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Abstract

In high-poverty neighbourhoods, participation and voice offer central capabilities and functionings in the development of collective agency and the ability to act in concert to address inequalities. The success of community participation is contingent on critical meso-level *conversion factors* or resources: the transformative spaces, relationships and approaches which support the flourishing of human capabilities and lead to meaningful locally led participation and change. Meso-level conversion factors at neighbourhood level include a wide range of organisations such as Third sector anchor and issue-based organisations, schools, community and health centres, and the staff and programmes they support. Transformative meso-level organisations need to consider not only effective local participation and voice, but also the distribution of power afforded to local participants through the spaces in which they are invited to participate, and the level of influence given to their priorities for change.

 Civic participation in decision-making has become a key UK policy focus in addressing inequalities in high poverty neighbourhoods. Policies such as the Localism Act 2011 and Levelling Up (2022), Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and Prosperity for All (2017) in Wales, cite the need for public services to be accountable by articulating local priorities and supporting community engagement and ownership. Despite similar socio-economic profiles, some neighbourhoods have been able to benefit from such public sector policies by building collective agency and taking action for change, while others struggle to gain traction for participation. The Covid-19 pandemic has further

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exacerbated inequalities and highlighted the value of community-based organisations that can adapt and respond to local need.

A range of initiatives such as Community Planning, Big Local, New Deal for Communities, Community Empowerment Networks, Community Rights and Right to Buy and Community Organisers programme, have aimed to build social cohesion through participative decision-making and local ownership. These have produced a considerable academic and grey literature on what works to support effective participation. This paper suggests that for collective agency to be transformational, it needs to be defined according to both redistribution and recognition, so: i) collective agency must be linked to the multidimensional wellbeing goals identified by those with lived experience; and ii) collective agency must reflect the lived experiences of poverty. This aligns with an understanding of social cohesion as a dynamic political, economic and social process linked to socio-economic conditions, rather than simply as a social process, but also supports high poverty neighbourhoods to have a voice in the policy and practice conversations concerning them.

Building on a previous participatory research process that mapped Participation and Voice functionings as a journey from individual to collective agency, this paper seeks to understand the critical meso-level conversion factors that underpin each stage. The journey spans seven Participation and Voice functionings from the Measurement Framework for Equality and Human Rights, which were tested empirically and mapped across the key steps of a multi-site asset-based community development programme,

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from identifying interests and priorities, building relationships and mobilising activity, to building wider community association and developing a local vision for change.

By reviewing current academic and grey literature on the critical meso-level spaces, relationships, and organisational characteristics conducive to collective capability development, the paper aims to draw together the key features of transformative meso-level conversion factors aligned with capabilities development of participation and voice, and the critical drivers that support the journey from individual to collective agency.

Keywords: participation and voice, capabilities, collective agency

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Introduction

In this paper, I aim to demonstrate how the capabilities approach can offer a useful and detailed analysis of the resources that are required to support community participation at a local level across a pathway of participation. This is based on a research study conducted in Scotland between 2015 and 2019, and updated with more recent literature. My main focus will be to present the conversion factors at structural, social and personal levels, that relate to institutional practices. The goal is therefore to understand which aspects of institutional policy and practice support and hinder participation – and there, which have potential to be transformative.

First, I'd like to explore briefly why participation is important, and what the capabilities approach can offer that's a unique contribution to understanding how to support participation. Nancy Fraser describes the participation parity principle as fundamental to justice. Fraser says, 'Justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participation on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction' (Fraser, 2009: 16). Fraser highlights two power relations in the achievement of economic and cultural justice as *redistribution* and *recognition*. To these, she has added a third relation – that of *representation*. This concerns the political dimension, and the imperative to support the development of practices to support justice. I've found these concepts helpful when thinking through the barriers and conversion factors to achieving participation functionings in community settings. The idea that both of these factors

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should be present but are not reducible to the other helps to analyse the complex causal factors that influence how community members can or cannot participate in social life.

Participation has certainly been considered an important aspect of policy in the UK in recent years. At times, the concept of participation seems ubiquitous to the point of losing meaning altogether and has been regularly at risk of what Cooke and Kothari (2001) termed a 'tyranny' that ushered in 'the illegitimate exercise of power' (page ref). In Scotland, over the past two decades, there has been a groundswell in community participation and engagement policy. Lightbody and Escobar's scoping review on Community engagement and Equalities (2021) cites examples from across health, environment, urban regeneration, gender, education, youth involvement, housing rights and policing.

From the Government's review and reform of public services and its commitment to community participation in shaping local services made by the Christie Commission in 2011, to the Community Empowerment Act in 2015, and a set of principles for Community Empowerment to govern public sector institutions laid out by the Auditor General in 2019, the Scottish Government says it's serious about community participation – especially for high poverty communities. But how is this working on the ground, and in what ways does this policy agenda transform into participatory parity at a neighbourhood level? Furthermore, how do these efforts map against Fraser's dimensions of redistribution, recognition and representation? I will argue that the Capabilities Approach can generate a locally-led participation framework that can offer a

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detailed analysis of how participation practices are operating at a hyper-local, neighbourhood level.

So why is the Capabilities Approach a useful one to take in this context. This audience will be familiar with these reasons, I'm sure, but I hope you won't mind me making the case for the CA anyway. And I'd value your help with this too, because there may be important considerations that I have missed. To begin, the starting point for the CA is not participation itself, but the freedom to live a life of your choosing – to do and to be what you have reason to value. This is important, because it leads to my second point, which is that if we are to enable parity of participation, the parity should begin before the decision has been made to prioritise participation as a goal. In their paper on Capabilitarian Participatory Paradigm (2022), Martinez-Vargas, Walker, Cin and Boni describe the involvement of participants in research at methods, methodological and cosmological levels:

> When we talk about the cosmological dimension, we refer to a highly critical positionality within the participatory paradigm that at times can connect with claims of indigenous empirical research and operationalisations (Chilisa 2012). Here we draw from the assumption that any knowledge generation process is political (direct, indirect, hidden), and therefore immersed in power structures and global epistemic imbalances, including our academic knowledge and our privileged positionality as researchers (Walker and Martinez-Vargas 2020).
>
> (Martinez-Vargas et al, 2022:19)

Using this methods/methodological/cosmological framework as a heuristic to gain an understanding of the intentions of participation policy makers in Scotland, it perhaps

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won't be a surprise that we are far from the critical position of the cosmological level. But perhaps a Capabilities Approach can bring this into the conversation as an expectation and a guide for potentially transformative institutional approaches.

Moving on to a couple more practical points about Capabilities, the articulation of functionings offers a tangible framework of indicators which are meaningful to the communities that create them. These can be measured to assess how effective policy is, and – as a final point – evaluated using *conversion factors,* to understand the resources required by individual or collective groups to achieve them.

Personal conversion factors are internal to the person, Social and Environmental conversion factors are defined respectively by Robeyns (2017) as 'factors stemming from the society in which one lives, such as public policies, social norms, practices that unfairly discriminate, societal hierarchies or power relations related to class, gender, race, or caste' (46) and factors that 'emerge from the physical or built environment' (46). I've also included structural conversion factors, because it's clear from this research that many of the barriers to participation concern income, benefits, housing costs and other factors associated with poverty. So, to summarise, the CA offers both philosophical rigour and practical tools to put participation into practice.

Methodology

Turning now to the methodology, I'll give a brief overview of the scope and methods of this study. This was a wider study, which evaluated an intervention funded by the Health

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Board in Scotland, using Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) to build community wellbeing in high poverty communities. I'm not going to talk today about ABCD, but I have published a paper in the Community Development Journal on conducting a theory-based evaluation of the programme, in case that's of any interest. Beyond the evaluation, the study also used the CA to explore how the social justice potential of the ABCD programme might be extended, so it's this aspect that I'll share in my findings today. The study was a qualitative comparative case study of two of the nine neighbourhoods in which the intervention was being implemented. The choice of neighbourhoods was guided by the Evaluation Steering Group, who were keen to compare two neighbourhoods in different Local Authority municipal areas that were of a similar size and socio-economic profile. The fieldwork comprised twenty-four in-depth interviews, one focus group and a researcher fieldwork diary. The interviewees were mirrored across the two sites. Half were local residents involved in a range of community-based activity through the ABCD programme, the other half were strategic and operational staff from Local Authority (or municipalities) and Health Board, and staff from Third Sector organisations. The focus group was with local residents. During the interview, participants were invited to do a mini task. They chose their 'top 5' capabilities in relation to the programme (from an adaptation of Nussbaum's set to make them easier to understand), and these were discussed in turn during the interview, to explore what the functionings of this capability freedom would be, and the extent to which the programme was able to enable participants to achieve these. The interview also discussed the steps of ABCD based on the literature, to explore how these were working

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in practice. The data was analysed using thematic analysis and the most popular 'top 5' were chosen as representing the group's most important freedoms., and the capabilities were mapped onto the logic model and change mechanisms, to explore where in the ABCD cycle they would be likely to take place. The programme evaluation data that was already being collected had shown that the programme was not achieving the desired aim from the ABCD literature – that of reaching a 'tipping point' where community activity would shift towards a wider community association and generate momentum for residents to plan a long-term vision for change in their communities.

Moving to Findings now, I want to begin by talking about the top 5 capabilities, and then to talk in more detail about Participation and Voice. The top 5 capabilities were

Identity, expression and self-respect, Valued activity, Participation and Voice, Individual, family and social relationships and Health. Today, I'll be focusing on Participation and Voice because I don't have time to go into all of them, but it was also interesting that even though Participation was ranked third, it generated more data than all the other domains put together. When the functionings were mapped onto the ABCD Logic Model, four of them clustered in specific stages of the ABCD intervention, but Participation spanned every step, starting before the ABCD change mechanisms and ending beyond the scope of the ABCD programme. This Participation pathway seemed to shed some light on why the programme was not reaching a tipping point, even in the more successful neighbourhood. What was clear from the Participation pathway was that it was cumulative and incremental. While participants didn't necessarily have to achieve every functioning, it

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was unlikely that they would jump to achieving the latter functionings such as 'participate in non-government organisation' or 'participate in the formulation of government policy' without having built the foundations by participating in decision making in their own lives and communities. This may seem obvious to anyone with experience of community work, but the assumption of many community participation policies at a local level, is that residents will be ready to jump into responsibilities without having had any support or the chance to build in skills and confidence. If these pathways are not there, then the latter forms of participation, which are linked to activist activities, are unlikely to appear in communities.

What became clear in the course of the study was that the context – i.e., the history of activism, provision of community venues, particularly those that were community-owned and activist experience - made a big difference in how Participation functionings operated, and consequently in how the ABCD intervention landed in each neighbourhood. A more responsive understanding of these contextual factors might have allowed the programme to tailor the intervention so that it could gain more traction. As it was, the ABCD programme had some impact in one neighbourhood, and very little in the other, despite their similar profiles on the face of it.

Before I say any more about the Participation functionings and pathway, I'd like to move on to talk about conversion factors. I will attempt to summarise the barriers and enablers to participation at Personal, Social and Structural levels, and for each I will summarise some of the critical conversion factors. I should say that there was a huge amount of data

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on these, but I have tried to choose brief quotations that illuminate the particular issues faced by both and each neighbourhood.

On Personal barriers, there was a huge issue in both neighbourhoods regarding isolation. There was a group of people who were considered 'hard to reach' – a term which x has called 'easy to ignore'. These were people who often had very few points of contact into the community, who didn't leave their houses and who needed a lot of support and encouragement to engage in any way. I'll read this quote from Participant 4, who was a local Welfare Advisor:

If you find folk that are socially isolated, there appears to be a magic point in which you just cannot get them back. A suggestion that it's about three years, you know, somebody's not had any friends, not any family, talking to them or anything ... Just getting people out of the door was difficult because I was working there, trying to make sure folk get all their benefits. There's just no sign of people coming out of their houses.

(Welfare Advisor, Respondent 4)

The programme was supposed to be about exactly this group – people who were not already engaged in some form of local activity. But what was found across the programme was that there were not the resources available to support this group sufficiently that they could participate. Their most pressing concern was in in coping day-to-day with poverty. One of the neighbourhoods had a focused support group in the school for parents at risk of domestic violence, which was run by. a local charity. This small group of women met every week and were offered activities and counselling to build confidence. This is the type of activity that was considered to be required to support this group of isolated

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people, but provision was patchy and offered by third sector – rather than State – organisations, whose own resources were precarious and based on a year-to-year cycle.

This quote from a local Headteacher demonstrates the distance this group were perceived to have from the freedoms of Participation.

You are starting with people who have never been able to have a voice for themselves and who have never thought they had a voice. As much as we do want them to get to the stage they can do it on their own, it's everything that goes in before that that they need support to get to that stage and they need a lot of support in different ways.

(Respondent 22)

Although isolation is articulated here as a personal barrier, it's clearly strongly linked with the structural barrier of poverty. So, in terms of Personal conversion factors in the dimension of *redistribution*, at a local level, welfare advice services and intensive support are helpful – and these services are increasingly precarious with recent local authority funding cuts – but also key are structural policies such as increasing Benefit levels and capping private rental costs. And this relates back to the issue of being 'easy to ignore' (Lightbody, 2017), raised by *recognition*. If we think of Fraser's principle, here is a group that is routinely sidelined, made excuses for about being 'hard to reach' and who rarely participate in any form of civic life. Proper recognition of the trauma and barriers, and the need for additional, targeted resources at both local and national levels, is critical.

Moving on to explore the social/environmental barriers and enablers to Participation, a key factor in both case study neighbourhoods was the presence or absence of a

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community venue. While neighbourhood one had limited access to venues run by faith groups and the school, these did not 'belong' to the community, and the opening hours were often not convenient, and there sometimes costs attached to using them. This was a prohibitive factor in managing to generate sustained local activity. Groups would take place once or twice, but couldn't seem to generate the momentum to keep seeking out suitable spaces for continuation. By contrast, Neighbourhood 2 already had a community centre that had been built at the same time that the housing scheme was built in the 1970s. For forty years, local residents had been running activities there. Although the centre was not actually owned by the community, it was managed by residents who decided which activities would be provided, and who often staffed a wide range of activities on a voluntary basis. While this did put pressure on residents, they were able to retain control of local activity and also offer a pathway of participation opportunities, from making decisions on your own life, getting together with others, participating in locally-led activity and decision-making. So we can see from these quotes on *redistribution*, the Centre was a 'food bank place', demonstrating the structural issue of food poverty, but it was able to offset some of the damage of poverty by having strong relationships between local activists and municipal Councillors – elected local representatives for the wider area. In fact, the activists had a monthly 'walkabout' where they would meet Councillors and walk around the neighbourhood, pointing out current problems and seeking resolution. A long history of activism meant that this group was not afraid to contest cuts and battle for resources – in fact, they considered this a primary role. So on the slide on *recognition*, we can see that despite a similar socio-economic

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profile to Neighbourhood 1, The Centre offered a trusted space where residents could find 'their own kind of people' (Participant 3) and the Community Builder (ABCD worker), Participant 1 from Neighbourhood 2 said, 'I didn't feel as if I was working in a deprived community.'

The activist relationships I've described from Neighbourhood 2 appeared to be absent from Neighbourhood 1, which had no history of activism, a lack of venues from which to build skills and momentum, and few points of contact with trusted municipal staff. Furthermore, invitations for local representation on new 'community participation structures' such as Community Planning Partnerships, Health and Social care Partnerships and Locality Groups were considered tokenistic and as promoting consensual relationships only, rather than the opportunity for protest and dissent. We can see this from Participant 19's comment, that he was invited along to represent the community at a range of different fora – The Tenant's and Residents, the Area Neighbourhood Forum and the Community Councils - but his perception was that they all had a pre-assigned agenda and were not inviting community representation on an equal footing to Local Authority (municipal) staff.

So, in summary, the social/environmental conversion factors that were allowed Neighbourhood 2 to offset some of the effects of poverty had both redistribution and recognition dimensions – offering sustained programme of affordable activities and materials goods to those who needed them, but also familiar and trusted spaces and

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people running them, who had long-standing relationships with those in positions of local power.

Finally, I'll move on to discuss structural barriers and conversion factors. So, I've already mentioned the issue of poverty, and here we see it as a barrier to participation in terms of redistribution – '(Poverty) impacts whether or not they want to come to the community centre or whether they want to be involved in what's happening, or whether they'll bring their kids to that fun day' – and still that 'easy to ignore' group who are too busy trying to cope with every day to be able to participate in social activities. But I also want to emphasise a *recognitional* issue here, that was repeatedly shared with me – especially in relation to Neighbourhood 1. Here is the Headteacher from Neighbourhood 1, telling me about the attitude of the Police with regards to the poorest housing blocks in Neighbourhood 1:

If you are here late at night … there is shouting, barneys, there's dogs barking. I couldn't understand why people weren't phoning the police because every night - I mean the children are in here and they can't learn because they are not getting to sleep because of the noise going on. I would say, you know, why are you not phoning the police? But the police are not going to do anything, so that's been a big thing for us to try and promote with the parents to say if you phone the police it's a logged call – 101 will be a logged call so therefore, you know, so action has to be taken and it's trying to get them to understand that.

(Local Authority staff member, Participant 22)

So here we can see further evidence of disregard for those who are 'easy to ignore' on account of antisocial behaviour. And what is helpful here is to see how a mitigating factor is ensuring that residents know how to log a call in the system, so that a response can't be ignored. So, I suggest that this is a starting point as a conversion factor, but what is

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really required is evidence on how the freedoms and functionings of specific communities being thwarted on the basis of class and gender and race, and to challenge this using Equalities legislation. This is a long-term goal, and one that needs further, in-depth research, working with those affected to create and review capabilities frameworks and to draw out the barriers to their capabilities goals.

In summary, some of the transformative practices of local institutions really did make a big difference to people's experiences of poverty. These involved redistribution through provision of activity, consistency, pathways to build skills and confidence, and also recognition through the visibility of related local activists who were able to challenge the existing institutional power relationships.

Thank you for listening.

Discussion

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