick Golooba-Mutebi in his work exploring popular participation in Uganda. Tracing the decline of participatory systems of local administration, he notes that there was a false assumption that people would necessarily make use of avenues for participation. A key learning therefore, is that “participation does not take place just because opportunities to participate are created”.⁸⁸

Research from developed countries also highlights the many reasons people might not participate. Self perception and belief about one’s own place and role in a community seem to be an important factor. For example, Katherine Gaskin looked specifically at young people’s predisposition to get involved in their communities through volunteering. She found that lack of confidence and a feeling that they have little to offer was a particular barrier.⁸⁹ Research by Dalziel and colleagues on attitudes to governance positions in the community found there is frequently a perception that these roles are undertaken by people who are well educated, articulate and have more time on

⁸¹ Participatory Rural Appraisal is an approach used by NGOs and others working in the field of international development. The approach is based on engaging the local community and making use of their knowledge and expertise to plan and manage development projects.

⁸² G Mohan ‘Beyond Participation: Strategies for Deeper Empowerment in B Cooke and U Kothari (eds.), in *Participation: The New Tyranny*, Zed Books, London, 2001, p 11.

⁸³ J Platteau, ‘Pitfalls of Participatory Development’, Chapter prepared for the United Nations, 2008

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p 39

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p 18

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p 38

⁸⁷ A Cornwall, ‘Unpacking ‘participation’: models, meanings and practices’, *Community Development Journal*, vol. 43:3, pp. 269-283, 2008

⁸⁸ F Golooba-Mutebi, ‘Reassessing Popular Participation in Uganda’, *Public Administration and Development*, vol.24: 4, 2004, pp. 289-304

⁸⁹ K Gaskin, ‘Young People, Volunteering and Civic Service: A Review of the Literature’, London, IVR, 2004

their hands.⁹⁰ David Beetham and colleagues summarise that “social exclusion, in all its manifestations, inhibits the participation of poor and disadvantaged communities and individuals.”⁹¹

3.1.2. The issue of legitimacy

A common argument is that various forms of participation can add to the legitimacy of decisions taken. So, even if we cannot be sure about the individual and societal benefits associated with a form of participation, there is value in participation due to the extra legitimacy that it gives to a certain course of action. However, a more detailed consideration of the concept of legitimacy throws up a number of difficulties. There is much debate within democratic theory about what exactly constitutes legitimacy. On the one hand, some argue that legitimacy is conferred on decisions when the decision making process is deemed to be fair – what is called the ‘procedural aspect’ of participation. In other accounts, the quality of the outcomes – the decisions made – are an essential aspect of legitimacy. In these accounts, legitimacy requires not just fair procedures where opportunities to participate are equally distributed, but also that those who take part are well informed. Some have also pointed out that there may be a conflict in trying to realise both these kinds of legitimacy at the same time. For example a concern for procedural fairness (enabling as many people as possible to take part) may make it harder to have high quality conversations. This is a much discussed debate within deliberative democracy. For example, commenting on a deliberative process about health care rationing in Oregon, Ian Shapiro asks “why should we attach legitimacy at all to a deliberative process that involved very few of those whose health care priorities were actually being discussed?”⁹²

Whichever account of legitimacy we favour, it is clear that the demands placed on participation in order to achieve some level of legitimacy are rather high. As argued in the report *Participation Nation*, “it is only if participation is truly representative, its outcomes a product of genuinely inclusive debate, that it stands any chance of achieving a broader legitimacy”.⁹³ Given the concerns outlined above about representativeness and co-option, this is going to be difficult for most participatory processes to achieve.

3.2. The practice of participation

3.2.1. Group dynamics

Even where engagement activities are able to attract a good mix of participants that accurately reflects the interests of the community around them, there are still reasons to be cautious about the outcomes of these activities. An interesting critique on this point is made by Bill Cooke.⁹⁴ He

⁹⁰ D Dalziel, E Hewitt and L Evans, *Motivations and Barriers to Citizen Governance*, London: Communities and Local Government, 2007

⁹¹ D Beetham, A Blick, H Margetts and S Weir, ‘Power and Participation in Modern Britain’, Democratic Audit, London, 2008, p. 11

⁹² I Shapiro, ‘Enough of Deliberation: Politics is About Interest and Power’, in *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, ed. S Macedo, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 33

⁹³ V Cooke, ‘Participation and legitimacy: the case for good deliberation’ in *Participation Nation*, ed. S Creasy, Involve, 2007, p. 33

⁹⁴ B Cooke, ‘The social psychology limits of participation’ in B Cooke and U Kothari (eds.), in *Participation: The New Tyranny*, Zed Books, London, 2001

challenges the idea that participatory processes will necessarily lead to better decisions. In fact, these processes can cause decisions to be made that are more risky, or with which no-one agrees, or that limit harm to others, and can be used (consciously or otherwise) to manipulate group members' ideological beliefs. These problems are clear if we consider just some of the work done on the social psychology of group dynamics since 1945. He describes a range of likely problems such as the Abilene paradox, whereby a group of people collectively decide on a course of action that is counter to the preferences of any individuals in the group. This paradox occurs due to a breakdown in group communications where members believe that their own preferences are counter to the group's and therefore they do not raise objections. Concern about maintaining status within a group can also lead to fears of presenting what the group facilitator might consider to be adverse or unhelpful information. Cooke notes that none of this goes beyond standard analysis of group dynamics that would be considered by business organisations. He is led to conclude that participation can be thought of as "yet another technology used with the third world without the care and concern that would be expected elsewhere". Or, as he puts it, "the rich get social psychology, the poor get participatory development".⁹⁵

3.2.2. Risks of disengagement

Poorly practiced forms of engagement can also create harm by making long term disengagement more likely. If it is true that citizen participation of various kinds can enhance the practice of democracy, as is often argued, then it is also true that negative experiences of participation can lead people to disengage even further. As Gerry Stoker comments, "bad participatory practice creates mistrust, wastes people's time and money and can seriously undermine future attempts at public engagement. Any subsequent proposals for involvement are likely to be greeted with cynicism and suspicion."⁹⁶ Geoff Mulgan highlights that "mis-managed consultations can leave people more hostile and distrustful".⁹⁷ Andrea Cornwall also highlights the risks of poorly thought out participatory activity, noting that "some communities have experienced so many attempts to 'participate' them that they have become tired and cynical".⁹⁸ Indeed, "if people have been consulted umpteen times and seen nothing happen as a result, self exclusion may be a pragmatic choice to avoid wasting time once again".⁹⁹ There is also some empirical research highlighting the impact of badly managed participatory processes. For example, Ian Cole's research on involvement in housing associations has suggested that poorly executed tenant participation initiatives not only lead to no tangible change, they can actually reduce overall levels of satisfaction and erode already fragile levels of trust.¹⁰⁰ Disengagement, disillusionment and consultation fatigue are well-documented outcomes of poorly conceived and executed engagement activities.

3.3. Conclusion

⁹⁵ B Cooke, 'The social psychology limits of participation' in B Cooke and U Kothari (eds.), in *Participation: The New Tyranny*, Zed Books, London, 2001, p. 121

⁹⁶ G Stoker, quoted in *People and Participation: How to put citizens at the heart of decision making*, Involve, 2005, p.12

⁹⁷ G Mulgan, *The Art of Public Strategy: Mobilizing Power and Knowledge for the Common Good*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p 224

⁹⁸ A Cornwall, 'Unpacking 'participation': models, meanings and practices', *Community Development Journal*, vol. 43:3, pp. 269-283, 2008

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ I Cole, *Tenant Voice, Tenant Satisfaction and the Quality of Housing Services – What Does the Evidence Tell Us?*, York: Centre for Housing Policy, University of York, 2008

Far from being a simple addition to attempts to address social needs, citizen engagement can be a high-risk activity. There are complex issues related to ensuring that participation is inclusive, and that it is not co-opted by powerful interest groups within a community. Even where it is possible to bring together a diverse range of people who reflect the whole community, the dynamics of group interactions can easily skew the information and ideas that emerge. And where participatory practices do not lead to positive change and are viewed negatively by participants, the resulting disengagement and cynicism can have a long term impact. In addition, some of these findings suggest that there may be cases where the state is incapable or poorly suited to supporting or practicing citizen engagement; there may be inherent tensions between public bodies who are reluctant or unwilling to cede control and citizens who demand greater power.

At the root of many of these issues is the mistake of viewing participation as a neutral technique, rather than an inherently political process. As Irene Guijt and Meera Shah note, participatory processes have been “increasingly approached as technical, management solutions to what are basically political issues.” This is something we need to be wary of when thinking about participation in the context of social innovation.

We have argued that a vague sense of the wider benefits of participation or a belief in the intrinsic value of engagement do not provide enough justification for advocating citizen engagement in social innovation. Instead, innovators need to have a clear understanding of why participatory activity will be valuable, what they hope it will achieve, as well as the potential risks associated with it. In the next chapter we examine some of the specific reasons why engagement is important for the practice of social innovation in particular.

4. Engaging citizens in social innovation

Our analysis of the value of engagement has so far been shaped by literature from political science and development studies. We wanted to draw on those disciplines that have looked at the concept of engagement and participation most explicitly. We have seen from reviewing this content that it is difficult to make general pronouncements about the positive value of engagement. So much depends on the way participation is practiced and the context in which it is carried out. In any case, given the risks of negative outcomes from participation and engagement, we need to be very cautious about making assumptions about their inherent value. However, the discussion so far has looked at the benefits of engagement more broadly. But does engagement play a role in social innovation specifically? Is it especially relevant to social innovation activities? In this chapter we focus on the benefits of engagement in terms of social innovation. To do so, we have drawn on literature from innovation studies which outline various mechanisms by which engagement can lead to better innovations.

We focus on two arguments in particular:

- Engaging citizens is essential so that information about needs can be understood and appropriate solutions developed
- Engaging citizens introduces divergent thinking from unexpected sources which helps to find novel solutions to complex problems

As we shall see, although these provide us with some good reasons to value engaging citizens in social innovation, they tend to rely on theoretical rather than empirically based assumptions. Much more research needs to be done to understand the empirical basis for these arguments.

4.1. Engagement enables better understanding of social needs

The aim of all social innovators is to develop solutions that meet social needs more effectively than existing solutions. However, in order to develop solutions it is first important to diagnose the problem that needs addressing. In many cases, social innovations are driven by those individuals who are affected by a particular issue. In these instances, social needs and challenges might already be well understood.

In many cases, however, especially within the public sector, those who are tasked with developing solutions do not have a personal understanding of citizens' needs. Frequently, the needs and interests of service users are assumed rather than understood or even explored.¹⁰¹ Often this is because civil servants or public policy makers do not have first hand experience of the social needs and challenges they are trying to address. This is not to say that personal experience is a pre-requisite for working in a particular area. However, the greater the distance between service users and service designers or decision makers (those who are developing the new regulations, reforms or services), the greater the risk that information about needs, motivations, context, experiences etc. will not be well understood or accurately transferred.

¹⁰¹ H Cayton, 'Patients as Entrepreneurs' in A Dixon (Eds.) *Engaging Patients in their Health: How the NHS Needs to Change*, Report from the Sir Roger Bannister Health Summit, Leeds Castle, 17–18 May 2007

The difficulty or ‘cost’ of transferring information about needs affects both the kinds of innovations that are developed and who is best placed to develop them. Equally, the idea that there is a ‘cost’ of transferring information implies that there are information asymmetries between information holders (in this case, citizens) and information seekers (in this case, public organisations, social enterprises, non profit organisations etc.). This in turn, provides a strong argument that to develop effective solutions to social challenges, it is necessary to engage those who are experiencing these challenges themselves. Citizens are best placed to articulate their own needs as they experience them. As Christian Bason argues, they are “experts in their own lives and nobody – nobody – else can claim that role.”¹⁰² This argument was first put forward by Friedrich Hayek in his seminal paper on the use of knowledge in society. Hayek argued that citizens have information about themselves that no centralised bureaucracy can ever have, namely, “knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place”¹⁰³. He reasoned that “the knowledge of the circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form, but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess.”¹⁰⁴ This also provides a rationale for co-operation with citizens: “practically every individual has some advantage over all others in that he possesses unique information of which beneficial use might be made, but of which can be made only if the decisions depending on it are left to him or are made with his active co-operation.”¹⁰⁵

4.1.1. Knowledge transfer and innovation

Within the innovation literature, it is widely accepted that innovation and knowledge processes are closely related and inter-linked. Innovation entails the creation or exploitation of new knowledge. At the same time, knowledge is the basis for understanding and creating new information and knowledge (i.e. innovating). As such, literature on innovation often focuses on the ways in which knowledge can be transferred from one entity to another.

Transferring knowledge is costly and the costs of doing so not only shape how the process of innovation is carried out but who is best placed to innovate. Von Hippel describes the cost of transferring information as ‘information stickiness’. He defines the stickiness “of a given unit of information in a given instance as the incremental expenditure required to transfer that unit of information to a specified locus in the form usable by a given information seeker. When the cost is low, information stickiness is low; when it is high, stickiness is high.”¹⁰⁶

One of the factors which determines whether information is sticky is the extent to which it is tacit or codified. Tacit knowledge is knowledge that is hard to articulate, tends to be highly contextual and requires face to face contact to ensure its successful transmission.¹⁰⁷ The basic concept is

¹⁰² C Bason, *Leading Public Sector Innovation: co-creating for a better society*, Policy Press, Bristol, 2010, p. 151

¹⁰³ F Hayek, ‘The Use of Knowledge in Society’, *The American Economic Review* 35, no. 4, p.522

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 519

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 521-522

¹⁰⁶ E von Hippel, “‘Sticky Information’ and the Locus of Problem Solving: Implications for Innovation’ MIT Sloan School of Management Working Paper, Published in *Management Science* 40, no.4, April 1994: pp. 429-439

¹⁰⁷ Within academia there has been a particular focus on the role of tacit knowledge in the innovation process. For example, Giovanni Dosi (1988), Richard Nelson & Sidney Winter (1982), Nathan Rosenberg (1982), and others explore the role of tacit knowledge in their studies of innovation, research and development, knowledge transfer and diffusion. In particular, these and other authors focus on the acquisition of tacit knowledge. Kenneth Arrow (1962) for example highlights the importance of ‘learning by doing’. Nathan Rosenberg stresses the role of ‘learning by using’ while Donald Schön and Chris Argyris (1978) emphasise the importance of learning to learn or ‘reflective

expressed by Michael Polanyi's statement, "we can know more than we can tell".¹⁰⁸ Examples include speaking a language, playing the piano or performing a dance routine. It is often defined in distinction to codified or explicit knowledge which can be formalised and is therefore easily transferred (examples include information such as the names of capital cities or elements of the periodic table). However, it is important to recognise that these are not opposites. Instead, tacit and codified knowledge should be seen as operating along a continuum with completely codifiable knowledge (such as elements of the periodic table) at one end and wholly uncodifiable knowledge at the other. The two forms of knowledge are also complementary. As Polanyi explained, tacit knowledge is required to interpret codified knowledge. Moreover, implicit and explicit knowledge are not static. Knowledge processes are dynamic and co-evolve. For example, the codification of knowledge creates new tacit knowledge.

Information stickiness is not simply a function of the characteristics of the information itself. It also relates to the characteristics or attributes of the information seekers and providers. So, while the extent to which the information is tacit or codified affects the cost of transfer, there are other factors to take into account. For example, if the information provider charges for access to the information (say in the form of a patent or license) then the stickiness will increase. Similarly, if the information seeker lacks the necessary skills, knowledge or competencies that are a precondition for assimilating the information then stickiness will also increase. Stickiness also varies according to the amount of complementary information or additional skills that are needed to make use of the new information. So, as Keith Pavitt explains, "even borrowers of technology must have their own skills, and make their own expenditures on development and production engineering; they cannot treat technology developed elsewhere as a free, even very cheap, good."¹⁰⁹

One type of information that is frequently 'sticky' and costly to transfer is information about users' needs and preferences. Certainly much of the information that individuals hold about their own needs is tacit in nature. Ragna Seidler-de Alwis and Evi Hartmann's description of tacit knowledge as that which is "personal, hard to formalise, rooted in action and procedure, commitments, values and emotions"¹¹⁰ applies well to the type of information individuals might have about their own lives, experiences and needs. This kind of information is sticky for other reasons: it can be highly contextualised (for example, in the context of a particular locality); it might require a stock of knowledge for its interpretation (for example, it might require an understanding of how public services should be delivered and how they work in practice) or; it might require the use of specific skills (for example, those of trained professionals such as teachers, doctors, psychologists etc.).

This suggests that there is an information asymmetry between citizens and service providers, with information about needs residing with citizens and information about solutions residing with service providers. This has significant implications for us. First, it means that some form of engagement is necessary to accurately transfer knowledge from citizens to services providers – especially where this information is tacit. That is, the more tacit the information, the greater the need for engagement.

practice' in organisational settings. Lundvall (1985 and 1988) introduced the concept of 'learning by interacting' to show how the interaction between producers and users can enhance the competencies of both.

¹⁰⁸ M Polanyi, *The tacit dimension*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1966

¹⁰⁹ K Pavitt quoted in E von Hippel, "Sticky Information" and the Locus of Problem Solving: Implications for Innovation' MIT Sloan School of Management Working Paper, Published in *Management Science* 40, no.4, April 1994: pp. 429-439.

¹¹⁰ R Seidler-de Alwis and E Hartmann, 'The use of tacit knowledge within innovative companies: knowledge management in innovative enterprises', *Journal of Knowledge Management*, vol12:1, 2008, pp.133-147

Second, it suggests that some forms of engagement will be more successful at uncovering citizens' needs than others. In particular, 'deeper' forms of engagement that involve face to face interaction will be particularly valuable in uncovering 'sticky' information about complex social needs. Methods involving observation and interaction are likely to be more fruitful than asking people to articulate problems via a survey or in a basic workshop setting. Ethnographic research methods may be particularly helpful in cases where groups or individuals are unable or unwilling to articulate their own needs or where they are mistrustful of service providers. This may be the case, for example, with individuals who live with particular kinds of disabilities or mental health problems. This is not to say that alternative methods should not be used (arguably they have an important role in building up a picture of the scale of a problem once it has been more fully understood). Moreover, some authors have argued that body language is very important for the transfer of knowledge that is tacit in nature, which suggests limitations to the use of ICT approaches.¹¹¹

Third, the existence of information asymmetries also suggests that citizens should be involved in the development of social innovations. In *Democratising Innovation*, von Hippel argues that users and manufacturers tend to develop different kinds of innovation as a result of information asymmetries.¹¹² As innovators depend on the information they already possess, users tend to develop 'functionally novel innovations' while manufacturers tend to develop innovations which are incremental and better able to meet already identified needs. He suggests that "when information needed for innovation-related problem solving is held at one locus as sticky information, the locus of problem-solving activity will tend to take place at that site."¹¹³ To develop innovations which more closely meet the needs of users, information about needs and solutions need to be brought together. This argument suggests that since transferring tacit knowledge is so expensive and complex, rather than transfer knowledge about needs to innovators, users should innovate themselves. If knowledge of needs and tools for finding solutions can be co-located in the same place (i.e. the user) then the cost of transferring sticky information is eliminated. This is the rationale for engaging users in the innovation process. And it is why so many organisations are now providing users with the means to directly influence the ideation stage of innovation processes, or providing them with the tools to innovate for themselves directly (user-led innovation).¹¹⁴

A note of caution

Although von Hippel is writing largely about product development in the private sector, we can see how his arguments are relevant to building up a case for citizen engagement in developing social innovations. We can assume that the information citizens have about their needs can be 'sticky' or costly to transfer – often because it is relatively tacit. Therefore, in order to develop social innovations which meet citizens' needs effectively, citizens will need to be given tools to take part in the innovation process. Moreover, if von Hippel's argument about information asymmetries applies in the social field, then we can assume that service providers will tend to develop incremental and process innovations – rather than disruptive or functionally new innovations.

Von Hippel's arguments provide a good theoretical grounding for the idea of bringing citizens into the innovation process and for increasingly popular practices such as co-design and co-production.

¹¹¹ D Leonhard and S Sensiper, "The role of tacit knowledge in group innovation", *California Management Review*, 1998, vol. 40:3, pp. 112-25

¹¹² E Von Hippel, *Democratising Innovation*, Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2005

¹¹³ E von Hippel, "Sticky Information" and the Locus of Problem Solving: Implications for Innovation' MIT Sloan School of Management Working Paper, Published in *Management Science* 40, no.4, April 1994: pp. 429-439.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

But transferring his argument into the social field is not unproblematic. When von Hippel talks about user-innovators, he frequently understands them as ‘lead users.’ These are individuals who have particularly strong needs and who therefore are “positioned to benefit significantly by obtaining a solution to those needs”.¹¹⁵ In the examples he uses in his research (often extreme sports enthusiasts and users of specialist scientific instruments) these lead users are easy to identify and tend to be highly skilled and motivated to innovate once they have the tools to do so. Identifying their equivalent in the social field is difficult. Who exactly are the ‘lead users’ of public services? Are they those with the most acute or chronic needs?

Issues around representation are also more complex when we apply user-innovation to the social field. Where solutions will impact on a large number of people (as is often the case for state funded services), how do we ensure that user-innovators develop solutions that are applicable beyond their own circumstances? We also need to consider how to make trade-offs between the ideas of users and others who may have significant expertise – for example employees who have experience delivering services.

This is not to say that there isn’t significant value to be gained from engaging citizens as co-innovators, co-designers or co-creators. But it does make clear that the process is likely to be far more complex than has been identified in the business and science innovation literature.

4.2. Engagement as enabling diverse perspectives and solutions

A further argument for opening up innovation processes to more actors relates to the idea of finding solutions in unexpected places. This is the motivation of crowdsourcing platforms and competitions and in the social field, platforms such as OpenIdeo or Ashoka Changemakers. As Ashoka CEO Charlie Brown puts it, “solutions are all around us. The problem is that the market place makes it hard for us to discover them”.¹¹⁶ Underpinning this is the idea that diverse perspectives add particular value when we are trying to solve tough problems. It is a view echoed by several writers. For example, Christian Bason notes that when we get citizens involved in developing solutions, a “greater variation of different ideas and suggestions are brought to the table, providing inspiration and giving...a wider palette of options to choose from before decision making and implementation.”¹¹⁷ Frances Westley also highlights the importance of involving citizens in the development of social innovation, noting that “if the generation of novelty is largely dependent on the recombination of elements, then as we exclude groups from contribution we also lose their viewpoints, their diversity, and the particular elements they have to offer the whole”.¹¹⁸ These kinds of assertions about the value of diversity tend to be expressed as truisms without much further argument. However, recent work in the social sciences helps to give this idea more grounding.

Scott Page, in a number of research papers with Lu Hong and in his book *The Difference*, has helped to unpack why diverse perspectives are helpful for problem solving.¹¹⁹ Page defines a perspective

¹¹⁵ E von Hippel, ‘Lead Users: A Source of Novel Product Concepts’, *Management Science*, 32:7, pp. 791-806, p. 796

¹¹⁶ C Brown, ‘Opening a New Door’ Huffington Post, April 19, 2009. Available online at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-diamandis/guest-blogger-charlie-brown-188376.html>

¹¹⁷ C Bason, *Leading Public Sector Innovation: co-creating for a better society*, Policy Press, Bristol, 2010, p.8-9

¹¹⁸ F Westley, *The Social Innovation Dynamic*, Social Innovation Generation at the University of Waterloo, 2008, p. 7

¹¹⁹ S Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007

as “a representation of the set of the possible” – for example, the set of semiconductor designs, or welfare policies. When people have different perspectives, this means that they mentally represent or organise these sets of the possible differently, which impacts ‘what is next to what’.¹²⁰ And this matters because ‘what is next to what’ will also determine how a person locates new solutions.¹²¹

People with different perspectives also have different ‘heuristics’ (methods or tools to find solutions). For example, if we imagine two engineers trying to think of ways to improve the speed of an assembly line, one may focus on breaking down individual tasks into smaller tasks; the other may focus on switching the order of the tasks. Page argues that “the two heuristics differ, and because they differ, they identify different candidate solutions, increasing the probability of a breakthrough”.¹²² Taken together, different perspectives and heuristics will mean that people will “test different potential improvements and increase the possibility of an innovation”.

Page stresses the fact that specific kinds of diversity are more valuable for problem solving. Diverse perspectives will be most valuable when they embed knowledge that is relevant to the problem being solved.¹²³ He also notes that diversity is most powerful where the problem at hand is particularly complex. It stands to reason that if we know the problem can be solved by an individual with particular expertise, then there will not be much value in diversity. However, where there is complexity, if we only look to experts with similar perspectives and heuristics, then they are likely to ‘get stuck in the same places’. A diverse group of solvers will not.

Lars Bo Jeppesen and Karim Lakhani have also investigated this idea of different perspectives being useful for problem solving in an empirical way. They used the innovation platform InnoCentive to analyse science problems originating from R&D labs and how they were solved by InnoCentive’s network of up to 80,000 scientists.¹²⁴ They found that whether an external solver is ‘marginal’ or not is a statistically significant predictor of their problem solving success. Solvers can be marginal in a technical sense – they have expertise that comes from a very different academic field of study – or they can be marginal in a social sense - meaning they are in some sense distant from the ‘establishment’ in their own professional community, which enables them to bring an unconventional approach.¹²⁵ Their argument overall is that: “marginal solvers are not bound to the current thinking in the field of the focal problem and therefore can offer perspectives and heuristics that are novel and thus useful for generating solutions to these problems.”¹²⁶ And their

¹²⁰ S Page, ‘Making the difference: applying a logic of diversity’, *Academy of Management Perspectives*, November 2007, pp. 6-20

¹²¹ In Page’s example, J D Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* may be disconnected from Mao’s *Little Red Book* in terms of content, but they may be adjacent in a perspective that organises books by colour and size.

¹²² S Page, ‘Making the difference: applying a logic of diversity’, *Academy of Management Perspectives*, November 2007, pp. 6-20, p. 8

¹²³ For example, if our task is about trying to increase fuel efficiency, a perspective focused on weight of parts is probably going to yield more good ideas than a perspective that considers their colour.

¹²⁴ B Jeppesen and K R Lakhani, ‘Marginality and problem solving effectiveness in broadcast search’ *Organization Science*, vol.20, 2010

¹²⁵ Jeppesen and Lakhani note that female scientists are often socially marginal in this way: “Potentially productive marginalized solvers, who are to a large extent highly trained and talented individuals who could not enter core positions in their fields, read ‘women scientists’, might be more capable of approaching problems in fresh ways, one of which is likely to uniquely match a given problem. Here the ‘forced’ social marginality of women in science, in effect an exclusion from the thought worlds (Dougherty, 1992) of their own scientific fields, may provide a fleeting advantage in an overwhelmingly disadvantaged social position.” B Jeppesen and K R Lakhani, ‘Marginality and problem solving effectiveness in broadcast search’ *Organization Science*, vol.20, 2010, p. 13

¹²⁶ B Jeppesen and K R Lakhani, ‘Marginality and problem solving effectiveness in broadcast search’ *Organization Science*, vol.20, 2010, p. 11. The authors also note that their empirical findings related to InnoCentive are also supported by the sociology of science literature, quoting Ben-David who stated that “inventions are usually made by

findings are particularly applicable to open calls or broadcast searches to find solutions to problems. Although the odds that any given solver will be able to solve a specific problem are quite low, other things being equal, these odds should increase with each additional solver who has a different analytical approach and angle on the problem.

Implications and limitations

These arguments help to give some weight to generic statements that are often made about the importance of diverse perspectives and unexpected sources of solutions. But how applicable are these findings to the kind of social challenges that social innovations concern themselves with? Both Page and Jeppesen and Lakhani's research is based around technical, scientific or mathematical problems. While these may be very complex, the problems can usually be expressed in a straightforward way, and there is an agreement about what solving the problem would look like. Jeppesen and Lakhani note that "the sine qua non of using markets to solve problems is a clear articulation of the problem (or sub-problem) and the development of a solution criteria". But being able to articulate the problem in a clear way, and to define success can often be challenging for social problems.

In addition, one of the reasons scientific or mathematical problems are so amenable to crowdsourcing platforms such as InnoCentive is that they are usually not context specific. The theoretical physics solution developed in Delhi is equally valid and applicable in Delaware, for example. But since social challenges are so fundamentally shaped by context, the value we can derive from solutions developed without reference to context might be quite limited.

The research we have highlighted here also makes clear that it is not enough just to have different perspectives; the perspectives must be relevant.¹²⁷ But it is not always straightforward to identify what counts as a relevant perspective in the social field; is it the perspective of someone who has experienced a particular need, someone who has found a coping mechanism, or could it be someone with a particular perspective on a very different situation which might have some relevance to the problem we are trying to solve? Without a sense of who the target audiences might be that we want to involve, we are left trying to reach 'everyone,' which has major resource implications.

It is also important to note that an open search for solutions is no guarantee of diverse perspectives. Depending on how social challenges are promoted, there is always a danger (particularly for online challenges) that despite their apparent openness, they end up reaching quite a narrow band of individuals. How genuinely diverse is the group of individuals who respond to something like an Ashoka Changemakers challenge, for example?

Recent research on the value of diversity and marginal problem solvers helps to ground some of our intuitions about the need to bring diverse perspectives into the process of social innovations.

outsiders, that is, by men who are not engaged in the occupation which is affected by them and are, therefore, not bound by professional customs and traditions"(J Ben David, 'Roles and innovations in medicine', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 1970, vol.65:6, pp. 557-558)

¹²⁷ For example, Jeppesen and Lakhani caution that while "a different perspective may be crucial to problem resolution, it is not necessarily a sufficient condition to bring about a desired solution. Any given new perspective is not likely to be useful for solving a difficult problem: what matters is to be different and relevant."

But it leaves many open questions about how in practice we should engage people in contributing their ideas for solutions.

4.3. Summary

Engagement practices have particular value for the development of effective social innovations. In particular, we have argued that some forms of engagement will enable a better understanding of needs so that appropriate solutions can be developed. Participation practices can also introduce divergent thinking from unexpected sources which can help to uncover novel solutions to complex problems. And, citizens can be the source of innovative ideas and, if given the appropriate skills and tools, co-innovators or innovators themselves. Research from innovation studies also indicates that different types of engagement might deliver different kinds of value. For example, to transfer knowledge about needs, forms of engagement that involve face to face contact or ‘deeper’ forms of engagement such as ethnographic research, are most likely to be effective. In contrast, the importance of bringing diverse perspectives to problem solving would suggest a need for engagement methods that focus on breadth and diversity of participants. The most effective participation activities to achieve this might include crowdsourcing platforms, competitions, large scale deliberation exercises or co-design workshops which bring different kinds of people together to work on common problems, or online activities which seek out a multiplicity of voices.

However, there is little empirical evidence to substantiate these ideas. And since they are largely theoretical and based on literature from product and technological innovation, there are questions as to how readily they can be applied to the social field. Much more research needs to be undertaken if we are to develop a clearer understanding of the relationship between citizen engagement activities and social innovation. For example, what types of activities best enable the transfer of tacit knowledge about social needs? How can participation processes be designed so that they reach a diverse range of potential problem solvers who also have relevant knowledge about a social problem?

If we are to answer these questions we will need to start thinking about engagement and participation in more concrete terms, in relation to specific types of activity in specific contexts. This will be the focus of our next piece of work on citizen engagement in social innovation, which will develop a set of case studies looking at methods of participation.

5. Conclusion

There are good reasons to think that engagement plays an essential role in social innovation. In this paper we have focused on the way engagement practices can improve the quality of information that is used in the innovation process; engaging citizens ensures that the particular knowledge they have of the challenges they face is integrated into the development of new solutions to social challenges. Participation also enables contributions from varied and unexpected sources. This introduces diverse and new perspectives which add particular value when confronted with complex social challenges. And, citizens can be a source of innovative ideas. Moreover, given the requisite skills, supports and opportunities, they can be co-producers of innovations or innovators in their own right.

However, there is now a well rehearsed debate within the development and public participation literatures on the risks and limitations associated with engagement.¹²⁸ Our aim in this paper has been to highlight some of the arguments from these literatures and to use them to interrogate the normative assumptions often made about the inherent benefits associated with participation and engagement activities. Evidence of the benefits of participation for society and individuals is often patchy, and the value of engagement and participation tends to be contingent on the form and practice of that activity, the context in which it is performed, and the supporting structures around it. Not only that, but forms of engagement and participation also carry risks of generating additional harm, particularly when they are practiced in a way that does not take account of these contextual factors. Moreover, even where participation does lead to positive outcomes these are not necessarily the outcomes that policymakers, funders, practitioners and participants are expecting to achieve. At the very least, this suggests that stakeholders need to be comfortable with a certain amount of uncertainty and need to be open to the possibility of unexpected outcomes. But it also suggests that participatory activities do not always fulfil their objectives which could raise questions about whether these exercises represent the most effective use of resources.

These conclusions ought to make us much more ready to ask questions about the forms of engagement that are most appropriate to developing and sustaining social innovations, the specific outcomes they hope to achieve and any potential pitfalls we need to be aware of. To make the concept of citizen engagement in relation to social innovation meaningful, we need to think about specific types of engagement activities and the particular functions they perform in developing and sustaining social innovations. We need to develop what John Cohen and Norman Uphoff, writing about participation in the 1970s described as “clarity through specificity”.¹²⁹ This means breaking down the unwieldy concept of citizen engagement into something much more manageable, and studying it in relation to specific types of activity.

In the accompanying paper on case studies of citizen engagement in social innovation, we identify – or specify - three functions of citizen engagement in social innovation: providing information and resources, problem solving and influencing and taking decisions. This categorisation builds on previous work, undertaken as part of the TEPsIE project, on mapping citizen engagement in the

¹²⁸ See for example the collection of essays in B Cooke and U Kothari (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny*, Zed Books, London, 2001

¹²⁹ J M Cohen and N T Uphoff, ‘Participation's place in rural development: Seeking clarity through specificity’, *World Development*, 1980, vol. 8:3, pp. 213-235

social innovation process. We will use this typology to explore different cases of citizen engagement in social innovation, and to illustrate in more detail both the potential value and risks associated with these different types of activity. We believe that a much more instructive approach and fruitful avenue for further research is to focus on specific forms of activity. It is through a better understanding of specific varieties of engagement that we will gain an understanding of how they can best be used in the development and implementation of much needed social innovation.

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