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‘Strategic Partnerships at Local Level: Just Rhetoric or a Way Forward?’

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Strategic Partnerships at Local Level: Just Rhetoric or a Way Forward?

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This paper explores the issues around the recent developments of Strategic Partnerships at Local Level based on the initiatives for community regeneration and economic development introduced by the New Labour in order to achieve urban renaissance. The paper sets the policy scene emphasising on strategic partnership arrangements and suggests the steps needed for achieving urban renaissance. It concludes with the reasons why Strategic Partnerships at Local Level constitute a worthwhile way forward recognising though significant dysfunctional elements in the implementation of policies.

Partnership has been a ‘buzzword’ in the last decade or so. Many policies implemented at local level during the last years have had as a prerequisite the application of partnership functioning. This paper attempts to examine the latest of local partnership schemes introduced by the New Labour government, Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and Sub-regional Strategic Partnerships (SSPs). The schemes under consideration are identified under the label ‘Strategic Partnerships at Local Level’ as they both target urban renaissance for the British cities and towns. There is no particular research methodology used in this paper apart from secondary data based on different empirical researches that are used in order to prove the legitimacy of the arguments.

Construction of Strategic Partnerships at Local Level

Strategic Partnerships at Local Level (SPLL) could be defined in the context of partnership arrangements that have emerged mainly during the last two years in order to promote the development and sustainability of regeneration at local level as well as to pursue better delivery of public services. Their strategic focus of action is related more to an effective policy-making rather than to the actual implementation of policies. In this sense, SPLLs act as ‘*umbrella*’ for other small-scale local partnerships. In this paper we are interested more on strategic partnerships that act in urbanised areas of Britain as there are different social and economic conditions applying to the rural areas.

The definition given by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) for Local Strategic Partnerships is employed in order to specify the context of Strategic Partnerships at Local Level. According to this definition then:

A local strategic partnership (LSP) is a single body that:

- *brings together at a local level the different parts of the public sector as well as the private, community and voluntary sectors so that different initiatives, programmes and services support each other and work together;*
- *is a non-statutory, non-executive organisation;*
- *operates at a level, which enables strategic decisions to be taken and is close to individual neighbourhoods to allow actions to be determined at community level; and*
- *should be aligned with local authority boundaries (DETR, 2001; 15)*

This definition, although referring to a specific type of partnership arrangement proposed through an initiative by the current government, applies also to another strategic partnership action in today's local government, the Sub-regional Strategic Partnerships. In the light of this Local Strategic Partnerships and Sub-regional Strategic Partnerships are the two types of partnerships this paper is looking at. The latter does not mean that these two types of strategic partnerships could not be seen from the perspective of one type of partnership (strategic partnership at local level), quite the opposite. As the guidance given by the government for the construction of strategic partnerships at local level points out '*partnerships need to operate at a level, which allows strategic choices and decisions to be made...*' (DETR, 2001: 21). LSPs and SSPs fulfil this primarily very important requirement and in this respect they can be seen from the same angle.

From the governmental guidance it has been made clear that Local Strategic Partnerships have a focus on issues related to improvement of quality of life and governance in their locality (e.g. construction of community and neighbourhood renewal strategies) whereas Sub-regional Strategic Partnerships have pre-eminently a focus on economic development aspects. Because of the homogeneity that face economic issues as well as the complex and often intractable nature of problems that requires multi-dimensional responses the geographical area of activities for SPLs is usually extended to the length of '*the travel-to-work-area*' or even larger (Westall & Foley, 2001). Moreover, it could be useful to add the definition of local economic partnerships given by Bennett and Krebs (1991) that helps to define strategic partnerships at local level from an economic development point of view. They define such partnerships as '*agreement, usually formal, sometimes informal, by actors to work together towards a specified economic development objective*' (Bennett & Krebs, 1991: 82).

The main attributes of Strategic Partnerships at Local Level could be summarised in the following table:

	<i>Attributes of Strategic Partnerships at Local Level</i>
<i>What is the role of Strategic Partnerships at Local Level</i>	They lead the preparation, ongoing development and implementation of strategies that are appropriate to their area e.g. community or economic development strategies – They bring together local plans, partnerships and initiatives – They lead the preparation and implementation of regeneration plans – LSPs work for better delivery of services in their locality.
<i>Who are members</i>	Public sector organisations such as local authorities, universities, the police – Also local businesses, community organisations and local people, voluntary organisations.
<i>Who leads a Strategic Partnership at Local Level</i>	It is decided between the members – Vital issue the inspiration of vision, trust and commitment
<i>Who partners are accountable to</i>	In both types of SPL individual partners remain accountable for decisions on their services and resources – They both work closely with Government Offices in the area

Table 1: *Attributes of Strategic Partnerships at Local Level*

Source: Adapted from DETR, 2001 & EMDA, 2001

Strategic Partnerships at Local Level for Targeting Urban Renaissance: ‘More tea vicar’?

When the New Labour came into office they had already in mind a rather radical and in many instances ambitious programme for ‘*modernising local government*’. Partnerships, especially the local ones, have played a very important role in these plans. The government has from the very beginning announced its intention to move from a contract culture to a partnership culture. Additionally, they have suggested that they privilege the development of new conditions for the ‘*community*’ to play a more prominent role in the creation of regeneration strategies in relation to employment, housing, health, crime prevention and education (Foley & Martin, 2000). Moreover, they have introduced Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), which in collaboration with the Government Offices promote regeneration – especially economic development – at a sub-regional level through the construction of partnerships (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1997).

Through these changes it seems that we have entered into a new epoch. The notion of local governance is very accurate in describing the shift from government to governance with respect to reduction in legitimacy, authority and accountability of the traditional

instruments of governing and their replacement by new institutions that draw together the key players in the governance environment (Sullivan, 2001). It seems that the primary concern of the government's action has been to secure higher quality of life for all citizens in urban areas. This is why the White Paper, *Our towns and cities: the future* (2000) has considered as its major vision to improve quality of life through local people's willingness to: shape their future; to live in attractive and well kept cities and towns; to sustain environmentally these cities and towns; and to create economic prosperity and good quality of services. The ultimate target is to achieve an urban renaissance that reflects the willingness of local people to be benefited from making vibrant and successful cities. According to White Paper, in order to achieve urban renaissance there is a vital need for establishing a framework for effective partnership working to allow properly joined up strategies to be developed and implemented (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2000).

In this respect strategic partnership functioning comes up as an indispensable condition for achieving urban renaissance. As the White Paper states clearly '*Local Strategic Partnerships will not be just another partnership on top of the many already in place at the local level*' (DETR, 2000: 34). Local Strategic Partnerships and Sub-regional strategic partnerships can bind local people to work together. They are responsible to take a fully joined up approach that brings together economic, social and environmental issues. Consequently, the main strategic principles of urban renaissance to be achieved through the strategic partnership functioning could be described as follows: Working with citizens at local and sub-regional level in order to make all urban areas places where

- *local people can get the quality of services as well as participate in developing their communities as they wish;*
- *all the urban areas can create and share prosperity.*

There have been a series of programmes requiring the construction of partnerships as a prerequisite for effective implementation e.g. the New Commitment to Regeneration (NCR) and Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (SNR). From an economic development point of view they are the Regional Development Agencies that are very close related to Sub-regional Strategic Partnerships. Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) and New Deal for Communities (NDC) could be considered as examples of both community regeneration and economic development. Focusing to Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal as the latest of these initiatives, it guides attempts on solving the problems of deprivation, and social and economic decline in specific neighbourhoods in the country. The strategy is based on the vision for all these neighbourhoods to '*have common goals of lower workless ness and crime, and better health, skills, housing and physical environment*' as well as '*to narrow the gap on these measures between the most deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the country*' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001: 8).

With regard to economic development, Regional Development Agencies are the vehicles that attempt to bring together representatives from all the sectors at the regional level towards sustainable economic growth taking also into account the social regeneration issues in the area. For instance, in the Urban Action Plan of the East

Midlands Development Agency (EMDA) (2001: 5) it is recognised that the agency '*would be happy to offer relevant support to these plans [for collaboration in the production of Community Plans and other strategies by Local Strategic Partnerships], principally through engaging with Sub-regional Partnerships, and is keen to ensure that the UAP [Urban Action Plan] is complementary to them*'. Moreover, EMDA argues that the Action Plan's implementation needs the engagement of a broad range of partners, mentioning Sub-regional Strategic and Local Strategic Partnerships as the main vehicles to ensure '*seamless and co-ordinated delivery of a new regeneration approach*' (EMDA, 2001: 11).

There have been cases of partnership functioning that meet the requirements for achieving urban renaissance as well as strategic planning and implementation before the initiatives about Local and Sub-regional Strategic Partnerships. The activities of these ancestor-to-LSPs-and-SSPs partnerships are very indicative of signs of community regeneration and economic development. An example of a successful strategic partnership as such has been the Leicester Regeneration Agency (LRA) established in 1999 in order to co-ordinate social and physical regeneration in Leicester (*Leicester Regeneration Agency, 2000*). After the establishment of the Leicester Partnership (LP), as the strategic partnership at local level in the city, in June 2001, the strategic responsibility of all the citywide partnerships in the city have been transferred to the new partnership (*Leicester Partnership, 2001*).

Foley and Martin (2000) in an attempt to examine the impact of these initiatives to public participation and regeneration argue that local partners being used to different approaches of participating need to embrace '*community involvement*' if they want it to have any real impact on policy making. They go further to warn that if the current government does not learn from and addresses the difficult issues it will simply repeat the mistakes of the past. Which are these issues then that apply to main organisational attributes of Strategic Partnerships at Local Level? Moreover, how the so far development of SPLL could be characterised: successful or not? Are SPLL just another top-down rhetoric or they constitute an effective way forward for urban Britain?

In relation to the '*joining-up*' way Strategic Partnerships at Local Level need to work when dealing with such a broad range of issues (community strategies, local plans, public service agreements, neighbourhood strategies) there have been doubts to which extent this way brings a great deal of effectiveness. Chandler, for instance, (2000) argues that seeking perfect co-ordination within complex organisations, as SPLL appear to be, is something that does not lead to a wholly satisfactory outcome. This is simply because joining-up one set of groups may inevitably lead to disruption of co-ordination with groups from another sector.

Another difficult issue that comes up is closely connected to '*who leads SPLLS*'. Namely this is decided between the partnership members according to the needs of the body. Reality in many cases seems different though. Diamond, based on research on regeneration partnerships conducted in Manchester, addresses the difficulties arising when professional groups such as regeneration managers '*take over*' within the partnerships because they know better how to make things work as members of groups specialised on regeneration issues. In this way, local community based groups are less

likely to have access to similar networks of support (*Diamond, 2001*). In another example, temporary chair of the newly established Leicester Partnership is the leader of the local council. Reason for this has mainly been the fact that the local council can provide better facilities and expertise with regard to partnership's organisational needs.

Conflict between the partnership members is another issue for consideration. Although being opinionated can in many instances become beneficial for the partnership's prosperity, usually it creates tensions that it is difficult to be solved. The case of the Community Forum in the Elephant and Castle, London, is an illuminating example where the overall levels of conflicts can be significant. In this case the partnership needed to fight to get its point across against the decisions taken by the local authority something that resulted on the slow progress of the policy implementation over a Single Regeneration Budget project (*North, 2001*).

Back in 1992, Mackintosh referred to partnership construction as, amongst others, a model of budget enlargement where a public body collaborates with a private body in order to attain funding from a third part (*Mackintosh, 1992*). The government has intended to support localities with some £ 800 million Neighbourhood Fund (the fund that is rewarded as a result of a successful Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy), and about £ 45 million for at least two rounds of Neighbourhood Management and this is only related to one of the initiatives that require construction of SPLs (*Social Exclusion Unit, 2001*). Therefore, it becomes apparent that it is financially very beneficial for local actors to establish SPLs. Consequently, where budget enlargement is the main reason for constructing this can create difficulties to partnership consolidation in terms of organisation and development of collaboration between the participating members.

Concluding Remarks

Concluding this paper it could be argued that it is possibly too early to judge on the success or not of Strategic Partnerships at Local Level simply because there are not significant outcomes available. As SPLs have existed hardly for two years or so people involved have not probably had the opportunity to digest the way on which they will try to make urban renaissance not just a governmental rhetoric but a way forward. Urban renaissance summarises in two words the ultimate aim for local citizens that is the right to get the quality of life they wish. This key policy term has come up as a response to challenges faced the urban areas of the country such as tackling the poor quality of life where it is needed or reducing the impact that urban living has on the environment. In this context Strategic Partnerships at Local Level can play the important role of the vehicles, which the implementation will be based on. This is due to the ability partnership functioning has to bring together all the interested groups in the locality and not only the actors specifically occupied in the activities the particular partnership has been constructed for. A second reason is that Strategic Partnerships at Local Level are responsible for making and implementing policy in their own territory and accountable to people they represent despite the fact that the responsibility for the whole attempt at a national level belongs to the central authority.

However, recent experiences from other local partnership functioning and initial information from the implementation of the initiatives on SPLs indicate cases of opposite outcomes. Disruption on 'joining up' working, cases of leading partners, considerable conflicts between the participating members, and economic priorities as the only reason for partnership construction are the difficult issues mentioned in this paper that can create major negative impact on SPLs' s functioning. Even worse, these issues do not seem to be the only ones. Therefore, the need for successful negotiation before and during the construction and functioning of the partnerships is considered as a crucial issue. Moreover, trust becomes an all over important aspect for consideration when partnerships function in order to create a consolidate base for collaboration. More tea in the cup of reciprocity vicar!

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