

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION IN UK TOWN PARTNERSHIPS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

Nikos Ntounis, Manchester Metropolitan University

Cathy Parker, Manchester Metropolitan University

Simon Quin, Institute of Place Management

ABSTRACT

The crucial role of town partnerships in the management, marketing and regeneration of places, and in factors that affecting its performance (such as retailing, planning, infrastructure, housing) has been widely emphasized in the literature (De Magalhaes, 2012; Diamond, 2002; Hemphill et al., 2006; Warnaby et al., 2004; Whyatt, 2004). Successful partnerships often refrain from the managerial or top-down approach, and emphasize on building bridges between all local stakeholders in an attempt to enhance community engagement and participation (Head, 2007). The ideal concept of “partnership” is one of joined-up place governance by all place stakeholders (Friend, 2006), a view that is supported by the UK government, which calls for "community participation", "involving the community" and "holistic partnership" throughout the attempt to "economically transform areas and create sustainable places where people want to live and can work and businesses want to invest" (DCLG, 2009; pg.1; Greig et al., 2010).

However, the creation of sustainable and successful partnerships is hampered by various parameters, such as the lack of stakeholder engagement and communication barriers between partnerships and local stakeholders (public, private, and voluntary). Whereas the future of towns is of relevance to a wide range of stakeholders (Nisco, Riviezzo, & Napolitano, 2008), only a small proportion of them seems to be interested in making a change and engages in collaborative town activities (Medway et al., 2000). Lack of collaboration and co-operation

with stakeholders on a network level that stems from the inability to engage with them in the first place hinders the ability of partnerships to tackle complex and ill-defined problem solving in towns (e.g. the long-term decline of a town centre) (O'Higgins & Morgan, 2006). Barriers to communication are also prevalent between place stakeholders and partnerships, which leads to little involvement and no real empowerment of important stakeholders over town decisions (Davies, 2002).

The paper aims to address the issue of communication and stakeholder engagement through an empirical examination of 10 town partnerships that participate in a High Street project. Data were collected from direct and indirect observations, as well as town documents. Initial findings suggest that the difficulty of engaging stakeholders stems from failure to find the right way to get everyone "up to speed" with what is going on in town. Town partnerships recognise that "communication is key" to the prosperity of partnerships and the town. The challenges and problems of communicating with stakeholders, as well as ideas and proposals of tackling these will be presented in a communication model, which will emphasise multiple patterns of communication in partnerships. The study aims to contribute to the understanding and successful implementation of communication practices between stakeholders, in order to enhance participation and engagement in town partnerships.

Keywords: stakeholder engagement; communication; town partnerships; participation; place management

REFERENCES

Davies, A. (2002) "Power, politics and networks: shaping partnerships for sustainable communities", *Area*, 34(2), 190–203

DCLG (2009) "Transforming places, changing lives: taking forward the regeneration framework", London: Communities and Local Government Publications

- De Magalhaes, C. (2012) "Business Improvement Districts and the recession: Implications for public realm governance and management in England", *Progress in Planning*, 77(4), 143–177
- Diamond, J. (2002) "Strategies to resolve conflict in partnerships: reflections on UK urban regeneration", *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 15(4), 296–306
- Friend, J. (2006) "Partnership meets politics: managing within the maze", *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 19(3), 261–277
- Greig, A., El-Haram, M., & Horner, M. (2010) "Using deprivation indices in regeneration: Does the response match the diagnosis?", *Cities*, 27(6), 476–482
- Head, B. W. (2007) "Community Engagement: Participation on Whose Terms?", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 42(3), 441–454
- Hemphill, L., McGreal, S., Berry, J., & Watson, S. (2006) "Leadership, power and multisector urban regeneration partnerships", *Urban Studies*, 43(1), 59–80
- Medway, D., Warnaby, G., Bennison, D., & Alexander, A. (2000) "Reasons for retailers' involvement in town centre management", *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 28(8), 368–378
- Nisco, A. de, Riviezzo, A., & Napolitano, M. R. (2008) "The role of stakeholders in town centre management: guidelines for identification and analysis", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 1(2), 166–176
- O'Higgins, E. R. E., & Morgan, J. W. (2006) "Stakeholder salience and engagement in political organisations", *Society and Business Review*, 1(1), 62–76
- Warnaby, G., Bennison, D., Davies, B. J., & Hughes, H. (2004) "People and partnerships: marketing urban retailing", *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 32(11), 545–556

Whyatt, G. (2004) "Town centre management: how theory informs a strategic approach",
International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management, 32(7), 346–353