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### Equality in community engagement

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# Equality in community engagement: A scoping review of evidence from research and practice in Scotland

**Ruth Lightbody and Oliver Escobar**

## **Abstract:**

In Scotland, innovative designs for community engagement have been developed by national and local governments, public authorities, and civil society organisations, leading to a wealth of literature and research. This evidence review of over 75 articles and reports, explores the intersection between community engagement and inequality in Scotland. We find that the ways in which equality must be supported within community processes are often overlooked. Community engagement must be placed in the context of broader democratic innovation and citizenship at regional, national and global scale in order to become future proof. Appropriate resources are required to avoid replicating systemic inequalities as well as to support the development of a variety of institutions, processes and methods that cater for groups often mislabelled as ‘hard to reach’ but that are perhaps best seen as ‘easy to ignore’ (Matthews *et al.* 2012). The paper highlights key learning and strategic considerations to inform practice in Scotland and beyond. The findings and recommendations are of relevance to reformers, innovators, researchers, practitioners and policymakers working across diverse policy areas and levels of governance.

## **Key words:**

Community engagement; Scotland; participation; equality; inequality; easy-to-ignore; hard-to-reach

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## **Introduction: Democratic recession and community engagement**

In the last decade pressures have mounted on established democratic systems that feel the weight of public mistrust and dissatisfaction (Wike & Fetterolf, 2018; Foa et al 2020). A driving force of this institutional malaise is the growing gap between the 'politically rich' and the 'politically poor' (Dalton, 2017), where political inequalities in power and influence provide a foundation for the reproduction and expansion of inequalities in wealth, health, education and income (Dorling, 2015; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018; McCartney *et al.* 2021). This makes equality in community engagement a particularly salient yet underexplored dimension of democratic politics. Unequal community engagement can worsen policy outcomes for communities of place, interest and identity and subvert the very purpose of public participation in democracy.

Democracies all over the world face challenges in terms of both capacity and legitimacy – the very foundations for collective public action. On the one hand, there are doubts about the *capacity* of current institutions to provide effective governance in the face of the infotech and biotech revolutions, the transformation of welfare states and labour markets, the sustained displacement of populations, or the climate crisis. On the other hand, the *legitimacy* of public institutions is under question due to deficits in inclusion, trust, accountability and efficacy. These twin tracks form a vicious circle: it is difficult to develop capacity for collective action without strong legitimacy, and it is difficult to build legitimacy without the capacity to act effectively on public issues.

This context is challenging the foundations of traditional models of representative democracy and public administration but is also providing fertile ground for experimentation with community engagement at the frontlines of public service reform (What Works Scotland, 2019). Democratic innovations are proliferating across the world to counter democratic deficits by increasing the legitimacy and capacity of public institutions (Smith, 2009; Elstub & Escobar, 2019a). Democratic innovations are new processes or institutions developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence (Elstub & Escobar, 2019b:11). Community engagement, be it through traditional participation or through democratic innovations, seeks to expand the roles available to citizens in political life, from voters and/or activists to co-producers and problem-solvers with a more substantial contribution to politics and policy (see for example Hendriks *et al.* 2021).

This article takes stock of where Scotland is in terms of its community engagement progress through an evidence review of 79 articles and reports that focus on in/equality. We explore three key areas: how the relationship between equality and community engagement is conceptualised in the

literature; what the key dimensions and factors in the relationship between community engagement and equality are, both in terms of process and outcomes; and what the most effective strategies and approaches to ensure equality in community engagement are. A community is a group of people united by at least one common characteristic, including geography, identity or shared interest (NSfCE, 2016: 8) and we consider community engagement to refer to processes where citizens and civic groups are actively involved in shaping the future of their communities. This includes developing relationships between communities, community organisations, and public and private bodies to shape and implement policies, strategies and decisions, and identify community needs (NSfCE, 2016: 6). We highlight the difficulties with engaging communities who have in the past been referred to as 'hard to reach' and consider if instead, communities/groups are 'easy to ignore' (Matthews *et al.*, 2012). Following a discussion of the findings, we outline key dimensions for improving community engagement processes. We conclude that seeking equality in community engagement is a multifaceted endeavour but one that is within grasp.

## **Methodology**

The evidence review was carried out over the Summer (June to August) of 2016 and 2017. Following a systematic search of evidence across multiple databases using key words, the research was undertaken through a scoping review to ascertain the focus on community engagement activities, with particular attention to how equalities groups might be affected. Due to the volume of returns from the literature search, any non-English articles were excluded. The date range searched was from 1999-present day due to the UK devolution (re)opening of the Scottish Parliament which sought to advance 'new politics' through community, deliberation, power-sharing and equal opportunities. Covering that period, 70 articles were reviewed which all examined community engagement through community empowerment programmes, deliberative processes and stakeholder forums; including reviews of existing policies, evaluations of participatory processes and innovative programmes or case studies. The scoping review enabled the researchers to get an overview of how community engagement is talked about, if at all, including the language and definitions; how community engagement and democratic innovations are being utilised; and the various methods used for gathering evidence on this topic. The review was situated in conversation with the work of contemporary classics on public participation and democratic innovation. A further review was conducted over the Summer of 2019 which added an additional nine reports and articles. Table 1 shows the distribution of evidence by country. The majority of literature focused on Scotland, or the UK more widely, but a few publications were taken from outwith the UK if there was something particularly comparable or relevant.

Table 1

**Distribution of evidence by country**

No. of Publications

	<b>Peer Reviewed</b>	<b>Grey</b>
<i>UK</i>	13	7
<i>Scotland</i>	14	33
<i>England</i>	4	1
<i>Northern Ireland</i>		2
<i>Ireland</i>		1
<i>Australia</i>	1	
<i>Canada</i>	1	
<i>Italy</i>	1	
<i>No country</i>	1	
<i>Total</i>	35	44

Various analytic frameworks have been applied within the academic literature, which includes a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods such as surveys, interviews and focus groups, and approaches such as ethnography and case study analysis. The large majority of grey material make use of interviews, focus groups, case studies, evaluation and observation. In addition, as shown in table 2, eight sources applied a mixed method approach, 27 conducted an evidence review and eight sought to develop a best practice or toolkit approach.

Table 2

**Distribution of evidence by research method**

**Peer Reviewed**

**Grey**

<i>Evidence Review</i>	8	19
<i>Qualitative</i>	17	11
<i>Quantitative</i>	7	1
<i>Mixed Methods</i>	3	5
<i>Best Practice/Toolkit</i>		8
<i>Totals</i>	35	44

The evidence reviewed thus shows the range of approaches, analysis and methods deployed to investigate how equality and community engagement intersect. Further to this, the evidence comes from a range of sectors, which helps to explore strengths and weaknesses, as well as innovations and gaps. Table 3 shows the distribution of evidence by sector.

Table 3

<b>Distribution of evidence by sector</b>	<b>Peer Reviewed</b>	<b>Grey</b>
<i>Ecology / environmental justice / environmental management</i>	5	2
<i>Urban regeneration</i>	5	
<i>Public policy</i>	4	4
<i>Local governance</i>	4	3
<i>Sociology/social policy</i>	1	8
<i>Education</i>		1
<i>Young People/Children</i>		4
<i>Health/Social Care</i>	6	2
<i>Gender</i>	3	2
<i>Deliberative Democracy/ Democratic</i>	2	4
<i>Innovations</i>		
<i>Community</i>	3	10
<i>Empowerment/Engagement/Projects</i>		
<i>Housing</i>		1
<i>Vulnerable groups</i>	2	2
<i>Poverty</i>		1
<i>Totals</i>	35	44

The wide-ranging nature of the topics account for the efforts made by researchers, community groups, government institutions and the third sector to shine light on areas where it is vital to include groups who have been, and continue to be, easy-to-ignore.

### **Scotland as a case: The institutionalisation of community engagement**

Scotland is uniquely placed to offer insight into how community engagement processes are unfolding at the interface of state and civil society practices. The drive towards community engagement has

been at the forefront of Scottish politics and governance for two decades, generating a range of administrative, legislative, funding and capacity-building initiatives and reforms. Examples of innovation can be seen in health, environment (renewables) and urban regeneration (including land-use and planning), gender, education, youth involvement, housing rights and policing (see Nixon *et al.* 2001; Stafford *et al.* 2003; Breitenbach, 2006; Peel & Lloyd, 2007; Carlisle, 2010; Mackie & Tett, 2013; Roberts & Escobar, 2015). Further efforts have been made to establish place-based policies (Matthews *et al.*, 2012; Barker, 2005), partnerships in public services (Cook, 2015), and community-led health initiatives (Paterson, 2019), including projects through the Boundary Commission, Marine Scotland, Police Scotland, the Big Lottery, What Works Scotland and Public Health Scotland (Harkins *et al.*, 2016; Cook, 2015; Carley *et al.*, 2000; O'Neill *et al.*, 2015) which have had varying degrees of success. The Scottish Government and local authorities have been redirecting attention to disabilities, place, education and funding in an attempt to mainstream equality, while also supporting democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting (Escobar *et al.*, 2018), the Citizens' Assemblies on Climate Change (2020-2021) and the Future of Scotland (2019-2020), which recently made their recommendations to Parliament.

A clear indicator that this agenda has entered mainstream public institutions, is the new set of Principles for Community Empowerment developed by the Auditor General to guide all public sector and scrutiny bodies in Scotland<sup>1</sup>. This builds on a decade of public service reform guided by the 2011 Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services, punctuated by milestones like the 2015 Community Empowerment Act (What Works Scotland, 2019). Efforts have been made to implement the National Standards for Community Engagement (NSfCE, 2016) and examples can be seen through organisations and planned events such as the Health and Social Care Integration consultation; the Diversity and Equality Alliance; 'Our Rights, Our Voices' as well as many community-based projects around the country (see Lightbody, 2017: 6). The recent Social Renewal Advisory Board Report (2021) 'If not now, when?' published by the Scottish Government to inform recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic calls for transformative and systemic change by setting out twenty 'calls to action' including number 16: 'Further shift the balance of power so individuals and communities have more control over decisions that affect their lives;' and number 17: 'Improve service delivery and design by empowering frontline teams and the people and communities they serve'.

Authorities tend to highlight positive outcomes from community engagement, and while a multitude of trials and efforts have been made, there are evident challenges facing local democracy and

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/report/principles-for-community-empowerment> [Accessed in March 2021]

community engagement, not least due to austerity policies implemented over the last decade and funding cuts to local areas and community projects. In addition to financial limitations, there is a lack of understanding of the challenges citizens face when attempting to engage in policy and politics and thus a disconnect exists between decision makers and their local publics (see Lightbody, 2017; Bort *et al.* 2012; COSLA 2014). Scottish communities face acute social and health inequalities. According to the Poverty and Inequality Commission, 45% of lone parents (usually women), 35% of ethnic minorities (18% of white people) and 23% of disabled people were living in poverty in 2015/16. In-work poverty is particularly high: 58% of people and 70% of children who live in poverty, live in a household where someone is in employment. The inequalities of life expectancy are stark, men from the most deprived areas die, on average, 13 years (9 years for women) before people from more affluent areas. While the Scottish Government has pushed ahead with an ambitious community empowerment agenda, we are interested in how this helps to shift the power balance between communities and decision-makers, and create greater levels of equality within engagement processes.

### **Challenges and barriers in community engagement: ‘Hard to reach’ or ‘easy to ignore’?**

Despite increasing awareness of the difficulties experienced by a range of groups and communities in society, the term ‘hard to reach’ has been coined to depict groups that have not typically been politically active (Macpherson *et al.*, 2007; Cook, 2002). Those labelled as such are considered difficult to reach by institutions, organisations and researchers. According to Ellard-Gray *et al.* (2015) this is due to their geographical location, their social position (i.e. class) and/ or because they are vulnerable, often due to some form of discrimination. The term ‘hard to reach’ is overly simplistic and suggests that everyone has an equal opportunity to become politically involved: the blame resides with non-participants rather than the political, social and economic system. The expression is falling out of fashion and being replaced with terms such as ‘easy-to-ignore’ (Matthews *et al.* 2012; Nelson & Taberner, 2017), or ‘seldom heard’ (Ellard-Gray *et al.* 2015; Kelleher *et al.* 2014). Fundamentally, groups have become easy-to-ignore because non-action (as a policy) is easier than tackling the diverse and complex barriers which some communities face.

Blake *et al.* (2008: 31) describe how barriers to participation can manifest in a variety of ways. *Practical barriers* include a deficit of resources such as a lack of information or understanding of the process, a lack of transportation or childcare. *Personal barriers* depict a lack of confidence or language difficulties. *Socio-economic barriers* affect people in low earning employment, oftentimes working multiple jobs and who are time poor. Asylum seekers, former prisoners or those without a permanent



residence would also face this sort of barrier. Finally, *motivational barriers* include those who are sceptical about the effectiveness of any engagement process. Arnstein (1969) usefully illustrates the fourth barrier through her 'ladder of participation'. Participatory processes, including community engagement, can be designed as a one-way process to placate publics and make them feel heard without having any tangible influence over the outcome. Therefore, people can be understandably suspicious about getting involved when they see few results for their efforts.

Young (2000) takes this argument further by distinguishing between external and internal inclusion. External inclusion refers to the ability to access a process, whereas internal inclusion refers to the quality of interaction and communication once the process is underway. Young invites us to interrogate how power inequalities shape everyday life at the interface of structural forces and micro-political dynamics. Internal exclusion dynamics are typically skewed against people with low levels of formal education; struggling with health and/or mental health issues; hearing impairments; issues of confidence; dominant participants silencing others – either purposefully or not – and people using English as a second language (Goodlad *et al.* 2005; Carlisle, 2010).

In many instances the challenge is not necessarily getting people to participate or engage but actually ensuring that the dynamics of that participation are fair within the process (internal inclusion). An international review by Ryfe and Stalsburg (2012: 44) concludes that unless corrective measures are taken 'participation of all varieties will be skewed in favour of those with higher socioeconomic status and formal education.' For instance, Roberts and Escobar (2015: 39) and Han *et al.* (2015) show that individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to participate over those without. Research shows that white, middle-class, middle aged men often seek to dominate discussions in participatory or deliberative processes by talking more or setting the agenda (see Harris 2019: 50; Sanders 1997). Han *et al.* (2015: 11) too found that men spoke disproportionately more than women during participatory processes. When participants aren't familiar with articulating their ideas in a formal setting; certain participants can become more dominant (Sanders 1997; Fischer 2009). As Roberts and Escobar (2015: 102) note 'it is not simply a matter of sharing airtime equitably – some people can do more with less time'. When women do speak, they are more likely to address the common good and the most disadvantaged in society (Han *et al.* 2015: 14). In some community engagement processes, white, middle aged men frequently hold community leadership roles, while women more often gravitate towards the role of community volunteer or activist (Grimshaw, 2011).

Complications further arise when attempting to implement a 'one size fits all' approach to the sort of difficulties facing equalities groups. Women are often disadvantaged due to domestic and caring

responsibilities, lack of confidence, poverty and other issues including language, cultural barriers and stereotyping (McLaughlin, 2009) but the barriers women face are specific to region, situation, age, employment, race, ethnicity, religion and so forth. Therefore, 'women's issues' are multifaceted and complex and cannot be easily addressed by one policy or initiative (Breitenbach, 2006). Distinct ethnic groups are all too often 'clumped together' (denoted by the popular term Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities) and are frequently assumed to be homogenous albeit their needs and aspirations are fundamentally different (Blake *et al.* 2008: 32). Fear of discrimination can prevent groups from entering community engagement initiatives (McClellan & O'Connor, 2003), affecting disabled people, immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, children and young people, and the senior demographic.

Disabled people are often not supported to participate due to organisers' budget restrictions and a lack of understanding of the challenges that they contend with. Disabled people also face their own financial restraints and issues of accessibility (Gowar, 2014; Attree *et al.* 2011: 255). Community engagement processes frequently require participants to move about, stand or sit for long periods of time and this can be difficult for disabled people as well as older people (Edwards, 2002). As Gowar (2014: 5) puts it: 'For disabled people, 'presence' in the form of physical access is not a marker of inclusion'. O'Hagan *et al.* (2019: 14) reported in their study of participatory budgeting across Scotland that the take up of disabled people's organisations has been 'limited' (see also Glasgow Disability Alliance, 2018). Hidden disabilities such as mental health issues or chronic pain, have not received the same efforts and funding. Attention is beginning to be paid to these conspicuous gaps which have been easy to ignore (Disability Rights UK, 2017; Scottish Parliamentary Debate, 2019; Research Voices Citizens' Jury, 2020).

Community processes habitually fail to include children and young people. Bessant (2004) considers that 'young people are understood to be members of society in so far as they belong to it, but have that bare presence without inclusion or representation'. Children and young people are being sent a mixed message: while encouraged to take an interest in shaping their own futures, they cannot vote until they are 18 in the UK and 16 in Scotland. As Nancy Fraser sums up, the conditions of a just society require 'social arrangements that permit all members of society to interact with one another as peers' (2003: 38). It is often wrongly assumed that young people are disinterested or ill-equipped to take part in politics and will just reflect the opinions of those around them, such as their parents or teachers (Eichhorn 2014). Further to this, evidence from the UK and Ireland suggests that the young people who do participate tend to be those that are 'confident, well-educated, articulate, socially orientated, older children' who are part of youth and school organisations (Carnegie UK Trust, 2008; Kelleher, 2014). As Mackie and Tett (2013: 392) note, 'The position of equality of opportunity taken by the

Scottish Government – rather than equality of outcome – ignores the impact of factors such as poverty and race which serve to marginalise young people at an early age’, deeply impacting on young people’s life chances and choices. Electoral democracies are hard-wired for short-termism, but crises like the climate emergency are rekindling debates about intergenerational justice and the importance of involving children and young people in political decision-making (Smith, 2021).

The literature strongly indicates that there are long term benefits to taking part in community engagement (e.g. Brodie *et al.* 2011: 31). In a UK wide review carried out by Attree *et al.* (2011), the majority of citizens who had taken part in community initiatives benefited from their engagement by experiencing increased well-being and self-confidence, reciprocity and social cohesion. Regardless of the focus of the community process, the health of those participating was affected – people reported to be eating better, walking more and feeling improvement in their psychological health (Attree *et al.* 2011: 255). Other Scottish-based studies have found that community engagement ‘enhances quality of life’ (Nixon *et al.* 2001: 11). Participants generally feel happier and more confident – with one participant in a citizens’ jury in Scotland proclaiming ‘I’ve got my mojo back!’ (cited Roberts & Escobar, 2015). Miller *et al.’s* (2015) report that young participants found it easier to make new networks, were more likely to go into training and gain employment based on their time working and engaging with youth workers. Overall, connections and bonds appear to be built and strengthened, people become more engaged and develop key skills, and policies find more support because people have a say in their design (Peel & Lloyd, 2007; Attree *et al.* 2011; Miller *et al.* 2015).

Conversely though, there have also been negative consequences of participation in community engagement processes (e.g. Brodie *et al.* 2011: 32). As noted in case studies in Scotland, as well as more widely, being accountable for a decision puts participants under pressure (Ziersch & Baum, 2004; Ratner, 2005; Carlisle, 2010). Attree *et al.* (2011: 250) highlighted that participants experienced greater levels of stress and exhaustion and found that participating was financially and mentally wearing (p. 256). In addition, failure to be taken seriously or to be given reasonable attention led to some people becoming dispirited (p. 258).

Clearly, barriers and challenges are far-reaching and multifaceted. To better understand how Scotland is tackling inequality, our review examined various types of community engagement with different aims and outcomes. The next section sets out the most salient themes from the evidence review.

## **Striving for Equality in Community Engagement**

The relationship between community engagement and equality is either positively or negatively articulated around four key dimensions: partnerships and power-sharing, bureaucracy and funding, representation, and digital resources (Lightbody, 2017).

### *Partnerships and power-sharing*

Any type of process which hopes to have a policy impact by engaging communities, requires a redistribution of power between key actors (Arnstein, 1969; McCartney *et al.* 2021). In the UK context, the term ‘partnership’ refers to collaborative governance arrangements that gather stakeholders from a range of sectors (public, private, third and community). These are often mandated by legislation, for example Community Planning Partnerships in Scotland, which are intended to be platforms for community engagement in local governance and policy-making (Weakley & Escobar, 2018). Concerns about power-sharing remain central in these spaces and partnerships can make citizens feel that they are more involved while offering very little influence over decisions, policies or services.

In UK and Scottish participatory processes, tokenism is a recurrent concern for citizens. Phrases such as, ‘lip-service’, ‘placatory’, and ‘talking shops’ (Todd & Zografos, 2005: 495; Stafford *et al.* 2003; Stevenson *et al.* 2004) were used to describe them, and at the more extreme end they were considered to ‘mask new forms of state control’ (Taylor, 2007: 297) because the ‘rules of the game’ were set from above (Burns & Taylor, 2000). Davies (2007) reports that partnerships can be used as an excuse for ‘creeping managerialism’ and can be undermined by ineffectual communication and deliberation (Weakley & Escobar, 2018). Carlisle (2010) found that conflict is sometimes more evident than collaboration within partnerships when it comes to power-sharing leading to a breakdown in relations and the likelihood of failure to achieve their goal. Attree *et al.* (2011) report that it is often unclear who is making decisions therefore inequalities of power can go undetected (Taylor, 2007: 300). In these instances, ‘the public may well hear and be heard’ (Lightbody, 2017: 12), yet their level of influence over the outcome is uncertain.

Scepticism and mistrust runs both ways, policy makers and experts often underestimate the input of citizens, assuming that they are uninformed or unqualified to contribute to the policy-making process (Roberts *et al.* 2020; Stevenson *et al.* 2004: 21). Additionally, policy makers can be unconvinced by the purpose and impact of democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting (O’Hagan *et al.* 2019) and citizens’ juries (Roberts & Escobar, 2015: 31). In these instances, citizens have little chance of effective power-sharing.

While there are examples of effective partnerships within Scotland (e.g. Glasgow, including the Community Policing Initiatives; East End Healthy Living Centre), Cook (2015: 2) reflects on the limitation of the existing evidence base on partnerships. Partnerships, between organisations and across sectors, have become ubiquitous in public governance and their remit covers most policy areas with a direct bearing on people's lives (e.g. health, transport, housing, social security, policing). Yet, the field of democratic innovation tends to pay attention to scrutinising equality in fashionable processes (e.g. mini-publics, participatory budgeting) while overlooking the proliferation of community engagement in collaborative governance partnerships (see Bussu, 2019). Although more recently the importance of these 'intentional, creative, everyday practices that seek to repair and renew connections in the fabric of democratic life' have been brought into sharper focus (see Hendriks *et al.* 2021: 2).

### *Funding and Bureaucracy*

Community groups are routinely constrained by a lack of funding, administrative burdens and/or lack of power over any outcomes (Goodlad *et al.* 2005: 932; Taylor 2007, 301; Carlisle, 2010). Community Learning and Development departments in local authorities have faced significant cuts throughout the UK since 2010 (Asenova & Stein 2014). In Scotland, this has reduced the staff able to organise across the public and third sectors (Hastings *et al.* 2015). A report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that poorer areas are disproportionately affected by funding cuts compared to people in more affluent areas, and funding for support services in Scotland was cut by 11% in real terms (Hastings *et al.* 2015). Having limited knowledge or understanding of the funding process, especially with diminishing funding opportunities, creates challenges for groups navigating the process for the first time (Carlisle, 2010: 124). Long term participation requires citizens who understand the funding and bureaucratic process (Todd & Zografos, 2005; Hamer, 2015), which limits the participation of those who don't.

### *Representation*

Decision-making undertaken by community members can create concerns around legitimacy and representation (Barker, 2005; Carlisle, 2010). Representation is a challenge contingent upon how we understand a democratic mandate. Non-elected members of the public representing other citizens can be problematic. On the one hand, it can empower individuals and deepen the democratic process, and on the other, individuals could make decisions that do not represent the wider public (Taylor, 2007). Significantly, there is no way to hold community representatives to account, at least in terms of traditional notions of accountability (but see Escobar & Elstub, 2017: 9; Sullivan, 2003). Further to

this, Carlisle (2010) and Attree *et al.* (2011: 257) found that some community representatives felt overly responsible for the outcome, and some experienced ‘disapproval, criticism and even bullying from other community members’ if their actions were not viewed to be honourable. Measures to monitor the mental and physical toll of these new roles on citizens requires further research.

### *Digital resources*

Both official community engagement and independent community organising increasingly take place in the digital public sphere (see Russon-Gilman & Peixoto, 2019). Many communities of place, interest and identity create networks and bridge relationships online (Matthews & Besmer, 2014). Digital exclusion is evident in Scotland as 27% of households in the most deprived areas have no home internet access (Scottish Govt Annual Report, 2017). The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) notes that ‘Digital inclusion can itself help to address several important domains of deprivation: income, employment, health, education’ (2014: 22). However, inequalities exist here too. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) Internet Users data for 2019 found that 78% of people meeting the Equality Act definition of disability used the internet, compared to 95% of those who were not disabled. The 2018 Lloyds Digital Index also suggests 28% of those aged 60+ are offline and, comparable with ONS figures in 2019, that 53% of over 70s are offline. Men aged over 75 are more likely to use the internet than women (54% men / 41% women). The statistics are improving for consistency in internet usage but with so many resources only available online it is vital that all citizens have access in order to prevent digital exclusion. The Scottish Government developed a digital infrastructure strategy in 2017 to address these issues, which was revisited in 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, but it’s early days (Scottish Government, 2020). What the pandemic has clearly thrown into relief is that both online access and digital literacy are not only foundations for citizenship and community engagement but for inclusion in everyday life.

This section has thus far outlined what is happening in Scotland and highlighted some troublesome areas. The next section sets out some strategies for ensuring equality of access, equality during the process and long-term outcomes. In doing so, we complete our exploration of the literature at the intersection between community engagement and equalities research, before circling back to the broader issue of power inequalities in the conclusion.

### **Strategies and approaches for equality in community engagement**

### *Learning from past experience and listening to communities*

It is apparent from this evidence review that while ongoing community engagement processes are catalogued, the long-term impacts have seldom been studied (Lightbody, 2017). Online platforms such as Participedia or Latinno, which are repositories for case studies and projects, or VOICE, the Scottish platform for engagement practitioners, are attempting to address this knowledge gap. Acknowledging that one size does not fit all in community engagement is an important step (Attree *et al.* 2011) and cataloguing and sharing best practice is key for highlighting what has worked and what has not (see COSLA, 2014; What Works Scotland, 2019). Organisers must be prepared to co-design engagement processes with communities: citizens are best equipped to provide guidance on what will make their involvement easier. Young people in particular like to forge their own spaces.

### *Supporting communities to get involved*

Allocating resources that are proportional to the challenge faced by citizens in a particular context, will help to mobilise and involve people. Providing financial incentives for participants in order to cover child care, transportation, and/or wage replacement will help to bring down barriers facing many groups including women, single parents, young people, disabled people, and people living in poverty thus correcting the over-representation of advantaged groups (Ryfe & Stalsburg, 2012).

Citizens need to know what the level and scope of their influence will be over services, policies or decisions, particularly when there are multiple stakeholders and agendas involved. Participants in cross-sector partnerships must address power inequalities that prevent genuine collaboration and community engagement (Weakley & Escobar 2018). Successful partnerships often adopt a facilitative leadership approach which includes people working together to make a difference (see Brunner & Watson, 2016) while supporting communities to harness the resources available to those partnerships. Long term partnerships or 'cross sector alliances' can generate trust and relationships resulting in deeper social capital and collective learning for action (Knowledge is Power, 2018).

Community engagement should focus on quality over quantity to avoid communities losing motivation and to encourage future engagement (Aitken *et al.* 2014: 34). Democratic innovations need to be undertaken as more than an 'add on' to existing practices, and instead be developed as new community-led institutional sites within the democratic process (see Warren, 2007; Hartz-Karp & Briand, 2009). The contribution democratic innovations make to shaping policy must be tangible and visible if they are to be taken seriously by both citizens and political actors (see Font *et al.* 2017).

### *Supporting communities once they are involved*

Power inequalities permeate participatory processes, and people often need support to fully engage and contribute throughout to prevent internal exclusion. For example, using accessible language and providing translation services and Sign Language Interpreters are amongst the measures required at the most basic level. Offering support services for people with learning difficulties will accommodate their entry into community engagement processes and their contribution once involved (Research Voices Citizens' Jury, 2020). An often-understudied dimension in this democratic agenda is the importance of the role of facilitators and the micro-politics of facilitation practice (Escobar, 2019). Facilitators can make the difference between fostering internal inclusion or exclusion; between citizens finding the participatory process a positive experience or not; and can help to mobilise people to make changes for their communities (Emejulu and Shaw, 2010; Bynner *et al.* 2017). Further support can be provided by enrolling 'technical friends', 'information officers' or helping communities to work with experts (see Lansdell, 2011; Lightbody & Roberts, 2019) who can help to explore concerns; translate complexities associated with terminology or the participation process; offer information and guidance on how to organise and access funding opportunities; and generally support the development of communities of practice and enquiry (see Fischer 2009; Bynner *et al.* 2017; Knowledge is Power, 2018). Capacity-building programmes should be available for organisers and facilitators who play a crucial role in driving, shaping and supporting engagement processes, particularly at a time when the community development workforce is under mounting pressures across Scotland.

Digital technology provides alternative routes for organising, participating and communicating. It can offer access to young people, older and disabled people affected by limited mobility, and people who lack confidence or are time poor. Communities and networks can be created online. As a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, a significant 'upskilling' of citizens has taken place. It is estimated that at least 300,000 households (800,000 people) were not on online at the beginning of lockdown. Considerable work has been undertaken by the Scottish Government working to respond to this gap by working with third and public sector organisations, 32 local councils and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) (Lyne, 2020). Video conferencing, recording and broadcasting community engagement projects, and citizen journalism, can all help processes become more inclusive, or at least encourage people to get involved in new ways. The new generation of platforms that have been purposefully designed for digital participation and deliberation (e.g. Decidim, Pol.is, Consul, Loomio, etc) will have a vital role to play over the next decade as they have the potential to combine both breadth and depth in online engagement.



These strategies can enable the demography of participants to change, accommodating different communities. Knowing who takes part, and who does not, is vital for moving forward. Closer attention and recording needs to be undertaken by organisers so that absent communities are not dismissed as hard-to-reach, but instead actively identified as missing and efforts made to draw in lesser heard voices to avoid them being easy-to-ignore. Equality, at times, can be accommodated by disempowered groups deliberating in 'enclaves', for instance young people, creating an environment where they may feel supported to voice their needs and opinions and in turn, identify common goals and increase political efficacy (Fraser, 1990; Mansbridge, 1996; Young, 2000). Mayne (2010) reports that 'homogenous sampling' has been used to involve young and senior citizens as well as minority ethnic groups in community planning, with some success. Involving a cross-section of society in one process but also consulting a more cognate sample such as young, old, or indigenous communities, in another, and linking these two processes can be an effective way to institutionalise democratic innovations (Karpowitz *et al.* 2009).

### *Long term thinking*

To encourage long term action and engagement, it is imperative for community engagement to be flexible, including both community-led and official community engagement (SDCD, Poverty Alliance, 2018; Aitken *et al.* 2014). This links with our recommendation to learn from past experiences. Listening to communities about what works for them, learning from equalities groups about how best to facilitate their participation, and working with community groups to establish long term relationships can transform community engagement over time. Long term community engagement has to place particular emphasis on engaging young people. Despite being unable to vote, we have seen in Scotland a thirst for activity and change (Independence Referendum, Climate Change protests, anti-Trump rallies). However, this is not all young people. There is a rich catalogue of research which supports the view that community education and engagement has the potential to re-engage disaffected vulnerable young people and provide alternatives to criminogenic activities (Deuchar, 2009; Miller *et al.* 2015). Raising awareness about ways of participating and reaching out to a new generation requires links with schools and families, but also with care homes, social services and community centres, including religious centres. Creating spaces where young people can go and interact with friends but also other groups of people (the police, third sector workers, youth workers) (Coburn, 2011) can foster feelings of mutual respect and empower young people to shape their futures and communities, while harnessing tools and skills which will benefit them in life. Yet, young people should not be overburdened by participatory processes; monitoring involvement and ensuring that it is fruitful is important (Stafford *et al.* 2003; Mannion, 2012).

If communities are to become, and stay, involved, they must be included in long-term economic planning and development (Henderson *et al.* 2018). Participatory budgeting is now being institutionalised by all local authorities in Scotland, offering citizens the chance to decide how parts of local funding should be spent, which has the potential to change the relationship between communities and institutions (Escobar *et al.* 2018; PB Scotland, 2019). In addition, people can be offered a greater stake in their community through community ownership and development trusts (Henderson *et al.* 2018). Asset transfer is a key component of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the Scottish Government further supports this venture with the Community Ownership Support Service. Ownership of assets can help empower communities by making them stakeholders and decision-makers (Henderson *et al.* 2020).

## **Conclusion**

Equality is a moving target and citizens face multifaceted challenges when it comes to becoming politically active at the community level or more widely. The issues facing individuals are beyond what community engagement can achieve alone. Yet, citizen participation offers a platform for many to shape their lives and their communities' futures. The literature demonstrates that while community engagement can create social cohesion, trust in political decisions, a sense of well-being for participants, as well as new skillsets, there are also considerable downsides. Community processes can be laborious, frustrating and unrewarding.

The review finds that while much of the literature highlights what happened in the community engagement process, what should have happened and how we move on from here, few are actively seeking to design new processes by applying learning from past experiences, although exceptions have been noted throughout the paper. There is still limited reporting on the long-term impact of community engagement, both on policy decisions and communities. More empirical research on good practice and comparative work, including longitudinal studies, are required.

Community engagement must be placed in the context of broader democratic innovation and citizenship at regional, national and global scale. The challenge is to enable citizens and community groups to shape the spaces for engagement themselves, decide how they wish to participate, and have a say over the partnerships they are entering into. Appropriate resources are required to foster equality in community engagement – financial and practical support to facilitate participation, digital access/literacy, and community organising staff. Additionally, the development of a variety of institutions, processes and methods can generate the diverse experimentation and learning needed to explore what works, when, for whom and under what conditions.

This article has provided an overview of the intersection between research on community engagement and studies of in/equality, thus illustrating the learning that emerges when keeping these literatures in conversation despite disciplinary silos. These insights can inform improvements to traditional forms of community engagement. But they are particularly relevant for democratic innovations because these are intended to overcome the inequalities of traditional participatory processes. Focussing on Scotland, a polity currently steeped in narratives about community empowerment, allowed us to cut across levels of governance and policy arenas while exploring both systemic and micro-political dimensions of equality in community engagement. The challenges and strategies outlined here, however, will likely resonate with developments in other countries as the global wave of democratic innovation seeks to tackle growing power inequalities in a context of political, environmental and economic crisis.

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