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Article information:

To cite this document:

Zoraida Mendiwelse-bendek , (2015), "Community-based research: enabling civil society's self-organisation", *Kybernetes*, Vol. 44 Iss 6/7 pp. 903 - 912

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/K-02-2015-0056>

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Community-based research: enabling civil society's self-organisation

Community-
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research

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the contribution of community-based research to the self-organisation of Civil Society and in particular to community engagement, policy processes and social change.

Design/methodology/approach – Starting from communities own issues and organisational structures, this paper presents a methodology to create spaces for social transformation. Its approach was designing engagement programmes of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with communities' partnerships, supported by constructed conversations, workshops and fieldwork, coproducing knowledge within community structures.

Findings – The research offers evidence that supporting community empowerment and engagement with community-based research needs a deep understanding of participatory social processes. It makes visible that researchers should have more opportunities to focus their research on communities rather than on collecting data to respond to funders.

Research limitations/implications – Though community self-organisation happens one way or the other effective self-organisation processes cannot be taken for granted and need further studies and elaboration. Despite current efforts it requires more studies to understand social systems and develop stronger links to active citizenship policies.

Practical implications – This research contributes to communities' engagement in policy processes and highlights the enabling role of HEIs.

Originality/value – It rearticulates participatory approaches to active citizenship and learning in communities.

Keywords Self-organization, Active citizenship

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, citizenship has tended to be understood as “human agency”, setting the scene for the self-determination marking capacity building programmes to “empower” local communities’, whilst opening questions for research approaches exploring new dimensions of citizenship in practice (Kenny *et al.*, 2015). This paper explores the contribution of community-based research to citizenship self-organisation, drawing upon action research developed by a partnership of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) in the context, among others, of the ESRC Take Part programme led by the University of Lincoln.

Community empowerment links building community capacity to influence in decision making, governance and policy development for citizenship engagement in democratic processes. Community-based research explores discourses and practices of democratic knowledge and power for social change. Citizens, through Civil Society organisations, are struggling to understand and extend the boundaries of power in the operational domain of their interactions with policy makers, and how to move strategically to produce democratic transformations, at all levels of decision making. Education for more empowering forms of civil and civic action moves to include



learning about how to challenge unequal power relations, and how to work collectively to promote agendas of social justice (Mayo and Rooke, 2006).

The challenge for community-based researchers is to coproduce knowledge with communities, using approaches that enable communities to map needs, barriers and opportunities. Community-based action research has the potential to increase research mindedness, strengthen self-organisation, develop evidence of good practices and evaluation tools and facilitate reflective practice. (Mayo *et al.*, 2013, pp. 237-238).

Social systems and active citizenship, as transdisciplinary areas of research, imply greater understanding of the mutual constitution between individual and social patterns. A fair distribution of power in the self-organisation of local communities cannot be taken for granted. Those with knowledge and organisation will be able to better understand the structures and processes of power involved in decision making, some times for their own benefits. How to increase knowledge and support disadvantaged communities is a key point of research as part of the community empowerment process and promoting social justice agendas. This paper presents a research approach that start from communities' own issues and organisational structures as platforms to discuss social transformation, using as a reference the case of the UK Take Part programme.

2. Key concepts: active citizenship and Civil Society

The notion of “social citizenship” introduced by T.H. Marshall was a turning point in the development of the citizenship concept. As a full member of society, a citizen should enjoy not only the civil rights gained in the seventeenth century, and the political rights gained in the eighteenth century, but also the social rights that constituted the struggle of the nineteenth century and later.

The complexity of new citizenship theory and practice makes “human agency” a key condition in the process of self-organisation and social transformation. However, very little is known about the different realities and perceptions of how people understand citizenship.

Citizenship practice takes place in the self-organising space of Civil Society. But, this is also a space where power structures exclude those lacking skills and organisation from participating. Civil Society is a long-standing and contested concept, increasingly popular with governments, international organisations, academics and practitioners. It refers to those spaces where people can debate and demand social transformation and despite different developments, the concept “maintains the essence to inspire successive generations in their struggles for a better life” (Edwards, 2011). It also has an intimate connection with a better democratic society, as civil societies are spaces occupied by the voluntary and community sector and neighbourhoods, home to charities, faith-based organisations, human rights campaigners, housing associations and sports clubs, etc. In other words, a set of not for profit associations, which promote democracy and social justice, distinct from the state and the market, with the self-determination and capacity to engage actively in society (Young, 2000).

Freire's approach to community education and experiential learning has influenced a wide range of community-based research and active citizenship learning initiatives in recent times (Tandon and Hall, 2012; Etmanski *et al.*, 2014). It enables individual and collective critical understanding of the realities, issues, perceptions and expectations of communities in order to develop strategies for social transformations. Freire's learning approach is based in constant dialogical and dialectic reflection, observation and understanding of the power structures to define the route map for change. It has been

used to support people and organisations to overcome barriers to participation and in particular to support processes promoting social networks to break down inequality; to empower active citizens through learning bringing people together for community action and solidarity; to support citizens and communities to have a voice; to build partnerships for learning and action sharing the benefits of building stronger communities (Mayo *et al.*, 2013).

Citizens' participation has great potential in democratic societies, but there is also a risk of being hijacked by minorities, who over-influence the direction and quality of outcomes. Those with the resources, power and knowledge to shape discourses and practices can do it to their advantage, increasing power inequalities at the expense of the weakest (Gaventa, 2011). They skew self-organising processes. The citizens able to participate are often the ones who know how the "system works", so they can use power structures pursuing their own interests. It is a fact that these groups are more able to obtain this help and this is, in most cases, owing to their organisational competence. Therefore, it is essential to help improve the organisational competence of disadvantaged people, to enable them to participate. However, it is not enough in Civil Society to simply say "organise yourselves and go out to work". Civil Society's associations, groups and organisations need help to protect the interests of the weakest (Walzer, 2002). Civil Society can articulate citizens' participation in these places, but it requires guiding the self-organisation of action spaces (Espejo, 1996, 2002).

Civil Society is a natural self-organising space, where citizens define their rights and expectations and create new forms of democratic transformation (Young, 2000). They learn and as a result, adapt their interactions and relationships with local authorities and policy makers, and make alliances and networks with agents in local, national and global spaces to break down inequalities. Self-organisation needs enhancing shared values, particularly around social justice and solidarity. For this purpose, self-organisation should help citizens develop collective inner strengths, so they have a platform from which to work together, become outward looking and promote social justice. But self-organisation, underpinned by heterarchical relationships, is often chaotic and fails to produce strong participatory platforms (Barbrook, 2014). In spite of this, perhaps there is something in the "genetic code of human beings that resists attempts to bureaucratise the self-organising principle of civil society". Citizens struggle for a voice to increase their influence in public decision making, so the challenge for Civil Society is to enable learning that helps citizens pursue shared values, in non-coercive contexts. Only a comparatively small number of associations, groups and organisations have the capacity to overcome the obstacles preventing them from producing socially shared values. Organisations are needed to support a more pluralistic understanding of "identity", in all its different forms, as well as citizens' issues, expectations and opportunities, as these are the catalysts for the self-organising collectives and groups of Civil Society.

The relationship between power, citizenship and democracy has become a key topic of research and activism (Rosenblum and Post, 2002). Researchers are producing more and more holistic research evidence on how to increase effective Civil Society self-organisation, and how governments can improve their capacity to engage in a non-hierarchical relationship with citizens.

Of central significance is the organisational structure for citizens learning through actions, taking account of the circularity between observation and reflection with conversations shaping knowledge, practice and theory-in-use. Identification of local

systemic effects, through the critical reflection of those involved, has also been seen as key to effective active citizenship (Mayo *et al.*, 2013).

Increasingly, populations throughout the world are fighting more aggressively for changes that give substance to their rights and effective action enabling the social change they want to see. The emergency of social movements empowered by the new communication opportunities is transforming power relationships (Castells, 2012). Citizens are spreading and limiting the edges of power and are growing more concerned with understanding the structures and processes that enable them to participate effectively in decision-making processes.

Civil Society is strengthened when it develops an inclusive relationship with the state and the momentum is making visible the need for a holistic and systemic response to these requirements, in order to find innovative roads to reach a representative, inclusive, participatory and deliberative democracy and there is a need for more studies to understand relationships in social systems to develop stronger links to active citizenship policies (Espejo, 2007).

The relationship between citizens and the state requires programmes of community engagement, in which Civil Society offers a natural space for self-organisation. The research reported in this contribution discusses how to facilitate Civil Society's self-organisation processes, with the aim of speeding up inclusion and cohesion.

The role of HEIs in the relationship between active citizenship and democracy lies in generating new challenges. HEIs are striving to articulate and produce rigorous evidence of practices that produce positive social integration and protection of the most vulnerable. Helping groups of Civil Society to learn how to reach inclusion and cohesion for particular issues, has been one of the purposes of the Take Part programme in the UK[1]. In the next section this paper elaborates Take Part; its research process and findings.

3. Take Part programme

The national project

Over the past decade partnerships to support learning to take part in Civil Society as an active citizen have been a topical policy commitment. In the UK, the previous Labour government launched two consecutive initiatives, following a consultation by the Home Office on adult citizenship learning in 2002. First, "Active Learning for Active Citizenship" (2004-2006)[2], based in seven regional hubs, working in partnership with local voluntary and community sector organisations and academic partners. The hubs developed good practice guides and national learning frameworks (2006 and 2011). Second, the Take Part programme (2008-2011) to improve citizens' knowledge, skills and confidence, supported by a national support programme, designed to engage organisations beyond the programme. The programme involved several local authorities as well as third sector organisations and universities, which led to the ESRC capacity building cluster (Mayo *et al.*, 2013)[3].

Freire's approach was used by the Take Part programme to support citizenship learning processes, building upon previous lessons from best practice in the voluntary and community sectors. Its aim was facilitating civil and civic participation, and enabling people to come together in collective action over shared interests. It started from the issues and concerns of individuals, groups, organisation and communities. It provided spaces for experiential learning through courses, workshops, conversations, mentoring and other forms of learning and engagement. It encouraged citizens to press for change by influencing and shaping social policy and practices; promoted reflection, awareness and understanding; expanded opportunities for participation, in partnership with third

sector, public and private bodies making an active contribution to their communities (Take Part Learning Framework, 2006-2011).

Take Part reconnected with local knowledge communities, building new capabilities within the communities and producing evidences of good practices of sustainable community led programmes. This was done offering spaces, time and systematic and systemic spaces to observe the purpose and realities of their own community groups like residences panels and building sustainable and regular conversation in the process of building Civil Society. Rather than to pressure with narrow, pre-conceived and often irrelevant evaluations the programme helped community groups to learn more about their own strengths and weaknesses as a constructive exercise (Tam, 2013). This was a systemic and constructed process driven by the participants and supported by researchers, facilitators, practitioners and community leaders in general.

The East Midlands/Lincoln project

Lincoln University (LU), together with other partners contributed to the Take Part research. LU leading a national research cluster, produced a sustained contribution to governmental and third sector approaches to citizenship education. Take Part at Lincoln supported spaces for different forms of dialogue, monitoring, facilitation and enabling. These spaces were neutral, to speed up, facilitate and enable self-organising processes in:

- Area committees, neighbourhood working areas, area forums, citizen panels and local forums for youth, women, mental health or migrant workers, with the aim of improving the knowledge and skills of the diverse actors involved, including parish councillors, neighbourhood workers, community organisers and faith leaders (Mendiweso-Bendek and Herron, 2010).
- Multigenerational learning for solidarity between the generations (Watts, 2013/2015) aimed to enable the groups to assess their impact, and to investigate together how to develop more effective activities for local change.
- Sports volunteering and community engagement community-based research was undertaken on how volunteering in sport and with grassroots sports organisations may contribute to community development, engagement and cohesion in rural communities. The research focused predominantly on rural counties of the UK, and used a variety of community-based learning approaches, building on work that has been undertaken over a number of years. This has involved working in partnership with local sports partnerships, clubs and associations and volunteers.

Evaluations/impacts: national and local

Take Part demonstrated effective community-based processes using Paulo Freire's active learning pedagogy (Freire, 1972) and contributed new knowledge to make the concepts workable. For example, it helped to articulate and define the context and the forms of relationship in the learning process. It helped to make changes to policy development and practice in the area of public participation in democratic processes, especially in terms of community engagement and community empowerment, enabling people to feel able to influence the decisions that affect them, in their local area and beyond.

The evaluation of Take Part by the Community Development Foundation (Miller and Hatamian, 2011), found that "The programme had an extensive reach, with

thousands benefiting from accredited and non-accredited learning programmes, community leadership courses, workshops, one-off sessions, Pathfinder events and local ‘train the trainers’ courses”.

In the East Midlands, the research at the University of Lincoln led had impact by leading a Pathfinder programme in partnership with the Lincolnshire Assembly, every local authority and a range of communities and voluntary organisations. Lincoln also extended their local reach through a Regional Champions programme (Take Part in the East Midlands), in partnership with the Workers Education Association and supported by five district councils.

4. Research impact

The Take Part programme contributed to the development of “research mindedness”, as third-sector organisations began to develop an enhanced awareness of the value of research more generally. It helped third-sector organisations understand how to undertake research for themselves, commission research most effectively and identify relevant research methodologies and tools, as well as ways of identifying, evaluating and then applying research findings.

Overall, this research helped to develop innovative approaches to community engagement and empowerment, issues of central importance to the self-organisation of the third sector, as well as the public and private sectors.

This programme on the organisation and practice of citizenship learning showed the impact of conceptual robustness in direct applicability to local efforts. It included a sustained strategy of maintaining a link within the programme from research to practice.

Constructed conversations

An important methodological support for this research was “constructed conversations”, which reflected the practical application of an already developed conceptual research at LU (Espejo, 1996, 2002). Civil Society groups construct their identities in the process of extending the boundaries of their power (i.e. issues, expectations and opportunities). This construction is the outcome of communication processes among citizens. Identities emerge from the way in which citizens relate to one another in their moment-to-moment communications. Citizenship is understood as a stable construction-property that emerges from these interactions. Citizens are producing the contexts they belong to, at the same time as being defined by these contexts (Espejo, 2000). Take Part facilitated the recognition of possibilities and diversity through constructed conversations. These conversations were designed to help participants in Civil Society to be systemic observers of their own internal processes as they extend the boundaries of their power, and also to observe from the outside, as external observers. The systemic observer is inside and outside the action. From this perspective they simultaneously observe themselves as actors and observers in a circular causality.

Constructed conversations, with the aim to enable effective self-organisation in Civil Society, are more than community conversations or collective observation. These constructed conversations need structures that at the same time as harnessing the interactions of groups operating under non-coercive rules and, as yet, undefined purposes, also enable inclusion of all people and openness of expression for all viewpoints. These are conversations which steer groups towards shared issues,

maintaining their course through on-going feedback (cf. Beer, 1994). These are conversations that observe, analyse and reflect about community and authorities organisational practices, processes and structures. These are conversations of Civil Society about barriers, opportunities and learning in processes that influence decision-making processes.

Connecting with local knowledge communities offered spaces, time and systemic spaces to constructed conversations to find strengths, weaknesses and learning lesson in the process building communities. These are conversations that have adopted the assumption that the meaning of community implies to take under consideration social justice and active citizenship. Community led sustainable conversations can increase community cohesion, inclusion and social solidarity; conversations about how to create alliances and networks to break down inequalities.

This research combined ideas of self-organisation and understanding power relationships by taking a knowledge co-production approach, working with communities and envisaging community research as part of the community development process. Take Part focused on active citizenship learning tools for third-sector organisations, community-based research, training for trainers and forms to strengthen university and community partnerships. Recently published results (Mayo *et al.*, 2013, pp. 237-238) indicate that the approach has enabled communities themselves to “map needs”, “explore the impact of public policy”, “strengthen self-organisation”, “develop evaluation tools” and “facilitate reflective practice”. The research also identifies that the assumption of effective “self-organising” in local communities cannot be taken for granted, an issue that needs further studies and elaboration. Identification of local systemic effects, through critical reflection by the actors involved, has also been seen as key to effective active citizenship.

The emphases of these programmes were upon learning collectively, as well as individually, and learning experientially, through engaging as volunteers and participants in structures of governance. Through increasing their knowledge and their critical understanding, learners could also be empowered to take collective action in the pursuit of the values of equality and social justice (Mayo, 2010).

State structures to enable self-organisation

At a more global level, the state is responsible for enabling effective processes of self-organisation in Civil Society. As Civil Society becomes stronger its demands on the state and the economy will increase, and in particular, the state will have to strengthen its organisational ability to respond. This is likely to produce a relationship where the circularity will increase mutual demands and opportunities. The self-organisation of Civil Society needs a social context that respects justice and freedom. Social justice is a key element of Civil Society and involves not only self-determination, but also self-development. Self-development means being able to actively engage in the world and grow, which requires state intervention, its own activities and those of the economy and Civil Society.

5. Future work and conclusion[4]

This paper has discussed the impacts of a research programme and offered research findings in line with other researchers’ understanding of concepts and practices for partnership learning between universities and Civil Society. At its root is Freire’s (1972) conceptual framework to justify approaches to active citizenship, Civil Society and

third sector learning. Take Part was based, amongst other influences, upon Freire's principles for participatory learning for social justice and equalities. The approach was to enable citizens and communities to make effective use of the spaces offered by government programmes from above, whilst continuing to strengthen Civil Society's capacity for progressive, autonomous action from below, with particular emphasis upon self-organising amongst women, black and ethnic minority communities and other groups suffering from discrimination and oppression.

The academic world can sometimes be far away from the complexity of local knowledge narratives. Therefore, the challenge for HEIs is to support reflection and help articulate their local and global narratives, by coproducing knowledge for social transformation. Whilst their role in the relationship between active citizenship and democracy lies in generating new challenges.

The self-organisation of Civil Society in the UK, as elsewhere, is facing major challenges in the current times, particularly in terms of the potential opportunities to be grasped (Mayo *et al.*, 2013). Community-based research to support Civil Society, community empowerment and engagement needs a conceptual rigour. Successive governments concerned with learning have favoured narrow project evaluations, instead of participative evaluation to support self-organisation. "Researchers should be given more opportunities to focus their research and help community groups learn more about their own strengths and weaknesses as a participative process, rather than simply collecting data to respond to funders" (Tam, 2013). There is a need to learn to bridge languages in use, by enabling co-production learning processes. In addition, third-sector organisations need to strengthen their own capacities to undertake research and evaluation, in order to demonstrate the value of their outcomes to potential funders. There are pressures to make the most effective use of resources, by thinking strategically and building alliances with organisations with similar values, working towards transformative goals for the longer term. University and community-based research partnerships can make a vital contribution to those goals.

In summary, further research is necessary to:

- Critically examine strategies to strengthen self-organisation in the third sector and more generally the self-organisation process of Civil Society. For example, ways in which participative approaches in arts, media and sports can contribute to community development.
- Develop tools and practices for a participative evaluation, in order to demonstrate the value of sustainable community led programmes over time.
- Facilitate reflective practice and research mindedness to develop strategies in the third-sector organisations to strengthen analyses on their own contributions and impact in policy development.

Notes

1. www.takepart.org
2. See Woodward (2004).
3. www.takepartresearchcluster.org
4. For a complete identification of the research findings see Mayo *et al.* (2013).

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