Improved Ways of Living or Continuing Exclusion? Experiences of Participation in Belfast's Urban Transformation

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Abstract

There is much rhetoric in policy promoting citizen participation in planning and regeneration as a way of encouraging feelings of inclusion and of producing more equitable project outcomes. Using empirical evidence this paper assesses the participation experiences of local citizens in the regeneration projects that have led to Belfast's urban transformation. The paper suggests that the to kenistic model of participation employed by many regeneration professionals has done little to improve the ways of living of the most disadvantaged citizens.

Introduction

Belfast has emerged slowly and unpredictably from conflict, urban restructuring and 30 years of Direct Rule government from Westminster. Currently the city is undergoing a dynamic process of urban transformation and revitalisation. This period of sustained regeneration can be traced back almost 20 years to a concept plan for the redevelopment of Belfast's riverfront. This presented a vision to transform the environmental quality of a vital part of the city (Shepherd, Epstein and Hunter/B DP, 1987). Laganside Corporation, an Urban Development Corporation (U DC), was created in 1989 to implement this. While Laganside Corporation fulfilled its remit and was consequently dissolved in early 2007, the pace of regeneration in Belfast has continued to gain momentum. New and proposed regeneration projects pepper the urban landscape including the Victoria Square development and the Royal Exchange scheme.

Perhaps this just sounds like any other former industrial, medium sized European city, but Belfast has also been blighted by the 'Troubles'[1]. Even in this now relatively peaceful city, division, segregation and fear are still a salient part of society. Indeed some commentators have stated that Belfast is now even more divided, not just ethnically, but increasingly socio-economically (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). It has been argued that new

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[1]The 'Troubles' is the term used to describe the period of violent political conflict in Northern Ireland which spanned almost 30 years from 1969 to 2007. Approximately 3,500 individuals lost their lives as a result of the violence.

consumption sites and high value riverside residential developments have benefited a growing population of middle class citizens, while those in working class 'sink' estates are unable to participate in the new prosperous city (Murtagh and Keaveney, 2006). Against such a background, building an inclusive and shared future for all citizens of Belfast regardless of ethnic and socio-economic status is extremely challenging. One method to overcome some of these challenges could be through citizen involvement in the decision making process for the future development of the city. Citizen involvement and participation has been a particularly prominent theme in the politics surrounding the regeneration of (urban) public space (Giddens, 1998; Imrie, 2004). Much of the literature on citizen participation is highly normative. Greater and more meaningful participation is viewed as improving the quality and legitimacy of decisions. This normative emphasis stems in part from the wider policy climate where participation is seen as improving public services and delivering more effective outcomes. It also comes from some academic work where deliberative democracy is viewed as a means to achieve democratic renewal (Stewart, 1999). Indeed, citizen involvement is portrayed as the only way to ensure that people will get the surroundings they want and it is now seen as the best way of ensuring that communities become safer, stronger, wealthier and more sustainable. However, while most Western states accept the idea of public involvement in the planning of cities, the reality and the extent of consultation and the distribution of power between social groups varies markedly, with the interests of economic and social elites tending to dominate (Fung and Wright, 2003).

Using empirical evidence and by employing Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, I assess citizen participation in Belfast's regeneration and whether this has led to improved ways of living or increased levels of exclusion. The paper is divided into four sections. First, I introduce the methodological approach adopted. I then explore the ideology surrounding participation. In the third section I briefly explore the institutional structures and urban policy of Northern Ireland. The fourth section explores the participation experiences of the respondents from three regeneration projects: Laganside Corporation, Victoria Square and Royal Exchange. The debate is then summarised and concludes by suggesting that a tokenistic model of citizen participation has done little to improve ways of living for Belfast citizens.

Research Approach

The findings in this paper form part of a larger research programme from recently completed PhD research. The central concern of this was the

exploration of how key stakeholders participate in, interact with and influence the consultation process for urban regeneration projects in Belfast. These regeneration projects (see Figure 1) were:

- Laganside — Laganside Corporation was charged with overseeing the regeneration of 300 acres of brownfield land adjacent to the river Lagan from 1989 to 2007. The project was mixed use incorporating new sites for business, housing and entertainment venues.

- Victoria Square — Multi Development UK, a private developer, undertook the largest retail development in Belfast covering 800,000 square feet. It was opened on 6 March 2008 and cost £400 million.

- Royal Exchange — William Ewart Properties (a private developer) and ING Real Estate (an integrated real estate group) will deliver this retail led mixed use scheme. The scheme is situated to the north east of Belfast city centre and is scheduled to open in 2012 at a cost of approximately £360 million.
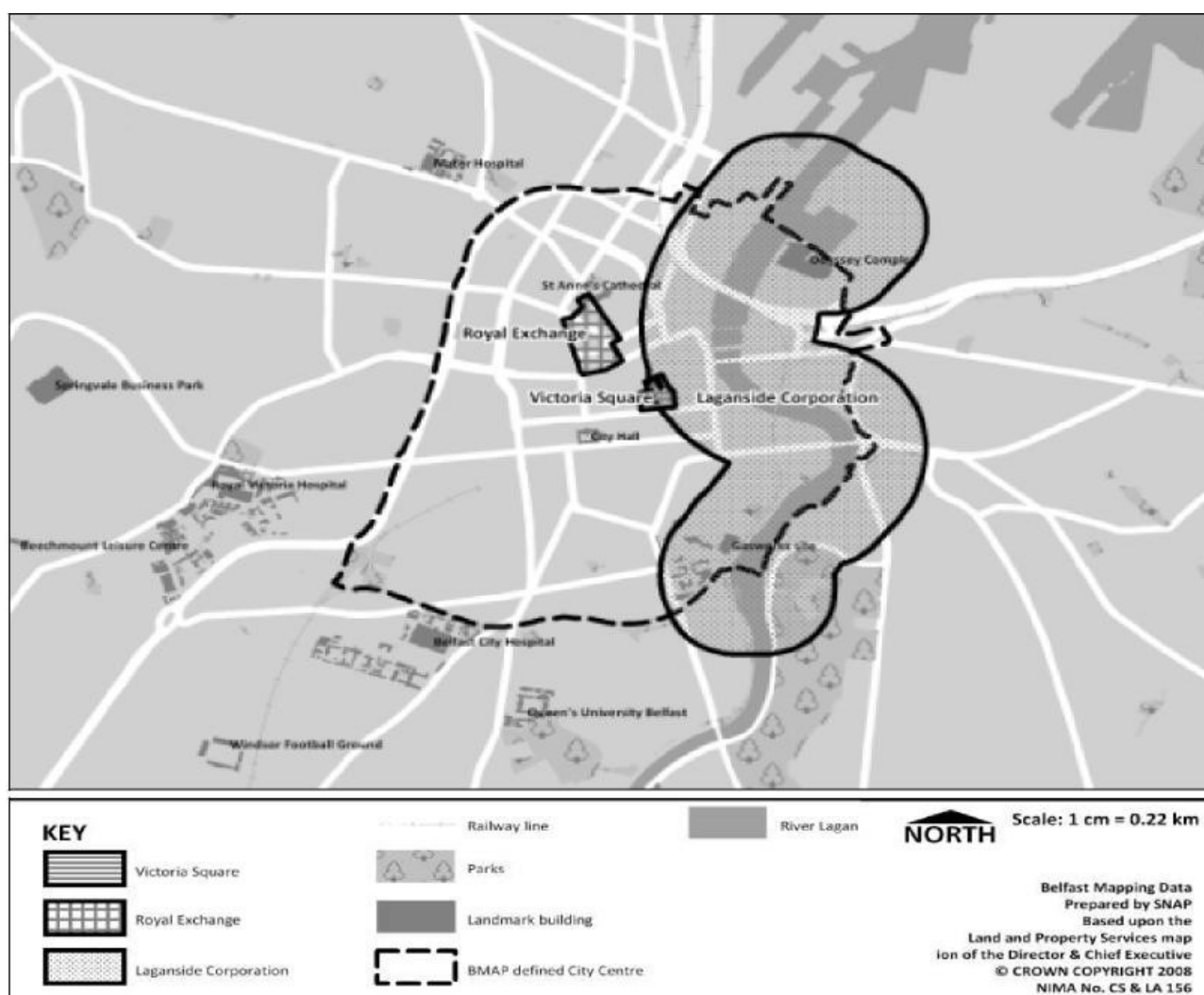

Figure 1: Map illustrating the three key regeneration sites in Belfast

The main method of data collection was in-depth semi-structured interviews. To select respondents the technique of non-probability sampling was adopted. This involves selecting typical or interesting cases. People are deliberately chosen because they have a unique insight or because of the position they hold (Denscombe, 1998). Snowball sampling was also used whereby, in some cases, the participants chosen were asked to recommend other potential informants. I was interested in speaking to representatives of government and council departments and developers who were involved in specific regeneration schemes. I also interviewed those members of the community who would effectively be the consumers of these regeneration documents and projects. A total of 60 respondents were interviewed. A detailed breakdown of the sample is provided in Figure 2.

Interview Code	Type of Respondent	Interest: Community/ Professional/ Other	Number of respondents	Percentage of Total Sample
C	Representatives from community organisations	Community	11	18%
P	Member of the public	Community	32	53%
A	Academics	Other	3	5%
D	Developers and regeneration professionals	Professional	7	12%
G	Local Government and Council staff	Professional/ Community	7	12%

Figure 2: Sample details

The interviews were used to question the respondents about their involvement or lack of involvement with regeneration consultation in Belfast. These were conducted as one-to-one interviews and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All but four of the respondents agreed to the interview being audio-recorded. During the interview brief notes were recorded to assist with the transcription. The interviews were transcribed immediately afterwards where possible.

Interview data were supplemented with a detailed analysis of reports published by regeneration organisations and local government. This data analysis was largely factual. It sought to determine essential background information on the range of initiatives, the order of events for various regeneration schemes and to access the official statements of developer activity and priorities.

The findings from this empirical work will be introduced following a discussion of the literature surrounding participation and an exploration of the institutional structures of government and urban policy in Northern Ireland.

The Ideology Surrounding Participation

Urban policy in Britain has long been characterised by changing institutional structures of community involvement. The exact role that communities should play in urban policy has been an area of contention for some time. From the Community Development Programmes of the early 1970s to the assertive neo-liberalism of the 1980s and back to the seemingly inclusive partnership based politics of the 1990s, community involvement in the construction and delivery of urban policy has been a critical theme (Raco, 2000, p. 573). The idea that residents (citizens) should participate in their communities seems to have become a panacea for all social ills (Barnes et al., 2003). Accordingly, this is reflected in current UK policy trends with citizen participation becoming a key component not only of regeneration policy but other policy spheres also such as health, education and crime (Brannan et al., 2006).

This move from government to governance has been well documented (Newman, 2001; Swyngedouw, 2005). The terms: 'participation', 'engagement', 'consensus building', 'community involvement', 'stakeholder dialogue', 'facilitation', 'mediation', 'partnership', and 'communication' are all increasingly applied in urban analysis. Most commentators agree that in the context of globalisation or given the complex nature of today's society, it is no longer possible for the state to govern without the cooperation of other actors (Barnes et al., 2007). New spaces have therefore opened up in which a number of actors are now engaged in governing. This has created new opportunities for actors who have in the past been excluded from the policy process. These opportunities are reflected in the increasing emphasis in international and national policy on community participation.

Roberts (2004) observes that citizen participation captivates our attention because there is something seductive about the idea that people ought to be directly involved in the decisions that affect their lives. However,

In-terview Code	Type of Re-spondent	Interest: Community/ Pro-fessional/Other

research on citizen participation produces a complex and, at times, unruly literature (Kweit and Kweit, 1981). As a contested concept (Day, 1997), it is not surprising that it is plagued with definitional problems (see Kalu, 2003). Sherry Arnstein (1969), however, defined citizen participation as:

> *'A categorical term for citizen power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the politics and economic processes to be deliberately included in the future'* (p. 216).

Direct participation requires power sharing among citizens and public officials. It is not a form of control that enables those in authority to get citizens to do what they want them to do. This is reflected in Arnstein's ladder of participation (see Figure 3). This conceptual framework is used in the empirical analysis presented later in this paper. In this model there are eight levels of citizen participation with each successive rung of the ladder moving towards greater influence in decision making.

The first two rungs are 'manipulation' and 'therapy' and are grouped together as non-participation in real terms (Arnstein, 1969, p. 218). In manipulation, the pretence of participation is used as a public relations exercise, rather than as an attempt to create meaningful involvement. The therapy approach to citizen participation is described by Arnstein as both dishonest and arrogant because the administrators (or those who hold decision making power) attempt to control and influence those individuals who participate in citizen engagement.

The next three rungs are 'informing', 'consultation' and 'placation'. These are classified by Arnstein as degrees of tokenism. Informing is one-way participation. Citizens are informed of plans which are likely to affect them, but feedback does not flow back to the decision maker. Consultation goes a step further, as decision makers are more likely to meet directly with the public through methods such as public meetings, where members of the public are given the opportunity to articulate their opinions (Arnstein, 1969, p. 219). However, in consultation there is no guarantee that these views will be taken into account at later stages. Consultation could be described as window dressing. In placation, the public begin to hold some degree of power since it is recognised by those in authority that citizen groups cannot be ignored without consequences. The professionals, however, retain the position of making the final decision.

The top three rungs of the ladder are 'partnership', 'delegated power' and 'citizen control' and together represent degrees of citizen power. In partnership, power is actually redistributed so that most citizens can come to

the table on an equal level with policy makers (Arnstein, 1969, p. 222). With delegated power, citizens are given increased control over certain areas of the plan or over implementing a particular programme. At the top of Arnstein's ladder, in a citizen control approach, participants can govern a programme or an institution, be in full charge of policy or managerial aspects and be able to negotiate the conditions under which outsiders may change them (Arnstein,
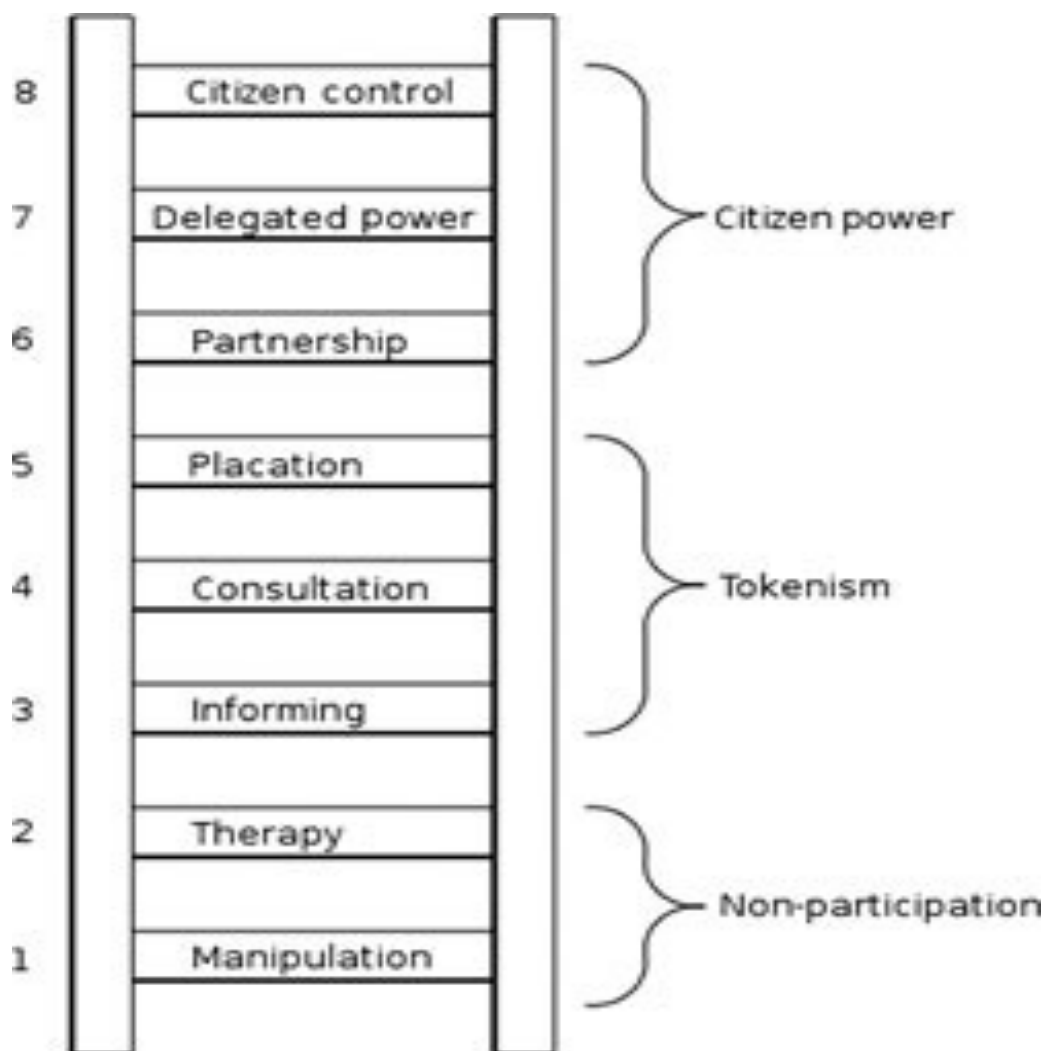
1969, p. 223).

Figure 3: Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation

The strength of the model lies in the recognition that there is a huge diversity in what participation means to different actors and a wide variety of approaches to involving the public in decision making. There are, however, some flaws in the model. For example, the use of the ladder suggests a need for citizens to move upwards towards implied power, but this fails to recognise that citizens themselves have some power outside formal participation processes. The model also suggests that the ideal scenario is for public participation to be at the top three rungs of the ladder: partnership, delegated power or citizen control. However, it cannot be assumed that

citizens should be given this responsibility if they neither desire nor have the technical expertise or resources to fulfill this.

One crucial aspect to consider when discussing participation is that not everyone will want to become involved. Not all issues will interest all citizens, while others see participation as someone else's role. In addition it is those citizens who are better organised with resources who are likely to participate. Indeed various authors have documented the problem of building a truly participative process (Woltjer, 2000; Hibbard and Lurie, 2000). In Northern Ireland the situation has been further compounded by 30 years of Direct Rule government from Westminster. The impact this had on urban policy is briefly explored in the following section.

Institutional Structures and Urban Policy in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland was ruled by the UK Government at Westminster from 1972 until early 2007, except for a few brief periods of devolved government. This is commonly referred to as the period of Direct Rule. Direct Rule was perceived by the British Government as a way of promoting stability during the Troubles and overcoming the sectarian discrimination of local authorities in the provision of services (Loughlin, 1992). The authority of local governance in Belfast and elsewhere in Northern Ireland was significantly eroded by Direct Rule. Neill (1999) noted that public participation in the decision making process of urban development was restricted and that highly corporatist forms of interest mediation were adopted to achieve planning and policy outcomes. In other words, strong efforts have been made since 1972 to base policy decisions on rational, objective and dispassionate measures (Bollens, 1998). The legacy of Direct Rule was a planning and policy making system where popular interests had little or no control and gained only selective access to the process and decision makers.

A further consequence of Direct Rule was that there has been a tendency for urban policy in Northern Ireland to follow the broad trajectory taken at the national level in Britain (Ellis, 2001). Several major instruments that were used in Britain have been adapted to the Northern Ireland context. These initiatives included Enterprise Zones, the Urban Development Grant and the introduction of Urban Development Corporations (U DCs). These mechanisms relied heavily on the use of grants and other incentives to stimulate development by the private sector in the expectation that property led regeneration would occur.

Property led regeneration was advocated by Thatcher and the New Right in the 1980s. An implication for urban policy was that expenditure was

diverted into U DCs and other related initiatives that were seeking to provide development opportunities for the (enterprising) private sector. In particular funding was made available for property led projects that tended to prioritise economic development and business interests above those of local residents and community groups (Imrie and Thomas, 1993).

Throughout the 1990s and beyond, a shift towards community participation, partnership and empowerment occurred in urban policy reflecting new discourses of participation albeit within the context of a competitive bidding regime (Tiesdell and Allmendinger, 2001). These were dominated by City Challenge and the Single Regeneration Budget. The new approach focused around the question of how to integrate problematic places into the mainstream economy. However, neither of the previous two initiatives were adopted in Northern Ireland. Yet, in line with New Labour's so called Third Way, Laganside Corporation (the UDC) did begin to embrace a more holistic approach to regeneration.

It was also in the 1990s that the political terrain in Northern Ireland began to show signs of stabilisation. The paramilitary ceasefires announced in 1994 and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998[2] paved the way for the return of devolved power to Northern Ireland. The Agreement had a number of direct ramifications for the planning and regeneration system. This included the return of political control from Westminster to the Northern Ireland Executive which had the power to delegate further to local government. Government in the region was reorganised into eleven departments, each with a minister in the new Executive to facilitate ministerial representation for all the main political parties. This has meant that planning and regeneration responsibility has been split between three departments (four, if one includes the Office of the Deputy First Minister with its strategic regeneration powers), potentially causing difficulties with policy co-ordination and implementation. Regulatory functions such as development control and development plans are controlled by the new Department of the Environment (DoE), while regional planning and regional transport planning are the remit of the Department for Regional Development (DR D). In addition, the Department for Social Development (DS D) has responsibility for regeneration. The Good Friday Agreement also prioritised equality, human rights and Targeting Social Need (TSN) as both constitutional and substantive policy concerns. The Agreement provided an opportunity to ensure that full citizen engagement was embraced in all areas of public policy. The success

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[2]The Good Friday Agreement is the accord signed in 1998 by most of the involved parties to implement a power-sharing devolved administration. New socio-economic linkages between the North and South of Ireland and the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons were some of the key features of the Agreement.

of this is explored in the following section. This draws upon empirical evidence from respondents who reflected on their participatory experience in projects undertaken by Laganside Corporation, the recently opened Victoria Square retail development and the forthcoming Royal Exchange scheme.

Experiences of Citizen Involvement in Belfast's Regeneration

The physical and economic base of Belfast like many traditional industrial cities has undergone dramatic change. The overall movement of change in developed cities has been away from manufacturing production towards producer and consumer services. Castells (1991) notes that this restructuring process has disadvantaged large sections of the population, in particular the traditional working class. The result is starkly inscribed on the landscape where many deprived areas have been devastated, while the residential, work and consumption spaces of the professional-managerial class have flourished.

Globalisation, de-industrialisation and economic restructuring have also reinforced the belief that competing on the basis of image and amenity is now 'the only game in town' (Hall, 1989, p. 281). Marketing and re-imaging strategies have been accorded special significance in this era of place promotion or selling the city. Belfast is not immune to such pressures having recently launched its heart shaped 'B' logo which is accompanied by messages such as 'be vibrant' and 'be welcome'. This logo and marketing campaign has been designed to promote the transformed city to the international market in order to attract more visitors and investment.

But have citizens been afforded a genuine stake in shaping this transformed city? As noted earlier, the findings reported in this paper form part of a larger programme of work from my recently completed PhD research. The findings of which broadly support other studies in that, despite the rhetoric of citizen participation,: 'the impact of community involvement in regeneration has generally been modest and that commitment to community involvement has often been tokenistic' (JRF, 1999, p. 21). When challenged about the lack of involvement, regeneration professionals and developers often argue that they tried to promote participation but there was no interest. Local people, they claim, are apathetic, do not attend consultation meetings, or if they do, have little, or nothing to contribute. However, there are a number of important factors that are overlooked here, for example, the life experiences that cause dissatisfaction, including previous examples of inadequate consultation, and a range of political and practical barriers that

prevent local people from getting involved. Often people are denied access at a basic level because limited attention is paid to the accessibility of the venue and the timings of meetings. Colenutt and Cutten (1994) emphasise that there is a need to overcome practical constraints on participation such as access to transport and childcare, as well as a need to encourage those who find it difficult to express their views. Even when childcare and transport are provided, more subtle barriers to participation may result from the formality of the proceedings and the exclusive nature of the language used. These difficulties were reported by 70% of the community representatives and members of the public in the Belfast study. To illustrate:

> *Planners and others think if some people don't turn up to a consultation they are apathetic. However it is not that. They don't actually understand the document, don't feel they have a right to participate, nor would their opinion be considered valid.*

> (Community Respondent C1)

> *A lot of people get fed up reading complicated, thick documents, as they are not user friendly at all...you sometimes wonder is that because they [regeneration professionals] don't want people to understand it?*

> (Public Respondent P5)

The general belief amongst government policy makers and academic commentators is that urban regeneration programmes are less likely to succeed if local communities are not involved in decision making (Hastings et al., 1996). It is important to note that this standpoint presupposes that successful regeneration programmes and local communities' ability to influence decision making can only be measured and considered valid if they are a meaningful, rather than tokenistic component in the urban regeneration process. However many community respondents and members of the public believed that their inclusion in the consultation process of regeneration projects (where one was actually included) was purely tokenistic. A total of 90% of these respondents believed that their views were completely disregarded by the professionals involved because they could not see any evidence of their input when documents and plans were issued in their final form.

> *Sometimes people feel that consultation is the time between when an organisation decides to do a thing and then just goes and does it.*

> (Community Respondent C3)

However, the research also revealed some indication that developers and others charged with regeneration are now attempting to secure the views of local people and integrate these into regeneration projects. This change has emerged because of pressure from national and local government and from organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

> *Well at least they are now saying we want to talk to you,*
> *we want to listen to your opinions and stuff.*

(Public Respondent P4)

Despite this, it is clear from the research findings that power and control over decision making has not been devolved to local people. Detailed analyses of these findings are presented in the following three subsections.

The Laganside Regeneration Experience

Spurred on by sweeping enthusiasm for waterfront development in Britain and abroad (most notably Baltimore), the Department of the Environment commissioned consultants to prepare a Laganside concept plan in 1987. Changing technologies in post-industrial Belfast meant that under used land fronting the river Lagan had become derelict and blighted the city. It was therefore proposed that these brownfield sites could be redeveloped and contribute in a fruitful way to the economy of the city. Legislation allowed the establishment of Laganside Corporation in 1989 (Berry et al., 1993). The remit of the Corporation was to secure the regeneration of 300 acres of land adjacent to the river Lagan (DoENI, 1989, p. 12). However unlike other U DCs on the British mainland, Laganside Corporation did not own all the land in their designated area of development, nor did they have statutory planning power to control development.

The particular depth of the crises in 1980s Belfast created an urgency around the regeneration agenda and in particular, attempts to normalise the city and create a positive sense of place imagery to international investors and tourists. Laganside was a pivotal showcase project to demonstrate the city's renaissance and its enduring capacity to resist paramilitary violence (Neill, 2004).

The objectives for Laganside were to strengthen links with the city centre, along with the development of the land for a variety of uses to create a new and visually exciting waterfront. They also included: job creation, conservation of historic areas, improvement of water quality, improved

accessibility and the promotion of cultural and recreational activities along the river (Smith and Alexander, 2001, p. 125).

By 2000 the project had largely fulfilled its core aims in the development of the wider area, but there were criticisms of its failure to impact on the poorest people and areas (OECD, 2000; Hemphill et al., 2004). In particular, it was argued that the main outcomes related to the development of the property economy, the creation of highly skilled jobs and improvements in the public realm (Gaffikin and Morrisey, 2001).

However, in line with other policy shifts in Britain, most notably the move towards community participation and empowerment that was advocated by the Blair Government's so-called Third Way (Rose, 2000), Laganside began to embrace the language of inclusivity and community in its more recent capital projects. By 2004 a new community unit had been established, three community members were appointed to the Laganside Board and an Equality Scheme had been prepared (L DC, 2003). This change recognised the growing emphasis attached to a holistic approach to regeneration practice and a broader paradigm shift within urban policy, away from narrower property concerns towards a more inclusive agenda, where social objectives and participatory practice were central to implementation (Coaffee and Healey, 2003).

Exploring the impact of the Laganside development is both important and interesting for a number of reasons. It was the first large scale regeneration project implemented as the city began to slowly emerge from conflict. In addition, the programme of development spanned almost 20 years which meant that many citizens have had some experience with the Corporation.

The findings from my research were varied with regard to how successful Laganside actually was in achieving the aim of integrated regeneration. This was both in terms of the consultation and communication with the community and with the impact the regeneration has had on the city as a whole.

One community representative reflected pragmatically as he attempted to evaluate the regeneration campaign of the Laganside Corporation. It is particularly noteworthy that the following comment relates to improvements in the physical environment, yet there is no mention of how successful the Corporation was in integrating local people into this process of change. This, of course, does raise questions regarding how much emphasis actually was dedicated to the social dimension of regeneration.

> *The main problem for Laganside was [that] this area was*
> *frankly the arsehole of Belfast, with the old bus station and*

what have you. They have done a terrific job, they got the Hilton, they got BT, done up the train station and linked it across the river.

(Community Respondent C22)

The local community who live on the periphery of the regeneration area were much more critical of the regeneration undertaken by Laganside. Collectively they feel that they have been disconnected from the regeneration projects, with 64% stating they were specifically unhappy that at the beginning of the regeneration project there was no engagement with them at all. My findings did not uncover evidence of communication with the local community in latter years. This raises questions as to whether there was engagement, or perhaps this was overshadowed by existing disillusionment, consequently influencing the responses that I received.

Laganside people didn't come and ask us what we want for the area; they [were] a complete shambles...and while the area is nicer to look at, there is nothing there for us.

(Community Respondent C6)

Interestingly a representative from Laganside Corporation sympathised with the position of the neighbouring community. It is possible therefore that if this Urban Development Corporation had had more autonomy (similar to its counterparts in Britain) from its inception, the relationship with the neighbouring community and their subsequent feelings of exclusion from the overall regeneration project could have been different.

I would have to accept that we have not delivered everything the community wanted, they were led to believe there would have been a lot more community input and community facilities, but I think they would acknowledge that we have tried.

(Developer D1)

Not surprisingly a regeneration practitioner who oversees private regeneration schemes revealed little concern for the inclusion of the local community in regeneration projects. Instead he stated that Laganside had a very specific job to do, namely, to physically regenerate a brownfield site in the city. Inevitably then the concern of the Corporation was to deliver physical regeneration projects, stimulate the economy and transform Belfast in a similar manner to other post-industrial cities in Britain.

They have done a good job, the criticism has been that they have excluded communities and possibly marginalised or displaced them, however it's [the regeneration] been about property, and this is a property economy.

(Regeneration Professional D4)

The focus of the response from a planning academic on the regeneration experience of Laganside Corporation relates to the impact they have made in a physical sense to the built environment. This again suggests that the involvement of the community was too little too late as much of the physical regeneration was expedited in the infancy of the Corporation. This was of course the priority of local and national government as noted earlier. The rationale behind this approach was to demonstrate that the city was 'open' for business. It is therefore extremely difficult to see how the competing interests of a disadvantaged local community, an Urban Development Corporation and those of local and national government could ever have been reconciled.

If you talk to any of the Laganside crowd, they won't quite admit that some of the development hasn't been the quality they wanted, but they stand over the fact that the whole area has been redeveloped, and it does seem a bit churlish at times to be critical of it, they delivered what they were told to deliver and that was physical bricks and mortar.

(Academic Respondent A1)

Overall, 60% of respondents accepted that the physical regeneration project led by Laganside has been fairly successful. A once neglected waterfront has been transformed and new sites of employment have been created. However, as the empirical findings suggest, it is questionable how far local residents on the periphery of the development were included in the consultation of the project and whether they have benefited at all from the outputs of the regeneration scheme. Employing Arnstein's model of citizen participation, the Laganside consultation experience could be classified as 'manipulation' equating to non-participation in real terms.

The new sites of renewal created by regeneration organisations such as Laganside can be signifiers of social unevenness and exclusion. Some of the city's new hotels and other buildings that border deprived communities employ security guards to keep the locals out. Apartments that sit boldly overlooking the riverfront are beyond the means of many local citizens. The fact that little consultation occurred with local people and that many are not benefiting from the redevelopment tends to limit the perceived success of the waterfront transformation undertaken by Laganside.

Retail Led Regeneration: The Case of Victoria Square

The Victoria Square scheme developed by Multi Development UK is home to 98 retailers (increasing the retail offer in the city by one third) and 106 luxury apartments. It neighbours the Laganside regeneration project and also borders disadvantaged neighbourhoods. When the building work commenced an advertising banner draped around its cranes stated: 'A renaissance for Belfast'. It was evident from this bold statement that the project was intended to set the seal on Belfast's image as a paradise for consumers. Inherent within this is an implication that more shops mean happier and more fulfilled citizens (Bairner, 2006). The evidence from my research confirms that Victoria Square is certainly shopping heaven for some. Yet many more feel displaced and the consultation with the citizens of Belfast was non-existent.

The scheme endured a number of setbacks in planning terms prior to it coming to fruition. Wrangling between the Planning Service of Northern Ireland and the Department for Social Development actually delayed the project by five years (Morrison, 2004). In addition there was much opposition from local businesses in the area (who were subsequently vested[3] by DS D) and from heritage groups such as Ulster Architectural and Heritage Society (UAHS) who opposed the plans because it would mean the demolition of the old Kitchen Bar pub, a time capsule of the now unfashionable Belfast of yesteryear (Neill, 2006). There was no consultation undertaken with local people, nor were there any public meetings held to inform people of the status of the project. The only communication that Multi Development undertook with citizens of Belfast was through occasional promotional material that was produced by their own marketing team. As such local people were unable metaphorically to climb onto the first ring of Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation.

The lack of engagement was astounding given the rhetoric about community participation and inclusion. However, perhaps because Multi Development is a private development company this stance is not surprising. The data obtained from the developer demonstrated a particular reluctance to involve the community.

> *There is no point in going and talking to the local community as they can cause more problems in the long run.*

> *(Developer Respondent D2)*

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[3]The businesses in the area that refused to sell their premises/property to the developer were purchased compulsorily by the Department for Social Development.

When I asked this respondent about the type of shops that will be in the development, he stated that they were keen to attract a high class clientele and the retail offer would reflect that. This is despite the fact that the development borders one of the most disadvantaged areas of Belfast.

> *We have been told by DSD to keep our development more middle market, but once Victoria Square is up and running, we really can have who we want in the shops.*

> (Developer Respondent D2)

Such sentiments demonstrate the amount of power that private developers continue to exert. Amazingly it appears that local government have also had minimal influence which confirms that the local community did not stand a chance of shaping the development even if the developer had undertaken a process of engagement.

A local academic expressed some reservations regarding the development of Victoria Square, believing that the type of high-end retail on offer in the scheme would exclude a large proportion of the Belfast population.

> *This development is not relevant for them. They [working class communities] cannot afford to go to these large retailers and pay £60 or £70 for something that you can buy elsewhere for £10.*

> (Academic Respondent A3)

The local people I interviewed were fairly reticent about the development as they felt completely disillusioned about the changing nature of the city. The Victoria Centre, a former shopping mall that was partly situated on the new Victoria Square site, was a place where local people could have purchased affordable goods. They now believed they were doubly disadvantaged, because firstly they could not afford to shop in Victoria Square, and secondly they had further to travel to obtain affordable goods. Many of the local respondents either had caring responsibilities or found it difficult to access public transport. This new development has actually increased their feelings of exclusion from the city.

> *The old place [the Victoria Centre] was handy, you know, for all us here. Now though what we have to do is trek to the other side of town, no one cares at all. It's all money now and it's suited for money people.*

> (Community Respondent C15)

A representative from local government was indifferent to the lack of consultation about Victoria Square and how the scheme would impact on the local disadvantaged community. Indeed, there was more concern that the city centre would 'shift' toward the south of the city.

> *Of course we were pleased at the investment the developer was making but we also need to ensure there is a geographic balance [of retail] in Belfast. This is why we are pressing on with master=plans for other areas of the city*

<div align="right">(Government Respondent G2).</div>

The experience from both Laganside and Victoria Square reveals that the city centre has become a lot more segmented. These new places of consumption tend to exclude the local working class people because they cannot afford to participate in the new spaces. This has also been acknowledged by a local community support representative.

> *I can't see too many people in inner city Belfast forking out £40 for a ticket for a show, or to eat in a fancy restaurant, basically you need money, you need money to enjoy it [the city centre] and working class communities are becoming more disconnected from it.*

<div align="right">(Community Respondent C8)</div>

So far it is difficult to see where communities have had an influence on the regeneration of Belfast. The interview findings have identified a lack of consultation with local people which has further marginalised them and increased feelings of exclusion from decision making over city development. This adds further support to the claim that inclusion in consultation is merely tokenistic despite the policy support for it (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2000).

The Royal Exchange Scheme

The Royal Exchange scheme aims to regenerate a rundown area situated to the north east of the city centre. The scheme will have a total floor area of 792,271 square feet which includes 417,611 square feet of retail. The blueprint includes a new department store, other major retail stores, leisure uses, bars, cafes, apartments, a hotel and a car park (Morton, 2008). The Social Development Minister at the time, David Hanson MP, welcomed the scheme by stating:

> *'The North East Quarter...has been characterised by blight and abandonment with historic buildings*

crumbling from neglect. An area that once contributed to the life of the city centre has deteriorated in physical, social and economic terms...[but] this proposal envisages a new beginning and bright future.' (taken from Calder, 2006, p. 20)

Now that Victoria Square has finally opened its doors, the way is clear for the regeneration of the North East Quarter to begin in earnest. Unlike the previous regeneration projects, many more respondents stated that they were consulted with regard to the plan, albeit that this occurred in response to pressure from local organisations and government departments. One community representative from the local area stated that he had problems engaging with the developer in the beginning because:

Initially the developer did not take us seriously, thinking we were some kind of loony arts organisation.

(Community Respondent C7)

Although the development of the Royal Exchange is being undertaken by a private consortium, pressure is being exerted from local government on the developer to ensure that the community broadly support the development. In fact it was a condition of planning approval that there was community engagement and input. Again, evidence from national urban policy and also disaffection from previous regeneration initiatives have helped to influence this change. To Illustrate:

Previous consultation has been very sporadic, but there is now more pressure on the developer and they do seem more willing to engage with the community.

(Community Respondent C2)

It appears they [the developers] are becoming more pro-active in engagement, but I personally believe this is changing because if there was a public inquiry held the lack of consultation would be very evident.

(Public Respondent P5)

The developer may have used the consultation with the local community about the Royal Exchange simply to obtain legitimacy for the project. Alternatively, the comments presented so far could portray a private developer who has sympathy for local people and also due regard for local government. However, this developer, while masquerading as a champion for local people soon revealed how committed it was to the local community when

gentrification was mentioned. Many local businesses in the area are currently paying little (if any) rent because the area is very dilapidated. Of course this will change with redevelopment. However, the evidence indicates that the developer is unsympathetic to the plight of some of the organisations in the North East Quarter who will be unable to afford new premises or to pay rent in the regenerated area.

> *Local arts groups are envisaging some buildings that will be made of use for them; these are known as managed workspaces where the rent is subsidised. My argument to that is I don't go to the bank and ask for a subsidised loan because it's for an arts group; these people have to learn it is not possible to live on handouts.*

(Developer Respondent D3)

From the interview material presented it is apparent that local people have been afforded some opportunity to influence this regeneration project. Further evidence of engagement comes from the 'Let's get it right campaign', a pressure group of local representatives who developed alternative regeneration proposals for the area with which to lobby the developer. Indeed, as a result, the developer did amend their own plans to reflect some of the aspirations of the pressure group. This level of participation could be represented as 'placation' in Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, as citizens begin to hold some degree of power and cannot be ignored by those in authority without consequences. At this stage it is too early to speculate how meaningful future engagement will be and how the dynamics of power will be negotiated. However, at least the lines of communication have been opened at this early stage. This is more progressive than previous regeneration projects in the city and so far both sides have benefited from this tentative relationship.

Conclusion

The attempts to modernise urban Belfast in the 1980s left little room for community concerns and involvement as efforts and resources were concentrated on physically rebuilding the city centre and Laganside riverfront (Neill, 2001). Evidence from the later Victoria Square regeneration project revealed that little has changed despite the rhetoric and policy support for involving the community in consultation in order to produce better and more equitable results (Hill, 1994; Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2000; Boland, 2001). The data from both Laganside and Victoria Square suggest that the most disadvantaged citizens have become displaced

from these regenerated spaces as they can no longer afford to participate in them which undoubtedly deepens feelings of exclusion. It is possible that if these citizens had been formally involved in the decision making process for these regeneration projects then their ways of living could have improved through a more equitable regeneration campaign.

The interview data, however, also revealed tentative signs of progress regarding citizen inclusion in the Royal Exchange regeneration scheme. Despite the non-engagement at the initial planning stages of this development, the commitment and dedication from a local pressure group revealed that it is possible to have a positive experience of participation in regeneration project consultation and that this deliberation can improve the quality and legitimacy of decisions benefiting all participants in the process. This should ensure more balanced outputs than have often been achieved in the past. As Muir (2004, p. 962) observes: 'It is correct to get the processes right in the first place in order that the outcomes will be a just reward for all those that have been involved in the processes'.

To conclude, much of the empirical data revealed that participation experiences have not improved many citizens' ways of living because the model of consultation employed by the professionals involved has been tokenistic at best, or at worst no consultation occurred. The findings revealed that, despite the policy rhetoric about citizen participation, the highest rung of Arnstein's ladder of participation citizens were able to reach was placation. While this may appear progressive, it is important to remember that the degree of power citizens hold at this level is minimal, and still, engagement is classified as tokenistic. This, of course, questions how equitable the regeneration outcomes are for Belfast citizens. If Belfast is to maintain its momentum of economic growth in a more balanced and sustainable way, the involvement of the community in consultation is a dilemma that needs to be more openly acknowledged and considered. Otherwise the gloss may soon wear off this shiny new Belfast if there are not serious attempts to address its rougher edges.

Acknowledgements

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