



## Strengthening participation: learning from participants

Current Government policies calling for people to become more involved in their local communities and beyond - the 'Big Society' - draw on a powerful history of participation throughout the UK and more widely. There has been much research in the past examining what encourages and prevents people's participation, but rarely from the perspective of the individual.

The [Pathways through Participation](#) project is uniquely placed to shed light on why and how people participate, providing insights and evidence from individuals' own experience of participation. It is a major research project led by [NCVO](#) with [IVR](#) and [Involve](#), which runs for over two years, to explore how and why people get involved, and stay involved, in a wide range of different activities in their communities and beyond. We have interviewed over 100 people in three contrasting areas of England to find out about their participation over the course of their lives: from giving to charity and consuming 'ethically' to volunteering, taking part in local consultations and setting up grassroots-led activities and groups that meet specific needs and interests.

Understanding the motivations, triggers, barriers and impacts of participation is critical to designing appropriate policies and mechanisms to encourage and sustain citizen involvement. This paper sets out some of the emerging issues from the project to date, to contribute to current national and local policy debates, and raises a number of questions that will be further explored in the next stages of the project.

## Participation has powerful results. It...

### Changes people and places

- At an individual level, participation influences and changes people through learning new skills, having enriching experiences, meeting people and gaining a sense of agency.
- Participation also affects communities: local projects can revitalise neighbourhoods, bring people together, improve wellbeing and improve or protect services.
- *How do these individual and local level impacts contribute to wider positive social change?*

### Can develop into and out of a strong attachment to place

- Many people share a sense of pride in their area and often participate to develop and improve their local neighbourhood: people value feeling they belong to an area and have a stake in it.
- Participation is fostered by the availability of places to meet, collaborate and share thinking, and is affected by the accessibility, ownership and local perceptions of such spaces.
- *Does 'nimbysism' need to be re-thought as a positive and personal attachment to place rather than as a self-centred and negative resistance to change?*

### May lead to engagement in other activities...

- People often concentrate their participation around particular activity types such as sport, issues or themes such as mental health or the environment, or within organisations and institutions such as universities.
- Cross-over between different activities can occur but is not systematic. It can be driven by either a personal interest in an issue or cause and/or by social networks and relationships. These can help to bridge different activities by informing members of the existence of other groups and encouraging new joiners.
- *Can people be encouraged to move between different types of participation, e.g. from volunteering to civic consultation? If so, how?*

### Participation is not without its challenges. It...

#### Isn't a level playing field

- Not everyone has access to the same opportunities to participate: some people and communities are faced with more barriers than others, such as lack of time, money and transport, or freedom from other responsibilities such as caring and work.
- The way people participate is also influenced by their own personal skills and confidence. Not everybody will have had the same opportunities to develop the aptitudes for certain types of participation.
- *What needs to be done to improve equality of opportunity to participate?*

#### Is unpredictable and changes over time

- Unexpected life events such as the death of a friend or family member, a period of ill-health or the loss of paid work, can all act as barriers (or sometimes as triggers) for participation.
- Life stages are also important. For example, retirement can give people more time and opportunities to explore their passions and interests through participation; or can reduce the resources and ability to participate. Similarly, having children can open up new channels for involvement; or reduce time for activities beyond the immediate family.
- The intensity of people's involvement can fluctuate over their lifetime, as people's priorities, resources and networks ebb and flow.
- *Is there any such thing as a non-participant or does everyone participate at one time or another, but in very different ways and through different activities?*

#### Isn't always positive

- Participation can become burdensome or stressful - people can feel overwhelmed with too much responsibility and demands for commitment.
- The time involved in participating can impact negatively on participants' time and energy for other important relationships, for example, with their children and partner.
- Those more likely to say 'yes' sometimes feel pressured to do more, and people occasionally feel that once they are involved in an activity, they cannot stop.

- Some groups can feel cliquy, with certain roles and responsibilities being the preserve of a few people. At times vested interests can lead to conflict.
- *Is it possible to fully tackle the negative elements of participation or do we need to acknowledge them as inevitable and unavoidable consequences of the process and aim to mitigate them as much as possible?*

## **Participation develops under certain conditions. It...**

### **Is shaped by social relationships and networks**

- Many people get involved because they are asked to participate by a family member, friend, colleague or someone in an existing voluntary or community group.
- The quality of social relationships is critical in sustaining and widening participation: people often stay involved because they like and respect the people they participate with.
- Participants also frequently stay involved through a sense of loyalty and commitment to the group, which can evolve into a sense of obligation or duty beyond personal interest.
- *Can approaches to encouraging participation that value the social dimension of people's involvement help increase the quantity and quality of participation?*

### **Can be triggered by discontent and anger**

- Feelings of injustice often provide the spark for someone to decide to engage or take action, for example, the threatened closure of a local school, community centre or hospital.
- Participation can also be linked to an individual's worldview, and a more global sense of injustice or unfairness, for example, around buying fair-trade products or supporting international environmental movements.
- *Is there a conflict between a state-driven interest in encouraging involvement and protest forms of participation at the grassroots level, and can one lead to the other?*

### **Is influenced by wider circumstances**

- Different areas have different opportunities for people to participate. The physical, geographical, demographic and historical make up of an area shapes the type of participatory opportunities that exist.
- Social institutions such as established voluntary and community groups, schools and places of worship often play an important role in creating and fostering participation.
- Individuals' upbringing and their parents' values and worldview influence participation but do not prescribe it.
- *Do organisations and initiatives that aim to encourage participation spend enough time and effort understanding the personal and external factors behind people's patterns of participation?*

**And above all. . .**

**Participation needs to have value and be *meaningful* to those who take part**

- Participation is personal – people's involvement is intimately linked to who they are and what matters to them.
  - People want to see results: they need to be sure that their actions carry significance and have the potential to make a difference.
  - People continue participating in an activity because they enjoy it.
  - Being recognised and appreciated by others for their time and effort is another important factor in their decision to continue their involvement.
  - Past experiences of participation matter. Good experiences can encourage people to get involved more intensively or in additional activities, while negative experiences can put people off.
- *How can we develop a people-focused approach to encouraging and sustaining participation?*

**These factors are at the very heart of why people get involved and stay involved.**

**What next**

After the detailed analysis of the research data has been completed and the findings produced, a number of workshops will be organised in each of the case study areas of the project (Enfield, Leeds and Suffolk).

These workshops, which will take place in February 2011, will provide an opportunity for local stakeholders to look at the implications of the research findings for their own work and more widely, and identify specific actions that they may want to take forward as a result of the research.

The results of the workshops will feed into the final project report and help formulate policy and practice recommendations. This report is due to be completed by May 2011.

**How to stay in touch**

For more information on the Pathways through Participation project or to subscribe to our newsletter visit the website:

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