Achieving resident participation in community and urban renewal in Australia

Over the past ten years, State and Territory housing authorities have stressed the importance of resident participation in community and urban renewal. However, their renewal efforts have lacked a sound evidence base. Why is community participation seen as crucial? What are the most effective ways of promoting participation, and what are the practical barriers to residents getting involved? **Martin Wood** *of the* **AHURI UNSW-UWS Research Centre** *explored these and other questions in a study of six renewal projects in Australia and his findings are reported here. The results underscored the extent of the challenges for those wanting to achieve genuine community participation in renewal programmes.*

KEY POINTS

- The key factors in promoting participation in renewal were community development approaches that start with local people, identify local issues and give residents the confidence and skills to influence their circumstances.

- The basic participation structures used in the three States studied were forums created to represent the views of the wider community. However, few people took an active part in these meetings.

- Without exception, resident involvement in the physical elements of urban renewal was restricted to consultation exercises. In contrast, the social and community elements of renewal typically allowed residents to determine renewal agendas.

- The life experiences of local residents had sometimes resulted in high levels of dependency and apathy, which worked against their inclusion in the renewal process.

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CONTEXT

Neighbourhood renewal in Australia comprises either urban renewal, such as the physical refurbishment of properties and neighbourhoods, or community renewal, which is aimed at making social improvements, or a combination of the two.

Several state housing authorities have emphasised the notion of resident participation in their community and urban renewal activities. They believe that without local people becoming fully involved, neither the State nor the market can provide effective solutions for disadvantaged communities. Community participation is therefore cast as an essential element in the process of renewal. A basic tenet of this view is that renewal work is unsustainable unless the community continues to play an active role.

However, despite the widespread calls for community participation, the term is often undefined or used uncritically, with little recognition that it means different things to different people.

The research aimed to flesh out the concept of community participation in renewal programs by answering questions such as:

- What is the rationale for resident participation in renewal efforts?

- How were residents involved?

- What are the barriers to participation, and what has encouraged it?

This report is based on a qualitative study of six community renewal projects – at Riverwood and East Nowra in New South Wales; Inala and Kingston in Queensland; and Salisbury North and Westwood in South Australia. All the areas studied had been predominantly public housing estates, and all were currently the subject of a renewal program. In each of the six renewal areas:

- interviews were conducted with key stakeholders such as state housing and renewal staff and resident representatives; and

- two focus groups were conducted separately, one with active residents and another with a randomly selected group.

The findings are based on integrated data from both the interviews and focus group sessions. The implications for good practice are drawn from the research and experience elsewhere, notably the United Kingdom.

FINDINGS

WHY PARTICIPATION?

Two broad sets of reasons for supporting resident participation emerged from the fieldwork. The managerial approach focussed on the financial effectiveness and better fit for local circumstances of putting resources into areas which residents, rather than outsiders, deemed important. The citizenship approach assumed residents have a right to influence the decisions that are made about their neighbourhood. Across both of these perspectives, resident participation was thought to improve social cohesion and lead to the development of more sustainable communities. The respondents did not clearly explain why participation was thought to be important in making programs sustainable.

STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES OF PARTICIPATION

The structures and processes used for resident participation were investigated in each locality. This included examining the type of representative forum adopted, the nature and scope of resident involvement in developing renewal plans and the methods used to inform and consult.

Representative Forums

The basic structures used in the three states studied were forums created to represent the views of the wider community. In all of the localities studied, these forums comprised representatives of local agencies, voluntary groups and local residents.

The selection process for the local representatives varied across the localities. The normal procedure was to begin with a public meeting advertised locally. The intention in each case was to encourage some local residents to attend a regular meeting at which they could represent the views of local people.

In Queensland, the forums were open to all residents who wished to attend, whereas elsewhere the forums were restricted to specified delegates. Even in Queensland, however, few people took an active part in these meetings and there was some suggestion that forum representation should be renewed periodically to ensure it reflected a changing resident population. Analysis suggested that few residents were enthusiastic about getting involved in community activity.

In some cases the local representatives were nominated by a broader 'resident only' community group, but the number of resident delegates was limited. Elsewhere, smaller 'precinct' level groups called Neighbourhood Committees had been established on a monthly basis but it was apparently hard to maintain involvement at this more localised level.

Development of Renewal Plans

In all localities studied, resident involvement in plans to make physical changes to the urban environment was restricted to consultation exercises. There was only limited evidence of resident involvement prior to the first development of refurbishment plans, and the level of consultation and resident involvement at subsequent stages varied.

In contrast, the social and community elements of renewal typically allowed residents to determine renewal agendas, although levels of influence appeared to vary between the states and across the cases.

Communication and Consultation

Continual communication was thought to be essential for maintaining resident involvement and newsletters were identified as the main method for achieving this.

Representative forums were used for continual consultation in all of the localities studied. However, only two had a mechanism allowing residents direct input into the project decision-making process. This involved resident delegates actually sitting on the project steering groups.

In Queensland the residents' forums played a different role in the decision making process. Projects were only approved if supported by the forums, and in effect, this gave the local group the power of veto.

BARRIERS TO RESIDENT PARTICIPATION

There were serious barriers to the active participation of local people in renewal programs. Foremost were the barriers that resulted from poverty and social disadvantage. Residents felt stigmatised because they lived in areas that had been denigrated and believed they were treated unfairly because of this.

They also described how serious social problems such as high levels of unemployment, drug usage and crime had affected them, reducing morale and eroding self-esteem. Renewal professionals noted how the life experiences of local residents had resulted in high levels of dependency on institutions including government, disillusionment and general apathy.

Beyond these serious concerns, there were many other factors that worked against community participation:

- apathy, cynicism and scepticism towards renewal efforts stemmed from earlier failed programs or inadequate consultation;

- often the formality of consultation or participation processes, such as meetings, and the exclusive nature of the language used were daunting, and discouraged local participation;

- meeting times and venues had restricted the attendance of certain groups and there was no mention of childcare facilities for parents;

- it was also apparent that key cultural groups, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds, were often excluded despite the extensive use of interpreters and translators;

- residents in the randomly selected focus groups revealed that they knew very little about the forums that had been established and claimed that the community members did not represent their views;

- the community representatives often felt dominated, ignored or manipulated by renewal professionals and felt constrained and limited in their role. Many also felt that all the work was being left to them, and doubted their ability to fulfil the role they had been given in the renewal process;

- renewal professionals often worried whether key community representatives spoke for themselves, the whole community or just one section of the community;

- some residents were upset by the levels of conflict they experienced in the community meetings, and hence were reluctant to stay involved in renewal programs.

TOWARDS GOOD PRACTICE

The barriers identified above suggest a range of implications for developing good practice in participation. Key points are listed below:

- **Giving residents the skills to participate effectively in renewal programs is the most crucial task for renewal professionals wishing to encourage such participation.** In the cases studied, this approach aimed to give individuals or groups the confidence, skills and knowledge to enable them to have more control over their collective situation – a necessary requirement for tackling the barriers posed by previous life experiences.

- However, it was clear that this community development role was not always fully understood by those involved. Renewal professionals sometimes saw their main task as securing resources or providing information, rather than giving residents the skills to participate effectively. Given the importance of the community development task, it would be useful to articulate it and document for future use the processes, skills and personal qualities that enable it to be achieved.

- **Good practice stresses the need to start with the views of local people, before plans have been drawn up.** This can be achieved by strengthening and resourcing existing groups and working for the inclusion of excluded groups. Because previous renewal experiences may have alienated local people, this suggests the need to target resources swiftly at issues prioritised by residents. Gaining early visible success provides an important boost at the start of a renewal program. While training for local residents should aim to provide the necessary skills for participation, it should also build upon residents' local knowledge to enable everyone involved to gain a better understanding of local issues.

- **Establish participation structures to allow for a wide range of representation.** This implies that closed

forums, where representatives are chosen by bureaucrats rather than the local community, need to be treated with caution as they can rapidly become exclusive. On both sides, concerns about the 'representativeness' of community representatives were expressed. Measures that improve access, such as the availability of childcare and interpreters, the timing of meetings, and efforts to look beyond existing community activists should be encouraged. However even open structures, like those developed in Queensland, can also fall into the same trap if communication and publicity dwindle.

• **Community participation is not an easy or cheap option and it takes time.** It may take several years to develop structures and processes that enable genuine participation. Skilled and experienced workers need to be employed to facilitate this. Local facilities need to be made available to community groups and they require financial, training and community development support. Ideally, local people should ultimately be employed in community development roles and this should be the aim at the outset. All these processes need to be adequately resourced for a sufficiently long period if community participation is to be effective.

• **Give local residents genuine power in the renewal process and look for "quick wins" to combat disillusionment.** While it takes time to set up suitable means of participation, the evidence suggests that disillusionment will soon set in if local residents are not given genuine power in the process and cannot see the effect of their participation. Monitoring and evaluation can be important in confirming that residents have influenced renewal efforts, and should be given high priority by those who wish to promote resident participation.

Other good practice principles identified in the study included the following:

• It is important to ensure that the participation structures and processes used are congenial to residents. One approach is to adopt structures and processes that make it easier for more people to take part in making decisions. An example highlighted in the fieldwork is the use of small group techniques.

• Evidence from the study and from experience elsewhere suggests that giving residents a choice over their level of involvement, with opportunities for devolved power and decision making, is essential if they are to be persuaded to participate.

• Community representatives need to see that they are 'getting results' in order to be encouraged to participate. A good way to achieve this is to act on the views expressed by local people or to provide feedback on why it was not possible to do so.

• Keep communication going once structures and processes have been put in place, and aim to assess the effectiveness of communication methods. Community representatives stressed the need for plain English newsletters or letters.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about this project see the following papers.

• Positioning Paper:
www.ahuri.edu.au

• Final Report:
www.ahuri.edu.au

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