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Partnerships, community groups and social inclusion
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Abstract

The themes of collaboration and partnership lie at the heart of the vision of a range of UK initiatives designed to tackle social exclusion. However, the benefits are extolled and the costs to community groups are minimised. Some of the problems and possibilities for the involvement of community groups in partnerships are considered. Partnerships are characterised by processes of inclusion and exclusion, dominance and subordination and it is argued that attention must be paid to the structures and processes involved. New ways of thinking about representation are required, with priority given to including those with the least power who are nevertheless the most expert in identifying the needs of their own communities, if local action is going to reduce social exclusion.

Key Words: Inclusion; Marginalisation; Partnership; Regeneration

Introduction

In the UK the themes of collaboration and partnership, sometimes referred to by the shorthand term 'joined-up government', are at the heart of New Labour's vision of the modernised welfare state and are regarded as the solution to the problems of creating 'joined-up' policy. As the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair put it 'all too often governments in the past have tried to slice problems up into separate packages. In many areas dozens of agencies and professionals are working in parallel, often doing good things, but sometimes working at cross purposes with far too little co-operation and co-ordination. Joined-up problems demand joined-up solutions' (Blair, 1997). This solution to the problems of diversity of provision and providers is by no means confined to the UK. A focus on inter-agency partnerships lies behind a number of international educational initiatives such as inclusive schools and full service schools in the USA, Australia and Canada (see Dryfoos, 1996; Semmens, 2002; Wagner and Spence, 2003).

However, this key objective of 'joined up government' could be seen as a way of substituting govern*ance* for govern*ment* in the face of the difficult challenge of getting different parts of the public services to work together by designing policy around shared goals. Rhodes (2000: 345) suggests that achieving this objective involves more policy 'steering' (governance) and less 'rowing' (government) as governments recognise that they cannot impose policies but rather must negotiate both policy and its implementation with partners in the public, private and voluntary sectors. In addition, Haywood and Wright (2000) claim that the search for 'co-ordination', 'joined-up solutions' and 'horizontal co-ordination' is the philosopher's stone of modern governments, ever sought but always just beyond reach. This means that from a government perspective the benefits of partnerships are extolled but the costs are underestimated. Such hidden costs include time spent in meetings, or resources spent on the process of managing, or being the lead agency in, a partnership (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a). Other issues include where the costs of human or material resources fall disproportionately on one partner, often those from the voluntary and community sectors, rather than being shared equally (Taylor, 2003).

Involving service-users and communities

Another issue that comes out of this commitment to 'joined-up policy' is the idea that service users should play a significant role in shaping the type of services available and their mode of delivery. The notion of service users as partners has been used for a range of purposes most recently as a way of involving 'disadvantaged' communities and groups in economic and social regeneration projects. However, there is evidence that this has not been an empowering process for such groups (see Mayo, 1997; Mordaunt, 2001). Rather, research suggests that the cultures and structures of private and public sector partners are not compatible with the type of community involvement that prioritises the issues raised by community activists (Tett et al, 2003). There is also some evidence that socio-economically disadvantaged communities themselves may not have the organisational capacity and resources for effective involvement in this type of decision making (Alcock and Scott, 2002).

Just as service users are construed differently under the new model of welfare, so the deregulation of services creates new roles for professionals with the boundaries between public, private and voluntary sector workers increasingly blurred.

> Workers are cast in the role of social entrepreneurs, crossing departmental boundaries in order to take on a particular task whether this is engaging with parents in pre-school education, working in one of the models of full service schools, …. or finding jobs or educational placements for young unemployed people through 'New Deal' partnerships (Riddell and Tett, 2001: 6).

Policies within the modernised welfare state tend to be focussed on those who are seen to be at the political margins such as socio-economically-disadvantaged communities and groups. This is partly because the rhetoric of partnership is strongly tied to 'social justice' and inclusion in many of the UK and Scottish Governments' policy documents (see Riddell and Tett, 2001). For example, the report of the Scottish Taskforce on Poverty states:

> Achieving our ambitious targets can only happen through partnership with colleagues across the UK. We share a common commitment to delivering social justice [including] a belief that we are stronger together and weaker apart as people, as communities and as nations…The targets in the Scottish Social Justice Report can only be delivered through focus, leadership and 'new directions' in the allocation and use of public, private and voluntary sector resources (Scottish Executive 1999: 2)

In addition there is interest in involving communities in partnership and collaboration across the globe. For example, in 1996, the world's governments unanimously endorsed partnership as a key strategy in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. 'Governments as enabling partners should create and strengthen effective partnerships with women, youth, the elderly, people with disabilities, vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, indigenous people and communities, the private sector and non-governmental organisations (in each country)' (Habitat Agenda, 1996). Since then the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have swung their weight behind the participation of poor and excluded peoples (e.g. Gaventa, 1999). In addition governments have become committed to consultative processes with user groups in order to get input and feedback as part of their need for political legitimation (Chandler, 2001).

Given the policy context outlined above this paper sets out to examine collaborative partnerships and in particular their contribution to the combating of social exclusion in disadvantaged communities. Partnership is a complex process since partners bring very different expectations, world-views, skills, powers and resources to the process (Craig and Taylor, 2002; Glendinning et al, 2002; Huxham and Vangen, 2000b). Whilst the complexity of policy making may create windows of opportunity for socio-economically disadvantaged communities some authors have suggested that it might also exclude them further (Purdue et al, 2000; Wagner and Spence, 2003). So it is important to consider the problems and possibilities of collaborative partnerships for people living in such communities. First, however, there is a brief review of the literature on partnerships.

Partnerships

What does research tell us about the limits and possibilities for collaborative partnerships? Partnerships have long been considered an important way of working in community development, education and other parts of the public and voluntary sectors (see Ball, 1998; Balloch and Taylor, 2001; Dyson and Robson, 1999; Hudson *et al*, 1999). However, partnership can be difficult because of a number of inherent hazards such as inter-professional rivalries or unrealistic expectations (Huxham, 1996; Taylor, 2003). An analysis of the literature (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a,b; Pratt *et al*, 1998; Tett et al, 2001, Wilson and Pirrie, 2000) suggests that there are five main reasons why public, private and voluntary sector organisations should collaborate to enhance social inclusion:

- *To avoid individualism.*
An organisation acting on its own may separately carry out an action or task which need only be done by one partnership. Or activities that are important to the objectives of more than one organisation do not get carried out. Or organisations working in isolation may take actions that conflict with those taken by others.
- *To add value*
Organisations can share resources such as staff, equipment, buildings, and expertise in order to achieve more with less.
- *To broaden the scale and scope of intervention*
Organisations in partnership can access broader networks or develop a wider curriculum than would be possible if they acted alone.
- *To tackle complex social issues*
Some problems have such wide ramifications for so many sections of society and professional services that they are impossible for one organisation to tackle on its own.
- *Collaboration is seen as a virtue*
Organisations are encouraged and exhorted to work in partnership through financial and other incentives.

Research (Craig and Taylor, 2002; Hardy *et al*, 1992; Hatcher and Leblond, 2001; Power, 2001; Tett, 2000; Wilson and Pirrie, 2000) has also identified a number of barriers to working in partnership including:

- Boundaries that are geographically different or fragmented.

- Differences in funding mechanisms and bases
- Differences in aims, organizational culture and procedures
- Lack of appropriate accommodation and resources
- Differences in ideologies and values
- Conflicting views about user interests and roles
- Concern for threats to autonomy and control and having to share credit
- Communication difficulties
- Lack of organisational flexibilities
- Differences in perceived power
- Inability to deal with conflict.

From the point of view of individual organisations, collaborative partnerships may pose a *threat*. Firstly, each agency loses some of its freedom to act individually when it may prefer to maintain control over its own affairs. Secondly, each must invest what are inevitably scarce resources of time and staff in developing relationships with other organisations when the potential return on such investment is often unclear and intangible. Working in partnership can also mean having to share the credit for particular achievements or even letting another organisation take all the credit.

The search for collaborative partnerships requires organisational flexibilities in the construction of joint agendas (thereby surrendering a degree of power to define the focus of action), joint resourcing (surrendering a degree of resource control) and joint working (surrendering a degree of control over staff time, energy and organisational loyalty). At the same time organisations face other pressures to tighten control in the pursuit of their own strategic objectives, greater resource efficiency and greater organisational commitment from staff.

It appears (see Craig *et al*, 2002; Pettigrew et al, 1992; Pratt *et al*, 1998; Riddell and Tett, 2001) that partnership working is facilitated when:

- Partners are clear about why they are collaborating together
- Partners have agreed which areas of their work will be done together and which will still be done separately
- The unique contribution each partner brings to the relationship is recognised
- Staff have time to work together to develop a common sense of purpose
- Shared ownership of the project is developed and people trust each other
- The component organisations and individuals are committed to learning from each other and changing their own ideas as a result.

Working in partnership thus involves firstly, being clear about the purpose of the joint project and then having sufficient time to enable organisations to work together to develop common goals that they are committed to implementing (Purdue et al, 2000). Secondly, it involves developing and sustaining shared ownership by front line staff (paid or voluntary) but this needs to be coupled with robust and coherent financial and management arrangements that all partners understand (Russell, 2001; Scottish Executive, 2000a). Thirdly, it involves recognising and nurturing individuals who are skilled at identifying and developing useful networks, and have

good social and inter-personal skills and finding committed individuals who are seen by others as having sufficient legitimacy to assume the leadership role (Wilson and Pirrie, 2000). Finally, an organisational commitment to learning from all the partners and changing as a result of such learning needs to be developed (Tett, 2002).

Problems for partnership working

Official government literature about the merits of partnership tends to present an idealized model that assumes that achieving local action and consensus at the community level is relatively unproblematic. For example the Scottish Executive, (2000a) suggested that 'Services need to listen to their communities with a single ear. Having listened they need to change the services they provide and the way in which they are delivered in a way that is more responsive to their communities' needs'. In contrast, research into partnerships between local community groups and a variety of public and private sector organisations (e.g. Craig and Taylor, 2002; Hatcher and Leblond, 2001; Huxham and Vangen, 2000, a, b; Milewa *et al*, 2002; Tett *et al*, 2003) shows the conflictual character of coordinating different and unequal interest and identity groups. Different partners bring differential forms of power and some have greater control over the change process as a result. Resource asymmetry may be at the root of power struggles in local partnerships, indeed such asymmetry is explicit in relation to the 'lead' agencies which are often advocated by government (e.g. DoH, 1998). A 'lead' agency necessarily implies a following 'partner' agency. Moreover, some community agencies may be excluded from the partnership in the first place by the lead agency because they are very small or because they are seen as not really representative of the communities they serve (Stoker, 2000:100). In addition, the pace and complexity of partnership working and the amount of information that has to be assimilated, coupled with the absence of resources, can easily pull those who are engaged in the process away from the rest of the communities they represent (Taylor, 2003: 139).

One of the many consequences of the increasingly high profile for the voluntary and community sectors has been a concern about the autonomy of such organisations. A cynical view might see partnership simply as a means through which governments have sought to work 'with an iron hand in a velvet glove' by apparently devolving decisions down to communities whilst at the same time retaining power and control over the boundaries within which decisions can be made. Some research suggests that when the rules of the game are set from above and when communities themselves do not have the organisational capacity and resources for effective involvement then communities derive little benefit from partnerships (Craig and Taylor, 2002: 134). Working in partnerships with members of marginalised community groups highlights these issues of power as community representatives may become incorporated into structures that effectively silence their dissenting voices. Thus it is important to distinguish between involvement and empowerment and between strategic power and operational power. Some partners may have the power to set the agendas; some only to participate in the implementation of agendas set by others. As Huxham and Vangen (2000b: 1166) point out 'structures….determine such key factors as who has an influence on shaping a partnership agenda, who has power to act, and what resources are tapped'. In other words, processes of inclusion and exclusion characterize partnerships. In addition, just as some potential partners may be wholly or partially excluded, so others may be compulsorily included especially when there are financial incentives to public sector organisations to include local voluntary organisations as in the case of Social Inclusion Partnerships in Scotland (Tett *et al*, 2003). In

other cases such as the Education Action Zones operating in England, for example, teachers and parents (and in a sense pupils) were designated as 'partners' whether they desired it or not (see Power, 2001).

There are a number of circumstances when, rather than joining a partnership for regeneration, community groups may prioritise other issues that are oppositional and disruptive and become challenges to dominant interests and agendas. For example, non-violent direct action against the closing down of a local school prioritises a different view of what might be for the good of the community from that proposed by the local education authority, which would prefer to amalgamate the school and relocate it to another area (see Tett, 2002). These kinds of struggles provide a local arena for people to exercise their citizenship and learn in ways that they often find more engaging than broader national issues. As a process this can both strengthen excluded communities and, through collective action, promote the citizenship of individuals within those communities. As Ruth Lister points out:

> Such action can boost individual and collective self-confidence, as individuals and groups come to see themselves as political actors and effective citizens. This is especially true for women for whom involvement in community organisations can be more personally fruitful than engagement in formal politics that are often experienced as more alienating than empowering (Lister, 1997:33).

Another problematic area for partnership results from the differences between partners in terms of their influence. Community groups are more likely to have limited access to information compared with private and public sector representatives and so are unable to make appropriate interventions. This issue is exacerbated by the way in which partnerships for regeneration are implemented. Often additional resources are only available for a limited time and have to be spent quickly so there is little opportunity for careful consultation and consolidation. Such partnership initiatives rarely provide long-term sustainable funding and often fold with the resulting demoralization of the community that is left to cope with the fall-out (Balloch and Taylor, 2002). This also highlights the importance of giving sufficient recognition to the resources that are provided on a continuing basis within communities rather than simply concentrating on new resources that are provided for new initiatives. Community groups consistently provide the human resources of voluntary effort and enthusiasm that sustain informal patterns of community care and community solidarity but these are often ignored (Mayo, 1997: 11).

In assessing how far power is being shared in a partnership it is important to consider whether community groups are involved only in implementation, however important this may be, or whether they are also involved in agenda setting and policy development. There is also a need to assess how far community partners are being allowed to inform the process of decision making – the rules of the game – or indeed to participate in making decisions. Taylor (2003: 124) argues that a striking aspect of most partnerships is that, even where community groups are involved in programme planning and design, they have little to say in the criteria by which these programme are monitored and evaluated. Because what counts is what is done, this can exclude from consideration the less measurable work that communities consider to be important such as changes in individual self-esteem or perceptions of the value of the community.

There is also an issue about the ways in which area-based initiatives and 'downward democratisation' (Giddens, 1998: 78) in themselves exacerbate fragmentation and inequality of provision across communities as some areas become more successful at gaining funds that are bid for on a competitive basis. Moreover, disadvantaged communities are further pathologised where remedies concerned with social exclusion are directed at the community and family rather than the socio-economic structures. As Nancy Fraser points out:

> Although the approach aims to redress economic injustice, it leaves intact the deep structures that generate class disadvantage. Thus, it must make surface reallocations again and again. The result is to mark the most disadvantaged class as inherently deficient and insatiable, as always needing more and more (Fraser, 1997: 25)

The demands of partnership, the lack of time and resources for community participants and the need to show results quickly make it extremely difficult to spread commitment throughout communities (Purdue et al, 2002). This means that the work of community representation is concentrated on too few community groups who may not have either the time or commitment to consult other community members properly. Community leaders may also suffer 'burnout' due to 'the energy and commitment that such people put into their roles' (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b: 1161). In many regeneration partnerships, the fact that 'the community' is predetermined by funders from above also intensifies the difficulties of representing the disparate interests that exist in any community (geographical or interest) (Russell, 2001). This is a particular problem for black and minority ethnic communities, which are often treated as if their interests are homogenous and are rarely resourced in a way that can give voice to their many different members (Craig et al, 2002). Moreover, professionals working with the most marginalised populations such as community workers have themselves been sidelined, in a number of documented cases, throughout the regeneration process from the initial planning, identification of needs and programme bidding, to the allocation and control of resources and service delivery (Balloch and Taylor, 2001).

Possibilities for social inclusion

Given these difficulties with involving community groups as equal partners how might communities and the community workers who liase with them be more effectively empowered? Purdue and colleagues (2000) suggest that effective strategic partnerships should first of all involve local community groups from the outset rather than after a partnership has been established. They should have an agreed and negotiated agenda with clear terms of reference; ensure that all partners are committed to community empowerment; develop appropriate structures and procedures for community participation that are acceptable to all partners; and address issues of conflict and power (Craig and Taylor, 2002: 139). Partnerships for community regeneration are potentially creative but they can founder unless they are based on shared interests, with agreed mechanisms for negotiating differences and building trust (Wagner and Spence, 2003).

One key is that they should be set in the context of longer-term strategies for community development that offer strategic possibilities for renewal. This involves taking the concerns and needs of local community organisations seriously by enabling them to respond as far as possible

on their own terms and at a manageable pace, rather than sucking them into the slipstream of policy programmes (Taylor, 2003). If communities are to be fully involved in decision making as equal partners then maximum access to as much information as possible is needed, particularly research and specialist knowledge that will enable them to justify alternative views. In addition, structures need to be in place to enable community groups and the people they represent to influence decision-making through developing their own ideas and agendas, pro-actively (Tett et al, 2003). They also need to have access to independent specialist advice that would enable them to develop their own policy analysis. Having control over resources of money, time and staff is also a powerful tool in establishing a more equal place at the partnership table. If these conditions were met then communities would be better placed to:

> Play an active role in setting the agenda and pressing for the wider policy changes required. [This kind of partnership for renewal would then be able to meet] social needs as defined from the bottom up, rather than responding to the requirements of market-led agendas determined from the top down (Mayo, 1997: 24).

Community workers have an important role to play in assisting community groups to understand, operate within, and, where necessary, challenge their political environment. This involves identifying and stressing areas of commonality and the creative development of links and alliances between groups that might otherwise see their organisations as in competition. It also involves recognising the rights of those who experience problems to define appropriate solutions and argue for the resources necessary their implementation (Wagner and Spence, 2003).

Partnership working has generally developed within the existing structures, processes and frameworks of power with public sector cultures in the UK. These cultures are so deeply engrained that power holders are unaware of the ways in which their use of language and procedures can be impenetrable, particularly to community groups (Haywood and Wright, 2000). Taylor (2003: 125) argues from her research into partnerships for regeneration that stereotypes are engrained within public sector cultures and 'assume that communities will not understand the complexity of the decisions that have to be made. [It is also assumed] that they will not be willing to make the sacrifices that are dictated by limited budgets and the need for fairness and that they will be ruled by self-interest'. Huxham and Vangen (2000b: 1167) have also pointed out that 'processes can empower potential members' access to the debate concerning a partnership's agenda, or strip power from them'. In order to combat these exclusionary tendencies, many community workers have established educational programmes designed to enable community groups to understand and engage with the unwritten codes behind the operation of collaborative partnerships (see Tett, 2002). This includes dealing with conflict since this can be a sign that partnerships are working, as the least powerful partners are able to gain the confidence to disagree rather than going along with the majority view. Indeed, White (1996: 155) suggests 'the absence of conflict in many supposedly 'participatory' programmes is something that should raise our suspicions. Change hurts'.

Funding led initiatives can drive wedges between communities if poorly designed and managed. Their administration saps energies and excludes the communities they are designed to benefit (Wagner and Spence, 2003). The rules and regulations surrounding partnerships sometimes seem expressly designed to replace trust rather than foster it. The dominance of this audit culture

has two major outcomes that fly in the face of community empowerment. First the demands of monitoring divert community energies or professionalise the way they operate, thereby putting at risk their distinctive contribution. A second outcome is that the demands of monitoring and accountability place power in the hands of those who can interpret the rules. The evidence (Milewa et al, 2002; Power, 2001; Stoker, 2000) suggests that, even where partnerships are constituted in ways that give communities control, public authorities or the professional bodies who take on the role of ensuring accountability for the money have the real power. Even where more emphasis is being given to asking communities themselves about their needs and attitudes, monitoring and evaluation processes appear to revert to this centralising command economy. Taylor (2003: 130) argues that until residents are given power not only over the design, analysis and interpretation of the definition of needs and also over the definition of success, a critical aspect of control will remain out of their hands. It is not only the content of accountability and monitoring processes that privileges existing power holders: it is the dimensions and directions of accountability. Edwards and Hulme (1999: 219) argue that current priorities neither serve communities nor provide a strategic approach. 'Strategic accountability is always weaker than functional accountability and downward accountability is nearly always weaker than upwards accountability'.

Communities want evidence of tangible changes as much as their public and private partners do. But an emphasis on hard, measurable outputs leads to a technical bias, which ignores the institutional and socio-cultural context and overshadows the social and political dimensions of the change process. An approach that transforms social problems into technical problems neutralises both their value base and debate about what caused the problems in the first place. The danger is that 'what began as a political issues is translated into a technical problem which the development exercise can accommodate with barely a falter in its stride' (White, 1996: 7). However, Russell (2001) reports on a range of initiatives that have attempted to overcome these problems of providing hard outputs. For example, partnerships have set benchmarks for community participation; had an explicit statement of the shared vision and purpose of the partnership, based on jointly held values; regarded each partner as having an equivalent status, irrespective of some having more resources than others have. One organisation suggested that the 'resources that each brings may be different and not always readily quantifiable such as the information, experience and expertise that voluntary groups bring about adult and community learning needs' (Russell, 2001: 22). Russell further argues that 'equivalent status means avoiding having 'core' and 'peripheral' groups and ensuring fairness in the conduct of the partnership by creating opportunities for each partner to contribute as much as they wish and in a manner that is appropriate' (ibid.).

The complexity of working in partnership means that community organisations and the community workers that support them need continuing commitment from managers and funders as well as persistence and patience in enabling them to build up their work over time (Craig and Taylor, 2002; Mayo, 1997; Tett et al, 2003). In practice, however, both these criteria are difficult to fulfil. This suggests that it is better to go for small achievable gains as part of an overall longer-term strategy rather than big objectives that are difficult to reach (see Bryson, 1988). However, many community workers found that they were set major tasks to achieve in and with community groups and links were not made between the macro and micro levels of activity. At the micro level they were able to negotiate achievable gains in partnership with other community

organisations such as enabling parent-led organisations to gain a more equal voice in schools, or negotiating more responsive health services locally. However, these small gains were not necessarily seen as linking up with the macro aims of achieving 'social inclusion' or 'community capacity building' set by funders such as the Scottish Executive (2000b).

Tett et al (2003) reported that their research into a range of partnerships in Scotland with community groups and a range of public sector bodies found that community workers saw themselves as operating successfully to empower groups at the local, micro level. Here they felt that they had a key role in developing a shared vision about the positive changes that were necessary for the community groups they were working with and forming partnerships in order to make it a reality. Of most importance they suggested was taking the concerns and needs of community organisations seriously by enabling them to respond as far as possible on their own terms and at a manageable pace and developing the political skills to assess appropriate risks at the community level. These community workers' experience of having their professional judgements valued at the local level by both the community and other professionals was certainly somewhat unusual in the wider regional and national contexts (see Dyson and Robson, 1999; Glendinning *et al*, 2002; Hudson *et al*, 1999; Riddell and Tett, 2001). Generally professionals are expected to respond to problems defined and understood elsewhere and this is part of the irony of a national policy that is committed to partnerships for other people but not for the policy makers themselves.

Conclusion

There are many barriers to collaborative partnerships and conflict and tension are inevitably part of the process so partnerships may be seen as a threat rather than a benefit. However, if partnership is the preferred solution, then it is important that both the public and private sector partners, community groups and those that work with them, are clear about what they wish to achieve through their joint efforts. Partnerships often fail because partners are unclear about the financial resources each is bringing so these resources need to be spelt out so all understand what they are financially able to contribute to it (Wagner and Spence, 203). Resources also include other potential partnership assets. Some of these will be clear, for example staff, facilities or services such as information technology. Others are less clear, such as knowledge, experience, power and legitimacy. Community groups, for example, are likely to have few tangible resources, but their involvement can offer a local legitimacy that would otherwise be lacking (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a,b).

Public and private sector partners also need to be clear about how they are constructing partnership and collaboration especially in relation to local communities that are disadvantaged. However, being clear about purpose in itself is not enough, since cultural differences and resource in-balances can create boundaries for community organisations and statutory restrictions may undermine efforts to engage in partnership working. As Craig and Taylor point out:

> There are compelling reasons to enhance the effective involvement of voluntary and community organisations, not least to make strategic social, economic and environmental programmes more sensitive to local needs and to address one aspect of the 'democratic deficit' (2002: 143).

However, the benefits of partnership for community groups will be greatest when they can bring their own distinctive and autonomous strengths to the table. Partnerships therefore need time and resources in order to build a meta-strategy that is designed to allow all relevant interests to explore possible ways forward. Community groups also need to be able to advance their own agendas whilst, at the same time, building up the capacity (trust, understanding, synergy) to engage in effective and sustained collaborative working (Pratt *et al*, 1998). The time, effort and resources that must be put into any collaborative partnership if it is to be effective mean that change can not be accomplished quickly. Change also requires resources, especially of staff time and the value and purpose of committing these scarce resources must be clear if the partnership is to achieve its aims. However, these conditions are rarely met especially as politicians seek to introduce new initiatives quickly and want to have immediate results (Taylor, 2003).

Given the particular emphasis in UK government policies on the value of partnerships, it is important to remember that collaboration is only one of many solutions to the problem of delivering effective services and there are a number of circumstances when it is best avoided. Such situations include when resources of time, energy and money are extremely limited, or when organisations are unstable or when organisations have very similar functions or when continuing support is unavailable (see Hudson et al, 1999; Huxham, 1996; Purdue et al, 2000; Tett et al, 2001).

Different partners bring differential forms of power and some have greater control over the change process as a result. Working in partnerships with members of marginalised communities highlights these issues of power as community groups may become incorporated into structures that effectively silence their dissenting voices. Partnerships are characterised by processes of inclusion and exclusion, dominance and subordination and generally the partner that controls the funding is dominant. If the funding comes from central government then the work will be outcomes driven and the funding will be attached to a policy definition of the issues at hand (see Power, 2001). Claims have been made that collaborative partnerships could lead to the extension of local participatory democracy. However, evidence from research (Balloch and Taylor, 2001; Glendinning *et al*, 2002; Mayo, 1997; Tett et al, 2003) shows that the rhetoric of collaboration can also mask a new configuration in which community voices are marginalised. Whatever the rhetoric of partnerships the voices of excluded communities can easily be silenced by '*exclusionary professionalist agendas, often sustained by deficit ideologies*' (Hatcher and Leblond, 2001: 55).

Attention should be given to developing inclusive and empowering structures and processes as these arise out of the practical reality of the tasks that are tackled and assessing how likely they are to enable the inclusion of community voices. All partners have to be clear about their positions in relation to marginalised communities otherwise, instead of helping to reinvigorate and strengthen local communities; they may end up promoting consumerist market relations. New ways of thinking about representation are required, with priority given to including those with the least power who are nevertheless the most expert in identifying the needs of their own communities, if local action is going to reduce social exclusion.

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