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Marginalised or Enabled Voices? 'User Participation' in Policy and Practice

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The idea of participation has been central to many policy developments in recent years. Both Conservative and Labour governments have used notions of participation and involvement in attempts to justify and implement their social policies. Yet, despite a plethora of initiatives and guidance around 'participation' emerging from all levels of government, and a substantial academic literature, there remains a major, and potentially damaging, lack of clarity over many aspects of participation, while the secret of achieving 'real' participation appears to continue to remain elusive.

Introduction: the policy framework

During the 1980s and 1990s the Conservative governments generally pursued a consumerist approach to participation, underpinned by their market-oriented ideology, the rise of consumerism more generally, and a desire amongst professionals and the users of services to see greater user involvement and empowerment in the shaping of services. In practice, this was reflected in market and market-type mechanisms and the development of new public management approaches to the delivery of public services (for example, Bochel and Bochel, 2004; Massey and Pyper, 2005).

Since 1997, under New Labour, there have been a range of even more eclectic influences that have encouraged participatory initiatives. These have included Labour's acceptance of some of the new right's criticisms of the public sector, but at the same time a commitment to some greater degree of democratic participation. The influence of consumerism and user groups has also remained significant. But there have also been a number of new influences, linked with ideas such as inclusion and with changes to the policy process (see, for example, Bochel and Duncan, 2007). Where the former is concerned, echoes of New Labour's concern with social exclusion and inclusion can be seen, with a desire to try to ensure that a broader range of voices are heard. This has been reinforced by arguments such as those around social capital, with proponents of such views arguing that participation can bring benefits to those individuals who participate, and to society more generally. Where the latter is concerned, Labour's agenda for the modernisation of government has included a concern for greater 'inclusiveness' in policy making, both in making voices heard, but also grounded in a belief that this will produce better policies, and, consequently, better outcomes. However, it is also clear that for the government 'inclusive' policy making is about involving not only users, but also a whole range of other stakeholders and interests, including those who are responsible for the implementation of policies.

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This article seeks to review the nature and purposes of participation, and in particular user participation, as it has developed over recent years, highlighting many of the complexities and ambiguities that continue to bedevil participatory initiatives, including how participation is legitimated (for example in relation to the 'representativeness' of participants, methods of consultation and participation, and issues of power and conflict).

The nature and purposes of participation

User participation can be defined as a form of activity shared by both governmental and non-governmental actors, at least some of whom are 'users' in the sense of being directly involved in the processes and/or outcomes of the activity (other kinds of participation include: civil participation, where people participate in non-governmental organisations; and civic participation, where people participate in governmental decision-making bodies). We suggest that there are at least three types of user in this sense. First, 'policy makers', those (primarily senior politicians, officials and professionals), who have the political, organisational or professional power to determine the overall philosophy or strategic direction of the policy process. Second, 'activists', those who lack this power but are nevertheless actively involved in the policy process, even to the extent of commissioning or providing services. Third, what Bang (2005) calls 'everyday makers', who are not actively involved in shaping or changing the process but are nonetheless directly affected by it. Users of each type can be governmental or non-governmental; for example, everyday makers could include junior council staff as well as ordinary residents; and activists could include committed GPs as well as community leaders. This is clearly a more 'inclusive' approach to understanding user participation than one that sees it purely in terms of 'service users', who are typically conceptualised as clients or consumers of state welfare services (such as patients, students, tenants and benefit claimants).

The purposes of participation are many and varied, and unpicking the debates around these is key to an understanding of participation and an ability to take the debate forward. Participation might be intended to improve governance, democracy, social capital, education and development of individuals, policies, service implementation and delivery – all, or one or more of these, or something else altogether. Clarification of the purposes of participation is therefore crucial, and initiatives that are not clear about this, or which have one or more purposes, may create confusion and undermine the ability to produce successful outcomes.

In reality, this lack of clarity extends to many of the ideas and much of the terminology associated with participation, including the ways in which 'users' are represented, and the ends for participation, all of which potentially affect the prospects of participation successfully impacting upon policy and practice, as well as posing real problems for analysis. This is true even within government documents promulgating participation as good practice. For example, the terms 'consultation' and 'participation' suggest different degrees of involvement in the decision-making process (see, for example, Cabinet Office, 2002: 41), yet they are often used interchangeably. This causes difficulties for those seeking to encourage and enable 'user participation', and has the potential to impact negatively on the policy process, policy outcomes and the ways in which users of different types experience participation.

Similarly, while there are now many different methods of user participation – examples include involvement via written consultation on new or existing services and

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policies, becoming a member of a focus group or citizens' panel to discuss specific issues, engaging in dialogue through a workshop, participating in an on-line chat event, helping to formulate policy options and proposals via interactive games and scenario planning, or taking part in visioning exercises (see, for example, Cabinet Office, 2002; Bochel and Evans, 2007; Stoker, 2007), as well more consumerist approaches grounded in notions of individual choice – what arguably is often unclear are the purposes that these are intended to serve in relation to particular initiatives.

Not only are there many different ways in which users might participate, but an equally important issue for this article is how they come to participate at all, because this relates strongly to issues of representation and legitimacy, as outlined further later in this article, including more specifically political concerns with democracy and public engagement, as discussed, for example, by Stoker (2007). There is also the potential for conflict between the role of elected representatives as decision makers and the possibilities for a shift in power frequently implied by participatory initiatives, leading to a further blurring of traditional representative democracy and more participatory representative approaches (Bochel, 2006; Howard and Sweeting, 2007).

Another issue is that different types of 'users' (policy makers, activists and everyday makers) may play different participant roles, for example as elected or selected or otherwise recognised representatives of different constituencies, as 'experts' in a particular area or as impartial 'untainted' adjudicators (Saward, 2005; see also Barnes *et al*., 2007). Therefore, the roles of the different types of user need to be clear. We might pose a series of questions to help in thinking about this, such as: what is expected from users? Has this been made clear to them (including whether they have been made aware of the limits of their legitimate involvement)? What feedback will be provided? What resources, if any, are available to support the process of participation? And how will the results of involvement inform policy or practice? (Bochel, 2006).

Negotiating power and conflict in user participation

A further aspect of recent emphases on participation that lacks clarity is power relationships. For example, the move towards wider, more participatory forms of governance, and greater participation in general, currently sits alongside traditional forms of representative government in what can sometimes be an uneasy relationship. There is potential for tension between the decision-making roles of elected representatives, and the implications of participatory initiatives, incorporating elements of both conflict and consensus. The move towards greater participation can help to hold organisations to account, but it can also weaken the role of elected politicians.

Arguably, the main problem here is what is known as the 'democratic deficit': most users, and activists and everyday makers in particular, are not represented at all in any given policy process (a reflection of their relative powerlessness). Typically, decisions are made by elected representatives of a wider constituency (e.g. local councillors, MPs) or by unelected professionals and managers, perhaps in consultation with a small number of user activists. The 'everyday makers' (Bang, 2005), therefore, who tend not to participate directly, find that their indirect participation is also non-existent (because there is no mechanism for them to be represented in the policy process) or at best ineffective (because they have a vote but it makes no clear difference to the result).

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Conflicts may emerge, especially at the local level (see, for example, Newman *et al*., 2004; Carr, 2007), and in relation to long-standing questions about representation, legitimacy, leadership and authority (Gaventa, 2004). As much of the existing literature around user participation suggests (see, for example, Newman *et al*., 2004; Barnes *et al*., 2007), such conflicts are often underpinned by unequal power relations between stakeholders in the participation process.

Some argue that participation is more effective and empowering in situations where power relations are roughly equal (Fung and Wright, 2003, cited in Gaventa, 2004: 18). Despite some evidence of user involvement impacting upon the way services are delivered, the National Community Forum (Morris, 2006) points to considerable research which suggests that users, whether as individuals or in groups such as communities, are failing systematically to influence public services through new participation mechanisms (see, in particular, Barnes *et al*., 2007). This is even the case within New Labour flagship programmes such as Sure Start and New Deal for Communities (see, for example, Perrons and Skyers, 2004; Geddes, 2006; Wright *et al*., 2007). In relation to Sure Start, Gustafsson and Driver (2005: 539) conclude that 'Parents, in effect, are powerless in the governance structures of Sure Start', as the overall Sure Start policy framework serves to shape the policies of local programmes and therefore limits the power for participants to move beyond any already established frameworks. In many ways, then, this reinforces the position of policy makers, and perhaps 'activists', as having 'expert' knowledge about policy solutions. Similarly, consumerist initiatives can be criticised as they risk replicating and reinforcing existing inequalities, while choice can be constrained by a variety of factors, including who is making the choice and how, while choice for some may not be choice for others (see, for example, Arksey and Glendinning, 2007, on informal carers, or Hilditch, 2007, on choice-based lettings in social housing). As a result of user participation, however, policy makers, and for that matter activists, may no longer be the only 'experts' in the field; the process may also inform users so that they act in different ways, with Gustafsson and Driver noting that Foucault's 'pastoral power' could mean that in Sure Start parents do gain power to some extent, including perhaps by being able to challenge the power of others.

Indeed, shifts towards user involvement and participation have often been concerned with a desire to encourage greater inclusion in the policy process for groups and individuals whose voice and contributions have historically been marginalised (for example, ethnic minorities, youth, older people) (Gaventa, 2004). Yet, for some critics, it is apparent that existing structures for engaging users' views, and particularly those of activists and everyday makers, within the policy process, may in fact exaggerate feelings of exclusion and disempowerment. For example, in a study examining domestic violence survivors' forums, Hague (2005: 200) concluded that 'women's groups sometimes felt betrayed and side-lined, when their careful contributions were ignored, even when the reason might have been over-work and exhaustion on the part of policy-makers facing too many demands and scarce resources'. Similarly, even in cases where agreements are made in the presence of service users, there are examples where decisions have been made 'behind closed doors' (see, for example, Barnes *et al*., 2004), or where users are perceived by officials as choosing 'the wrong battles to fight – things they can't influence' (Birchall and Simmons, 2004: 36–37). Hiebert and Swan (1999), for example, tell the story of an HIV/AIDS user group in Canada whose funding was abruptly terminated when they dared to challenge the judgements of health professionals. More recently, Skidmore *et al*.

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(2006) have provided considerable evidence to show how participation can disempower communities by co-opting so-called 'community leaders' to the initiative, leaving the rest of the community behind. Such examples highlight the risk that some attempts at user involvement, far from challenging the marginalisation and disempowerment of some groups, will actually reinforce it.

These instances further highlight the complex and fragile nature of user involvement and participation in current policy processes, and emphasise the need for clarity regarding power differentials between different stakeholders (see also Beresford and Hoban, 2005) and honesty surrounding users' influence, including the relative power of 'policy makers', 'activists' and 'everyday makers'. A recent article which draws on the findings of a major review on service user participation in social care by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) concludes that such 'difficulties with power relations were found to underlie the majority of identified problems with effective user-led change. Exclusionary structures, institutional practices and professional attitudes can affect the extent to which service users can influence change' (Carr, 2007: 267–268).

There is, of course, also the potential for conflicts within organisations that seek to represent users (Barnes *et al*., 2006). Such conflicts may relate to the different issues identified by different groups. Indeed, research on voluntary and community sector organisations by Taylor *et al*. (2004) suggests that despite the government's promotion of 'diversity', government respondents were repeatedly impatient with the number of different voices encountered on similar issues, preferring instead to hear a unified voice (cited in Gaventa, 2004: 17).

In response to such difficulties, alternative mechanisms for participation can be found among the abundance of writings on user involvement. Such methods, whilst not overcoming the problems arising from unequal power relations, may at least go some way towards reducing inequalities and encouraging greater empowerment in the process. Here, ideas of flexibility and creativity in facilitating inclusive dialogue between users of different types are important (Carr, 2007). For example, Barnes *et al*. (2006) describe a workshop event they facilitated that was designed to challenge feelings of exclusion among users of services, with their informal approach intended to encourage the users to be 'active, contributing experts rather than passive recipients and be able to tell their stories in a way that made sense to them and in an environment in which they felt comfortable' (Barnes *et al*., 2006: 335). Such approaches, creating conditions within which such dialogue might become routine, may be appropriate to relationships between all types of users, perhaps involving co-governance, as discussed later. Amongst other things, however, this would require radical changes in the organisation of the professions and state organisations.

Evaluating user participation

As argued earlier in this article, 'user participation' is taken to mean activity, focused on policy processes, by those who are affected by such processes. Such participation can be evaluated in terms of either inputs or outputs/outcomes. It can be assessed, first, in terms of the extent and intensity of its inclusivity; and, second, in terms of its fitness for purpose (whether interpreted internally or externally). These alternative approaches to evaluation lead to quite different sets of evaluation criteria.

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Inclusivity is a democratic value: that is, in a democracy, all citizens should have the opportunity to participate on an equal basis. Modern political systems, however, do not make it possible for most citizens to participate directly in policy making. Instead, they participate indirectly, through elected representatives. The inclusivity of user participation, therefore, depends not only on how many people and how much they participate but also on how well they are represented in the policy process.

Representation is a major unresolved issue here. For example, an individual may participate to represent themselves, to represent the views of a group or organisation, or a broader group, such as users of a particular service, or people with a certain characteristic, for example, women, older people or black and ethnic minorities, on an elected, selected or mandated basis. These categories are not mutually exclusive. One way to help to address this lack of clarity, at least in more top–down initiatives, may be for 'policy makers' or 'expert' users (Bang, 2005) to be clear about who they wish to involve and why they are selecting particular groups or individuals as opposed to others, and for 'activists' or 'everyday makers' to be clear about why they are being asked to participate, and who they are expected to represent. Even where it is possible for discussions to take place on more equal terms, similar consideration of roles may be desirable, in order to ensure effective and accountable decision-making. In general, for 'inclusive' policy making, there must be clear rules and protocols in place to ensure that full account is taken of the diversity within and across user groups, and this includes strategies to achieve equality of participation and representation in all stages of the policy process.

There are risks in increasing direct participation by 'everyday makers'. Bang (2005: 171), for example, suggests that they might act as atomised consumers, fragmenting and trivialising the public sphere, 'turning democratic debate and opinion-forming into a spectacle performed by competing political celebrities from state, market and civil society'. Alternatively, their participation might be orchestrated by policy makers for their own purposes, as appears to have happened in Mexico City (Harbers, 2007). It is essential, therefore, to devise appropriate mechanisms to ensure more effective indirect participation, and this might, for example, be achieved through the creation, development and support of democratically organised user groups, with as wide a membership base as possible (for example, the social movement organisations on fuel poverty and sustainability discussed in Barnes *et al*., 2007). In spite of the many drawbacks of such an organisation, our political system has so far not managed to produce any viable example of such a group better than a political party.

With regard to outcomes criteria, the key question is how the outcome is to be valued. Arguably, user participation should be evaluated not only in relation to its own objectives but also in relation to its social and political context. It is important, for example, to question what 'improving services' actually means or what purpose will be served by increasing human and social capital or improving governance. Also, participation that serves these purposes may not require representation – for example, participants may need to have only relevant competence or status.

Improving services, for example, could be understood as involving practices to increase the well-being of those who use them, which in theory could be measured in terms of health, happiness and such like (see Layard, 2005). Three key issues would need to be addressed here: first, establishing if and to what extent the well-being of service users is a consequence of user participation; second, identifying which users or groups of users successfully influence policy or practice; and, third, identifying which users benefit,

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and to what extent, from the process. The relationship between user participation and well-being is complex, for a number of reasons, including the different types of user (policy makers, activists and everyday makers), and the lack of correlation both between participants and beneficiaries and between the degree of participation and the amount of benefit, either for an individual user or for service users collectively.

Increasing human and social capital also presents difficulties of interpretation and measurement. The evidence for the effects of participation here seems overwhelming (see, for example, Halpern, 2005). This is hardly surprising, because participation inevitably develops people's skills and, by definition, user participation is highly likely to increase linking social capital as it involves 'linking' people into policy processes. Also, increasing the quality of representation by building democratic groups and organisations of users involves the creation and strengthening of bonding and bridging social capital. There is a risk of circularity here, in that increasing (user) participation requires the building of human and social capital, yet the purpose of the participation is to do the self-same thing. To avoid this circularity, it is necessary to specify more precisely the kind of human and social capital that user participation is intended to develop and the reasons for developing it. If, for example, user participation results in greater autonomy of action or increased capacity to influence policy making, then this might be regarded as an outcome that could be measured by evaluators.

Improving governance is beset by analogous problems relating to the meaning of governance and the measurement of its quality. Kooiman (2005) distinguishes three modes of governance, related to three different kinds of (user) participation (or what Kooiman calls 'interaction'): hierarchical governance, self-governance and co-governance. Applied to the policy process, hierarchical governance is 'top–down' governance in which a central 'governator' dominates the policy process (through an increasing variety of techniques: line management, contract, regulation, targeted funding, programme planning, etc). Self-governance is 'bottom–up' governance in which actors make their own policy in their own way. Co-governance is then where different groups of actors work co-operatively with one another, in a process of mutual shaping and mutual representation (see also Somerville and Haines, 2007).

Participation in hierarchical governance commonly involves processes of consultation with activists or user representatives and/or incorporation of them into the hierarchy. Typically, therefore, these processes involve the development of new techniques, which are simply added to the existing repertoire. In this context, 'improving governance' may mean only making the systems of inequality or domination more effective, with the autonomy of service users (everyday makers) being prevented or undermined and they and activists becoming complicit in their own oppression.

(User) participation in self-governance, in contrast, seems like a truism. Nevertheless, it draws attention to the need for users to organise themselves separately, developing their own policies, practices and forms of representation. As mentioned earlier, this is essential for maximising the inclusivity of participation. So self-governance is a condition for effective user input into the policy process, which itself can improve self-governance. For example, tenant management organisations (TMOs) are self-governing, they enable activists and everyday users to participate with policy makers in making policy on council housing management, and such participation can serve to strengthen TMO self-governance (ODPM, 2002). This does not mean, however, that increasing self-governance is a legitimate aim for user participation in every case, because much depends on

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the specific character and content of the self-governance concerned – particularly, the democratic quality of its decision-making processes (such as observing due process, mutual respect and equality of voice).

Where self-governing entities based outside the policy process engage on a more or less equal basis with actors based inside the policy process, we have the possibility of co-governance. Here everyday makers and activists participate in at least two arenas – that of their own movement and that of established power. They draw their strength and autonomy from their own organisations, which enable them (in principle) to deal with the mechanisms of hierarchical governance without being subverted or corrupted. Improving co-governance therefore sounds like a legitimate aim for user participation, but it is extremely difficult to achieve because hierarchy is likely to trump self-governance in most cases. This argument therefore highlights the need for evaluation to consider the ways in which hierarchical governance can be transformed, particularly through more radical forms of user participation (see, for example, the application of futures methods – Platt and Cooper, 2006).

Conclusions

This article has sought to highlight the complex nature of 'user participation', in terms of its theoretical underpinnings and the wide variety of approaches that have been followed in seeking to put it into practice. There remains a considerable lack of clarity, and indeed confusion, over many aspects of user participation, and this is often reinforced by other factors, such as the need to undertake initiatives with limited resources and the limited parameters for change in policy and practice that generally exist. Perhaps what emerges most clearly from this discussion is the need for further consideration of the various possible purposes and contexts of user participation and, within attempts to put such participation into practice, the need for clarity and awareness on the part of policy makers, activists and everyday makers, about their roles, the limits of their roles, and the boundaries of involvement. While many of the potential barriers to 'successful' participation might still remain, at least some of the possibilities for disappointment, alienation, unmet expectations and disappointment might be reduced, and the quality of input and of outcomes increased. Beyond that, it appears that there is scope for greater and deeper participation for activists and everyday makers, but this would require a more radical approach to the policy process, potentially developing it around notions of co-governance.

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