

# Participation: A theoretical context

## Introduction

Theories of community participation have received considerable academic attention particularly since the early 1990's but have been a source of debate since at least the 1960s. This paper is intended to provide a brief overview of some of the most prominent theories which have been put forward as a means of understanding and appraising participation structures and practices. It has been prepared in order to provide a theoretical context within which the appropriateness of different approaches to community participation in rural transport in Wiltshire can be assessed.

The note begins by providing a simple definition of participation. Two of the more prominent frameworks for community participation are then summarised and explored. In recognition that such frameworks represent simplifications of a far more complex reality, a number of these complexities are then explored, namely:

- dimensions of power;
- issues of process and capacity; and
- the nature of 'community'.

The note concludes by describing an evaluation tool for community participation, which has sought to address many of these complexities.

## 1. A definition of participation

For the purposes of this note a useful definition of public or community participation is that adopted by Stoker (1997) for 'political participation' (following Parry et al, 1992): members of the public *'taking part in any of the processes of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies'*. This is a wide-ranging definition, which extends the emphasis of public participation beyond the development of policy, to decision-making and implementation.

## 2. Theoretical frameworks

### 2.1 Arnstein's ladder of participation

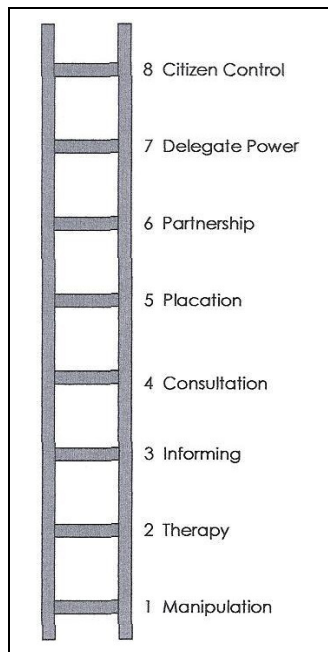
Perhaps the seminal theoretical work on the subject of community participation was by Arnstein (1969). The particular importance of Arnstein's work stems from the explicit recognition that there are different levels of participation, from manipulation or therapy

of citizens, through to consultation, and to what we might now view as genuine participation, i.e. the levels of partnership and citizen control (see figure 1).

The limitations of Arnstein's framework are obvious. Each of the steps represents a very broad category, within which there are likely to be a wide range of experiences. For example, at the level of 'informing' there could be significant differences in the type and quality of the information being conveyed. Realistically therefore, levels of participation are likely to reflex a more complex continuum than a simple series of steps.

The use of a ladder also implies that more control is always better than less control. However, increased control may not always be desired by the community and increased control without the necessary support may result in failure.

**Figure 1: A ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969)**



## 2.2 A ladder of citizen empowerment

Since Arnstein, increasingly complex theories of participation have been advanced and new terminology added. In particular, there has been a shift towards understanding participation in terms of the empowerment of individuals and communities. This has stemmed from the growing prominence of the idea of the citizen as consumer, where choice among alternatives is seen as a means of access to power. Under this model, people are expected to be responsible for themselves and should, therefore, be active in public service decision-making. In this context, Burns et al (1994) modified Arnstein's ladder of participation and proposed a ladder of citizen power (figure 2).

This is more elaborate than Arnstein’s ladder, with a further, more qualitative breakdown of some of the different levels. For example, a distinction is drawn between ‘cynical’ and ‘genuine’ consultation, and between ‘entrusted’ and ‘independent’ citizen control. The phenomena of ‘civic hype’, increasingly recognised during the 1990s (see, for example, Harvey, 1989), is incorporated at the bottom rung of the ladder. This essentially treats community participation as a marketing exercise, in which the desired end result is ‘sold’ to the community.

**Figure 2: A ladder of citizen empowerment (Burns et al, 1994)**

<b>CITIZEN CONTROL</b>
12. Independent control
11. Entrusted control
<b>CITIZEN PARTICIPATION</b>
10. Delegated control
9. Partnership
8. Limited decentralised decision-making
7. Effective advisory boards
6. Genuine consultation
5. High quality information
<b>CITIZEN NON-PARTICIPATION</b>
4. Customer care
3. Poor information
2. Cynical consultation
1. Civic hype

**2.3 A continuum of involvement**

As a development of this ladder concept of participation Wilcox identifies five interconnected levels of community participation.

**Figure 3: A ladder of participation (Wilcox, 1999)**

Information
Consultation
Deciding together

Acting together
Supporting individual community initiatives

Wilcox's work has arisen from the UK regeneration context and reflects a philosophical progression in thought around participation. That is that different 'levels' of participation are acceptable in differing contexts and settings, this progression recognises that power is not always transferred in apparently participative processes, but that the processes still have value. As opposed to the common interpretation of Arnstein, that brings the thought that it is only acceptable to be striving towards citizen control.

Within some contexts this move in philosophy has been further developed to describe levels of involvement as a continuum. This is well illustrated by the

### 3. Complexities in categorising participation

The above frameworks provide useful insights into the scope of experiences associated with community participation. By their nature, however, they represent simplifications of a more complex reality. A number of the dimensions of that complexity are discussed in this section.

#### 3.1 The dimensions of power

In summarising the literature on participation and involvement, Stewart and Taylor (1995) suggest that although the idea of empowerment is often implied, there is little explicit discussion of the operation of power. At a conceptual level, they describe the issue of whether power is finite, and held by particular people or groups, or an infinite resource open for all to grasp. The importance of this stems from the fact that if finite, the empowerment of some must involve the dilution of the power of others. An alternative view is that power is a positive-sum game, so that power can be achieved by some without necessarily removing it from others.

On a more practical level, Stewart and Taylor argue that determining which issues the community are allowed to be involved in is central to an understanding of participation and empowerment. Control of the agenda for discussion is a covert dimension of power which is highly important, but often forgotten in practice. Studies have shown that operational issues tend to get on the agenda, whilst the strategic issues are decided elsewhere. Perhaps the principal weakness of the ladder models is their failure to acknowledge the different spheres of decision-making in which their levels of participation can occur.

Hart et al (1997) emphasise the difference between strategic and operational decisions. Strategic power involves the ability to set targets, allocate priorities and determine

policy. Operational power is having the ability to decide how these things are carried out.

*Strategic level decisions are policy level decisions on a long term basis.  
Operational level decisions are service level decisions on a day-to-day basis...  
Strategic power is the power the stakeholder has in determining the aims and objectives of an organisation, in the setting of performance criteria and in evaluating that performance. Operational power is the power the stakeholder has in determining what services to provide, the allocation of limited resources and in how services should be provided.*

In their examination of empowerment within a City Challenge regeneration scheme, this distinction was shown to be highly significant and they argued that the local community only ever experienced operational power.

Hart et al's research drew upon a previous model of participation put forward by Winstanley (1995). Their distinction between strategic and operational power mirrors Winstanley's distinction between high-level and service-level influence over resource allocation. Winstanley developed a stakeholder power matrix which sought to distinguish between four potential levels of stakeholder power (figure 3). They are:

- A. Arm's length power, which represents strategic level power.
- B. Comprehensive power, which represents both strategic and operational power.
- C. Disempowerment, which represents no real power, either strategic or operational.
- D. Operational power.

This matrix could be seen as an advance from the ladder models, since it recognises that power and participation are on a continuum, rather than being a series of levels, and because it recognises the different spheres of decision-making within which it is possible to exert power. It is also less suggestive of greater participation always being beneficial, reflecting the view of commentators such as Burton (2003) who asserts that *'we might conclude that it is appropriate to encourage, enable or permit the participation of different groups or types of people, to different degrees in relation to different types of decision'*.

**Figure 4: A stakeholder power matrix (Hart et al, 1997 after Winstanley, 1995)**

	<b>High</b>	Arm's-length power	Comprehensive power
<b>Criteria power</b>		A	B
		C	D
	<b>Low</b>	Disempowered	Operational Power
		<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
		<b>Operational power</b>	

Skinner (1995) also looked at what individuals and communities were actually involved in within participative partnerships as a tool to categorise participation. Within an effective participative structure, roles and responsibilities will be clear and transparent. Skinner<sup>1</sup> suggests that a community will adopt five roles if fully participating within a regeneration programme. With in these five roles community members will act;

1. as beneficiaries of the programme and users of services
2. as consultees and representatives of local opinion
3. as the source of general community activity
4. as the source for the delivery of regeneration programmes
5. as potential long term partners in regeneration.

Through analysis of the exchange of power, and observation of Skinner's five roles, it is possible to make an assessment of the level of community participation within any given programme.

Other analyses of participation suggest a more richly woven tapestry. For example Windle and Cibulka (1981) propose a three dimensional assessment based on Arnstein's ladder and using the ladder as an indicator of involvement levels, but exploring two further axes. Firstly a 'functional dimension' in which different stages in policy cycle are identified including;

- Programme evaluation
- Service Giving
- Governing

- Planning
- Enabling
- Authorising

Secondly they identify a 'participant dimension', which in the context they were reviewing included communities, citizens, employees and consumers. Windle and Chibulka's work suggests that the picture of participation is a complex one.

The analysis suggests that to develop or assess community participation we need to look at not only the level of involvement, but what actions people are participating in and who is participating, and thus by implication who is not participating.

### 3.2 Issues of process and capacity

Studies of community participation, particularly in the field of urban regeneration, have highlighted the barriers to effective community participation (see, for example, MacFarlane, 1993 and McArthur et al, 1996). Even where 'partnership' structures exist, such studies have shown that the characteristic processes of governance (with an emphasis on formality, outputs and quick results) often preclude genuine participation on the part of the community 'partners'.

Such experiences have resulted in many cases in what Skelcher (1993) refers to as the 'paradox of empowerment' and what Hart et al (1997) refer to as the 'cycle of disempowerment'. In both of these models, the failure to truly empower results in the community becoming increasingly disenchanted and disinterested in engaging with the process.

Such studies have led to the recognition of the need for processes as well as structures which facilitate participation. It has also been increasingly recognised that attention needs to be paid to the capacity of the community to engage. McArthur et al (1996), for example, estimated that around 5 years of capacity-building was required, before a community would have sufficient confidence to become involved in a regeneration partnership.

Some writing around the issue of capacity building focuses on capacity building in terms of skills for individuals (Skinner 1995), more recent thinking suggests, in common with McArthur et al that to ensure quality participation it is the responsibility of those facilitating the participation to ensure that community capacity is present to support it. For example Chanan (2000) suggests that within a community, members will choose to or otherwise become involved at different levels in an activity project or programme and that the numbers of involved people will decrease as the levels increase thus creating a pyramid.

However, all parts of the pyramid must be supported as they depend one on another and such support will allow all people all possible entry points. In proposing his pyramid, Chanan states, *"the 'higher' levels, such as representing the community in a scheme, rest on the 'lower' levels, such as cooperation between organisations."*

Chanan further discusses that it is crucial to support the community sector generically to aid community involvement. He states that it is important to support engagement processes by maximizing participation at a full range of levels at the same time.

Thus individuals and / or communities may take on five roles (above) within a scheme. Chanan’s work would suggest that these roles also relate to five areas of activity, all of which need simultaneous support within a programme which seeks both to regenerate communities and engage communities in the work. These five areas and the type of support needed are summarised in the table below.

**Figure 5: Levels of involvement relating to action required to support involvement**

<b>Level of activity</b>	<b>Type of support and development needed</b>
<b>Leadership</b>	Technical assistance in negotiating with authorities and other power holders, helping shape the overall development of the locality and its population, and strategies for maintaining dialogue with other members of the community
<b>Infrastructure</b>	Development to establish or improve umbrella groups, forums and networks, service to their members, cohesion of community and voluntary sector and relationship with other sectors
<b>Established organisations</b>	Strategic planning, volunteers skills, staff skills, effective delivery, widening of social or geographical catchment, better interaction with networks and forums, new opportunities for local people to become involved
<b>Informal or excluded groups and new and fragile organisations</b>	Assistance in group formation, basic organisational skills, development of trust and confidence, clarification of joint objectives, establishment of group identity, getting help from established organisations or umbrella groups, opening up to more local people
<b>Individuals</b>	Stimulus to get involved in activities and organisation, assistance where needed in overcoming exclusion, making social contacts, building up confidence, establishing personal development pathways, participation in new or established group

Community capacity building has been increasingly emphasised in government research and policy statements. The Civil Renewal Unit’s (2003) review of community capacity building, for example, described the capacity building process as central to the

government's programme of civil renewal, in which *'people in their own communities are empowered to provide the answers to our contemporary social problems'*.

### 3.3 Understanding 'community'

The 'community' is often treated as a single, clearly identifiable and homogenous group. In reality, the situation is far more complex.

At the most basic and general level, a community can be understood as people with something in common, normally within a particular geographic area. Hillery (1955) gave a useful broad definition in saying that a community *'consists of persons in social interaction within a geographic area and having one or more additional common ties'*.

A number of issues are left untouched by this definition however, such as the extent to which the persons concerned need to be aware of the common ties, and the extent to which those ties can change over time. Furthermore, in this age of global digital communications, communities are less bound by geography than ever before. In reality, communities are a lot more changeable and complex than Hillery's definition suggests.

Atkinson and Cope (1997) speak of the *'fluid and overlapping membership of communities'*, but the complexity and close interweaving of communities is perhaps best captured by Etzioni (1993), who suggests that *'communities are best viewed as if they were Chinese nesting boxes, in which less encompassing communities are nestled within more encompassing ones'*. Burns et al (1994) recognised that *'community is not a singular concept but in reality represents a mere umbrella under which shelter a multitude of varying, competing and often conflicting interests'*.

Attempting to understand this complexity often results in labels being attached to different sections of the population. However, Patel (1998) argues that seeking to attribute individuals or sections of the population with fixed identities or common ties such as their race or social class is unhelpful, since people participate in many identities and cultures and these are constantly changing.

Past attempts at incorporating diversity have tended to focus on issues of equality and representation, for example, through the application of equal opportunities policies. However, there appears to be a growing recognition that this should simply be a starting point, and that multi-culturalism and diversity in general, need not just to be accommodated but recognised as major assets (see, for example, Patel, 1998 and Brownill and Darke, 1998). This requires not only increasing representation, but also the utilisation of different cultural perspectives in the redefinition of strategies and services.

## 4. Evaluating community participation

In recent years, a number of attempts have been made to develop tools to assess the effectiveness of community participation, taking in to account many of the complexities discussed above. Burns and Taylor’s (2000) *Auditing Community Participation*, for example, provides tools and appraisal exercises for measuring:

- the history and patterns of participation;
- the quality of participation strategies adopted by partners and partnerships;
- the capacity within partner organisations to support community participation;
- the capacity within communities to participate effectively; and
- the impact of participation and its outcomes.

Similarly, Yorkshire Forward’s (2000) *Active Partners* benchmarks provide a benchmarking system for measuring the effectiveness of community involvement. Although developed within a regeneration context, the principles behind the benchmarks have general relevance to community participation. Wilson and Wilde (the authors of *Active Partners*) describe the starting point for the research which generated the benchmarks as being ‘a recognition of the heterogeneity and elaborate nature of communities and the need for qualitative analysis that measures progress from diverse perspectives’ (Wilson and Wilde, 2003). The resulting framework is based on four themes/dimensions (figure 4) of community participation, broken down into 12 benchmarks (figure 5). Suggested questions are also provided for each benchmark.

**Figure 5: The four dimensions of community participation (Wilson and Wilde, 2003)**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Influence</b></p> <p>How partnerships involve communities in the ‘shaping’ of regeneration plans/activities and in all decision making.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Inclusivity</b></p> <p>How partnerships ensure all groups and interests in the community can participate, and the ways in which inequality is addressed.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Communication</b></p> <p>How partnerships develop effective ways of sharing information with communities and clear procedures that maximise community participation.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Capacity</b></p> <p>How partnerships provide the resources required by communities to participate and support both local people and those from partner agencies to develop their understanding, knowledge and skills.</p>

**Figure 6: The benchmarks of community participation (Wilson and Wilde, 2003)**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Influence</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The community is recognised and valued as an equal partner at all stages of the process.</li> <li>2. There is meaningful community representation on all decision making bodies from initiation.</li> <li>3. All community members have the opportunity to participate.</li> <li>4. Communities have access to and control over resources.</li> <li>5. Evaluation of regeneration partnerships incorporates a community agenda.</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Inclusivity</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The diversity of local communities and interests is reflected at all levels of the regeneration process.</li> <li>2. Equal opportunities policies are in place and implemented.</li> <li>3. Unpaid workers/volunteer activists are valued.</li> </ol>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Communication</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A two-way information strategy is developed and implemented.</li> <li>2. Programme and project procedures are clear and accessible.</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Capacity</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Communities are resourced to participate</li> <li>2. Understanding, knowledge and skills are developed to support partnership working.</li> </ol>

Such frameworks provide a useful means of understanding and appraising community participation, particularly since, to a degree, they take in to account some of the complexities associated with categorisation discussed in this note, such as inclusivity and the heterogeneity of the community, different dimensions of power and issues of process and capacity. However, some would question the premise on which they appear to be founded: that higher levels of community participation are always appropriate, desirable and beneficial.

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