

Citizenship and Learning Networks

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Abstract

The presentation introduces a practical model for action-research in contacting and collecting the views of excluded youth within the context of a city-wide urban regeneration initiative – part of a European funded project (*'Dimensions of Social Exclusion and Urban Change'*) based in Newcastle (UK), Rotterdam (Netherlands) and Kiruna (Sweden).

The project is adapting qualitative inquiry into social situations of excluded youth, to add colour and meaning to empirical data. The aim is an improved understanding of 'soft' systems and the process of social exclusion within the city – the views, perceptions, attitudes and values of excluded groups.

The project has adopted an open-ended approach to methods for contacting groups / individuals and gathering this missing 'soft' information. Retrospectively, this is presented as a network model to build research-subject contacts within (i) area based networks; (ii) 'excluded youth' networks, and (iii) formal education networks.

Mixed and multi-methods have been developed, tested and adapted in practice using these networks. This popularising of qualitative survey and action research techniques; not only helps the municipality in understanding the social situation (sub-culture) of socially excluded groups; but becomes part of a mutual learning process between citizens and the municipality.

These methods are presented as a flexible *toolkit* of resources with shared qualitative characteristics. They are all immediately accessible, open-ended, visual, spatial, interactive and designed as a way of prompting individuals and groups to think about their place within the urban system, spatially (geophysical neighbourhoods), temporally (their personal chronology of key events) and systemically (including cause and effect).

Introduction - Background to the methodology

The 'Dimensions of Social Exclusion and Urban Change' project is using *action-research* to understand the processes of social exclusion within a context of a major urban regeneration strategy. In so doing, the research itself has become important as a learning process in testing and adapting methodologies suitable for (i) *contacting*, (ii) *engaging* with and (iii) *structuring* the views of those groups ordinarily excluded from decision-making processes.

In this work, there is a distinction to be made between *knowledge*; based upon collection of information and data; and *understanding*. If knowledge is the possession of 'objective' facts about *what* is happening within the social or cultural situation, *understanding* relates to the operating of this culture and *why* things happen. It is, in part, the qualitative understanding of exclusion rather than the empirical knowledge that was identified as the 'gap' in the evidence base for the regeneration activities within the city (Crilly and Wren 2000). This project is designed to fill some of these gaps in the institutional understanding of the experiences of excluded groups within the city.

This 'learnt' understanding is gained through action-research. It is a heuristic approach - learning by doing. Thus the improved understanding of social situations and the addition to knowledge, is dynamic and in part retrospective - 'learnt by having done'.

Madanipour (1996, and with Bevan 1999) provides a useful review of qualitative factors that link perceptions and behaviour within urban systems. One of the key factors of qualitative and subjective factors is the need for a bottom-up or "micro-perspective" (1996 p74) analysis. This demands a diversity of techniques to collect, analyse and provide structure to material derived directly from the individual or community within the social situation. Most applied research shares this pragmatic position that is not confined by epistemology and which is at essence a revision of Etzioni's (1967) *mixed scanning* approach to methodology, its central concerns being: (i) a contextualisation of the community; (ii) generating an understanding of diversity within the community; and (iii) issues of decision-making and urban change within the social situation (Kaufman and Jacobs 1987).

This paper is concerned with the innovative role of information and 'mapping' methodologies (after Carley 1995, and with Kirk 1998) adopted within the action-research to gain an improved understanding of the processes of exclusion rather than the substantive findings of the research. However, practical examples are used to illustrate a range of techniques that broadly fall under the three headings of *contact*, *engagement* and *structure*.

It is important to note that the research methodology is descriptive rather than theoretical. It is more concerned with techniques that assist in describing, and then understanding, what is actually occurring within a complex social situation. Thus, the methodological structure is not imposed but has largely emerged retrospectively in response to the characteristics of the social situation. In this, it has become characterised by qualitative and open-ended approaches that begin to record attitudes and perceptions.

Contact Networks

A key research question addressed in the project was, 'How can we engage and involve normally inaccessible groups in the identification, definition and development of understandings of local issues of importance to them and to the city as a whole?'. In this context of 'hard-to-reach groups', the primary exclusion examined and addressed as a priority was participative exclusion amongst younger age groups (DETR 1998).

In the course of the project there were a number of obstacles to overcome:

- Accessibility. Hard to reach, inaccessible, little systematic infrastructure and process to deliver systematic contact and engage groups.

- Methodologies. No widely acceptable methods to elicit and capture holistic open-ended views of relevance to strategy formulation across groups and communities.
- Interest. Fundamental lack of interest of the groups in such initiatives; intrinsic barriers to involvement.
- Relevance. Irrelevance of views in a strategic context; qualitative and subjective.
- Banality and Contention. Work is likely to tell us what we know already or lead to counter-views to those of organisations and mainstream culture.
- Process. No infrastructure, process, methods to deliver, record and develop such understandings in systematic effective and sustained ways.
- Scale. Too many groups and people to involve.
- Resources. Resources and staff can be excessive given pay-back.
- Utility. Mainly self-centred perspectives will result; integration and balance of views from different groups.
- Ineffectiveness. Absence of means to act or do anything about what is found out; ineffectual projects; difficulties beyond our capability; extreme cases beyond hope.

One of the early findings of the project was that there was no set and maintained infrastructure to overcome these challenges and reach certain excluded groups in a systematic and direct manner. The structured networks did not exist to reach these groups and these were developed in the course of the project. This 'action-research network' developed through the course of the project and was not defined beforehand. The direction of the network was defined, influenced and changed by the issues that citizens raised in the course of the investigation; as new groups and people were contacted the direction of network development was opportunistically modified.

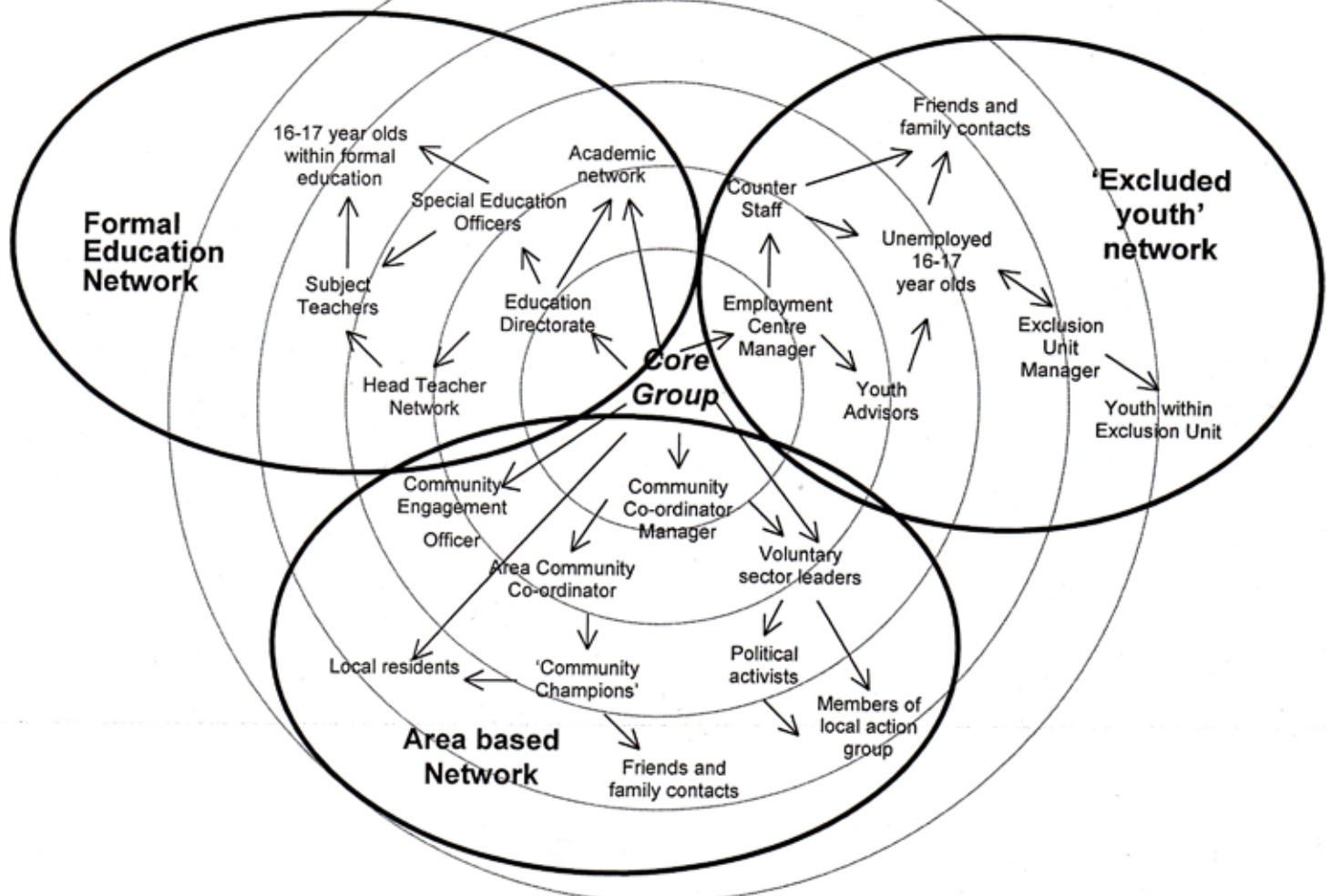
In developing the methodologies we tried to be pro-active in ensuring that we did not exclude hard-to-reach groups. We did this by first creating networks to these groups rather than general networks and processes which it was known would not include them. We found that this included a mix of youth which was positively biased towards the views of excluded groups but which equally did not exclude more mainstream views.

For example, the Employment Centre Interview Sample. Although the interviewee sample was taken from the employment service, targeting those 16/17 year olds living on hardship benefits, it included people in school, temporary work, and college who had visited the service for part-time work opportunities. Some could be described as law-abiding, others were clearly acting in 'grey' areas, some were in further education, others were either in and out of casual work or effectively unemployed. Some had had rewarding school experiences others had been excluded, some were in trouble for offences ranging from drugs to GBH. It was therefore a local cross-section which included excluded youth.

The networks developed included the professional networks in the city (community co-ordinators, employment service managers, education and special school professionals, senior police officers, etc) to help access a community network (including residents, 16/17s, 14 year olds excluded from school, 13-16 year old mothers).

The two major communities accessed are (i) community of excluded and mainstream youth, and (ii) associated professional community.

Although the groups involved in the project evolved throughout the project they were selected as having some significant relation with the local and national social exclusion agenda. Areas covered included: those in undesirable areas of higher than average deprivation; youth (13-18); those without employment; those out of mainstream school through exclusion; those out of mainstream schools due to pregnancy; those involved with (and affected by) youth crime and disorder; those in mainstream (ongoing).



('Action Research' Networks illustrated as 1st – 5th level contacts from Core Group)

These groups contacted within the 'action-research network' (above) are of course not comprehensive but (we found) that these are indicative of youth concerns of the national government agenda. Many of the indicators of exclusion relate to these groups.

The development of group involvement moved through stages. It began with professionals in local government, which lead to adult residents and semi-professionals in an area regarded as relatively excluded, then to 16/17s in the same area (many of whom were additionally unemployed), then to groups of excluded young males around 14 years, and also school age mothers between 13 and 16. Also there were trials with those in schools in Key stage 4 (between 14-16). In addition to these youth groups there was contact and additional participation of professionals responsible for or in contact with these groups. In all around 70 people were involved and around 50 could be

described as members of hard to reach groups (or having characteristics of them) – our 'data subjects'. Others were professionals, semi-professionals community representatives and activists.

The professional network included: local government staff (e.g. community co-ordinators and community professionals); mainstream schools contacts (heads and citizenship co-ordinators); managers and staff in employment centres; heads and professionals of special schools; senior police officers.

In summary the networks developed represent two levels; (i) various members of youth groups including a positive bias towards excluded youth, and (ii) the associated professional networks linking to these groups.

Mixed & Multiple Collection Methods

A range of methods were designed to form the basis of inquiry into three broad areas of concern. These concerns were often the basis for second or third level questioning, particularly if the interviewee required prompting in order to provide some detail of attitudes and values that underpin their actions and experiences. The concerns were addressed in common follow-up questions about neighbourhood (geophysical or spatial networks), social networks (friends and family) and organisations. While it is acknowledged that these are not discrete areas, they did provide some level of consistency in the methods of questioning between different data-subjects albeit the actual form of the question varied between different interviewers.

Accordingly, many of the methods used were required to perform a number of introductory functions. They were ice-breakers, visual prompts / aid-memoirs and a way of opening the discussion with the data-subjects into the three broad concerns of neighbourhoods, social networks and organisations.

These methods included;

- responding to mapped data.
- responding to photographic 'landmarks'.
- photographic recording.
- drawing own 'cognitive' community maps.
- community perceptions - colouring positive and negative aspects of community and photographing positive and negative aspects of community.
- phenomenological questioning - personal interviews and focus groups.
- chronological 'lifeline' mapping.
- network 'organisational' mapping.
- systemic 'linkages' mapping.

There are many lessons gained by the use of the multiple methods. These included the development, application, and testing of several techniques to give a combined approach to investigate produce a snapshot of the total environment of an individual. This also helped train the team in interview techniques the real practice without formal training. The process taught us how to do the process better – it was practice-development (this approach is recommended). The table (below) summarises the advantages and disadvantages of a variety of approaches.

Face to face interviews	
Advantages	Disadvantages
Reduces respondents' anxiety. Builds rapport and trust. Increased response rate. Decreases the potential for error. Experience makes the routing of questions easier. Can ask within limits for clarification. Answers can be recorded. Reduces variation, can probe further. Appropriate for visual methods to be used. Standardised questions – less skilled interviewers. Misunderstanding is less likely. No editing or summarising. Good for getting personal information.	Time consuming and thus potentially costly. Repetitive boredom. Time lines - jog respondents memories. Apathy. Sincerity.
Cognitive and Community Mapping	
Advantages	Disadvantages
Easy to use. Generates ideas to improve areas. Visual and colourful. Easy for participant to engage. Tests knowledge of local area. Encourages lateral and comparative thinking.	Repetitive boredom for facilitator. One instruction at a time.
Chronological and Casual Diagrams	
Advantages	Disadvantages
Flexible approach. Jog respondents memories. Encourages interactive approach and thus can trace history. Visual and immediate (see at a glance). Easy to use in a one-to-one context. Identifies problems. Could use variations of this method for any audience. Learning process – People can find out things they forgot!	May pass judgement on drawing. Needs to be kept neat for others to read. Repetitive.
Errors in survey methods of collecting data	Reducing errors
Sampling errors – sample of population surveyed if the entire population is not being investigated is not representative of the population from which it is drawn. Response error – through ignorance, inarticulateness or unwilling to engage in the process. Distorted answers.	Target audience who have a particular interest in the topic. Building trust and prestige. Reassurance of the importance of questions and the value of their responses. Avoid biased words and ambiguous words. Use appropriate language. Avoid negative questions.

The detailed methodologies which were found to work best were one-to-one recorded interviews including; (i) the production of maps, lifelines and organisational views, and social network diagrams, and (ii) information exchange and provision (in professional or work experience settings).

The *Individual interviews*. These demonstrated that a lot of information and insight can be gained in a short time using the above methodology. Participants were generally very open and honest - sometimes covering personal, illegalities and prejudice freely. A good method to get an overview of context and views.

Aspects which did not work so well for excluded groups included;

- group elicitation and interviews (for professional and semi-professional groups this worked better).
- cause and consequence models (worked in some cases but not in others).
- landmark identification.

The *Group Interviews*. We trialed groups of two, three, five and six. Of these the smaller groups seemed to work best – particularly on refining issues. The largest group output were not particularly informative. In male groups it was either difficult to control (and much time was lost in steering and regaining order in the group), views given did not seem to be considered views, methods are needed to accommodate disagreements while preventing these from dominating interactions. In female groups the difficulty was in getting members of the group to speak freely about the issues that had been identified in individual interviews. This suggests smaller groups only and separation of friends and family.

Characteristics of methodology 'toolkit'

In looking for what works there are a number of shared qualitative characteristics of the methods. There are differences between theoretical approaches and what happens in practice in the use of the 'toolkit'. In practice there are limitations. 'Mapping' methods of all types can be a very powerful tool that can be applied to statistical and decision-making but realising their potential depends on many factors;

- Applying information to decision making processes.
- Appreciation of the value of information.
- Enthusiasm and commitment at all levels.
- Co-operation and co-ordination in the form of partnerships.
- Intuitive / visual to ensure ease to use.
- Transferability depends on low-cost and simplicity.

However, this toolkit is not just methodological. It has to be concerned with a broader process (or protocol) (Crilly and Wren 2000) of sharing information and understandings from multiple perspectives and thus building trusted networks between organisations and individuals with these perspectives. This is an argument for a 'toolkit' of mechanisms and processes for neighbourhood management (Social Exclusion Unit 2000a) where positive attributes of 'self-confidence, community pride and the acquisition of new skills' (Church *et al* 2000) are achieved by meaningful and valuable participatory methods.

The output from this necessarily unstructured and open-ended approach is 'messy' data. The social researcher has a range of diagrams (network and suggested causal), coloured maps, life histories, photographs, interview transcripts (of variable quality and consistency), focus group notes, and published secondary sources.

Presentation and structuring – *making sense of the 'messy' data*

The methodology 'toolkit' can be considered a strategy of 'triangulation' (Silverman 1993) of mixed and multi-methods that link different types of qualitative elicitation and empirical data. This approach is to inform decision-makers' intuitive understanding of the processes of social exclusion and as such, it is beneficial for structuring to maintain intuitive (visual or hierarchical) structures to the mixed source material.

Similarly in the iterative approach to collecting data, the structuring of the source material (a range of primary and secondary sources of mixed qualitative and quantitative) itself becomes the starting point for analysis, questioning and exploration of linkages. Essentially, the material is structured for 'learning'.

The structure of the material aimed to communicate the characteristics of the social situation. The issues that emerged from the open-ended approaches are complex and inter-linked around broad 'configurations of indicators';

- Education (exclusion from mainstream, attainment levels - qualitative and quantitative, participation - length and attendance, truancy).
- Employment and unemployment.
- Participation / demography / organisational (level of involvement, potential for involvement - skill / accessibility, voting levels, perception of authority - trust, dependency, paternalism).
- Crime (youth as offenders, youth as victims, drugs, type of crime - recorded police based records - actual and perception).
- Social trends (school-age pregnancy).

The challenge is to maintain the multiplicity of perspectives and life histories within the data while also providing generic stories that illustrate the systemic nature of the social situation. This is being done by a variety of means including;

- Spatialisation.
- Layering 'linking' data.
- Maintaining the original format at the lower levels.
- Making it interactive.
- Test the use of IT.
- Formalise the material, using the same contact networks, for use in educational settings.

Reflections on action-research methodologies

Emerging from this study are clear locality specific benefits and dis-benefits. This is partly due to the necessary 'bending' of methodologies within a real-life *action-research* application. Throughout the work, pragmatism was considered a professional strength and a means for making the methodologies work in response to the variety of contact situations with data-subjects.

This pragmatism transferred to the generalities of other applied research activities, will likely involve the development of a more focused understanding of the social situation under investigation within the contextual constraints of the lead (or sponsoring) organisation. As such, the methodology has its' own context (including a significant commercial and/or political element) that means it cannot be value neutral.

This real world 'bias' towards specific scales, thematic areas or actions is an inevitable starting point for the use and application of a 'toolkit' of techniques. However, the 'learnt' links between attributes are also an aspect of building a systemic understanding and should suggest additional work, arising from new questioning of apparent links (causal or otherwise) within the social situation. This second stage investigation is to develop and deepen any initial understanding. Hence, the importance of on-going questioning, investigation and feedback on the use and development of the methodology.

Some of the key lessons of this approach to mixed and multiple methods, emerging intuitively from reflection of this action-research are:

- It has demonstrated the practical (and pragmatic) flexibility to allow for time, cost and experience limited approaches to building a mixed quantitative and qualitative understanding that is the basis for analysis at a variety of distinct

spatial scales. This flexibility is demonstrable over time as new material is gathered, structured and linked.

- The requirement for feedback (ongoing adaptation) on the use of the methodology can be established as a stage of participation and discussion that also allows for a broadening and a deepening (including non-spatial) understanding.
- The methodology is initially, best internalised within the sponsoring organisation and used by those individuals' who are closest to the work in progress and thus best placed to benefit from the spatial and systemic 'learning' when it has a specific role in regeneration activities.
- The methodologies have significant parallels with a physical mapping process. The approach is ultimately open-ended. It requires informed decisions and the inclusion of value judgements on the part of those making the maps. These are decisions about which aspects to focus upon, which to include and which to exclude.
- The limitations of spatial mapping are dangerously hidden within this process. There are many non-spatial components to any urban system that can remain unexplored unless those applying the framework of indicators are alert to their presence. There are also dangers in the persuasive nature of any digital (Geographic Information System) output that is given considerable weight within decision support systems as a result of the high level graphic output and the 'blinding' nature of the technology. Thus, care is required in communicating the metadata with any spatial output.

Most significantly, the mixed methodologies have underlined the truism that action-research and intuitive learning are interactive processes. What was initially a framework for a multi-dimensional data model has tended towards a multi-dimensional *process*. A process where the actual aims of the research can and do change through the course of the work and the methodology must maintain the inherent flexibility to provide utility throughout the process.

Issues of systemic and institutionalised exclusion

In the course of this paper, we have reported methodologies networks and processes to reach hard-to-reach groups. It is instructive to step back from the detail and ask ourselves some simple questions: Why do we need such projects? Why are such processes not systematic aspects of our organisational cultures? The very fact that we need such projects are *not* systematic illustrates something of the wider perspective on participative exclusions, and raises consideration of more systemic factors. To help illustrate this perspective it will be useful to consider some of the perceived obstacles to participative involvement of excluded groups and compare these perceptions against the findings of this project.

PERCEIVED OBSTACLES	FINDINGS
Accessibility. Hard to reach, inaccessible, little systematic infrastructure and process to deliver systematic contact and engage groups.	Not as difficult as it might seem; groups can be accessed and networks created. Exclusions come in degrees. These simple methods and incentives can reach those 'moderately' excluded.
Methodologies. No widely used methods to elicit and capture holistic open-ended views of relevance to strategy formulation across groups and communities.	They can be developed and applied. They have been tested on range of groups from excluded to professionals.
Community Interest. Belief in fundamental lack of interest of the groups in such initiatives as intrinsic barriers to involvement.	In practice mixed responses (some found it very interesting, others thought it was neither interesting nor boring). Overall sufficient interest can be sustained for between 30 mins and 1.5 hours given small financial incentive.
Irrelevance. Irrelevance of views in a strategic context; qualitative and subjective.	The issues were in fact relevant to strategic levels as well as operational. They sometimes confirmed issues in general however they neither confirmed nor contradicted strategies - they refine and complicate them.
View of Banality and Contention. Work is likely to tell us what we know already or lead to counter-views to those of organisations and mainstream culture.	Correct. Participative inclusion brings up both. Such studies lead to inclusion of balance and diversity.
Scale. Too many groups and people to involve in practice. Too few people; unrepresentative techniques and results.	Convergence and stability of range of views of areas and issues with relatively small numbers of people. Furthermore 20 16/17s may seem unrepresentative (and it is). However this was a sample from the East of the city – there are around 70,000 people there, of which 2000 might be 16/17. So we are dealing with 1% of people in the target group. A ward has 10,000 people – maybe 200 16/17s then 20 people would be nearer 10% of the target population. Small numbers are improvements on none at all.
Resources. Resources and staff to do this work are excessive.	When compared with alternatives costs and value of those, these methods are not more expensive. Understanding/£ may be more favourable.
No priorities or strategic utility results. Problem of self-centred perspectives will result; integration and balance of views from different groups a problem.	The method fundamentally incorporates consideration of others through relative comparisons. The priority groups and issues emerge as viewed by the rest of the city communities.
Ineffectiveness. Absence of means to act or do anything about what is found out; ineffectual projects; difficulties beyond our capability; extreme cases beyond hope.	For moderate participative exclusions this is wrong – their views can be included. For extreme exclusions we can use approach to support professional networks and learn from their expertise.

We have seen how some of these perceived obstacles can in fact be removed, or they do not exist in the same degree as perceived, and how some groups can be better engaged in participative processes. Many of these perceived obstacles therefore can be primarily attributed to cultural and institutional views and responsibilities rather than being features of reality or of all 'excluded groups'. Systemically hard to reach groups are more accurately described as 'hard to reach *by our current methods processes and networks*'. Taken collectively these perceived obstacles within our cultures *contribute* to participative exclusions. Reflections on the project lead the idea that systemic features can contribute to participative exclusions. These suggest that our perceptions, methods and processes may be partially responsible for some aspects of participative exclusion, and given that these are aspects are most directly under our control these may offer additional points of systemic leverage in dealing with some forms of exclusion. Extending this argument to a wider perspective raises the issue of systemic exclusions as a potential area of further study that addresses institutional concerns identified as;

- Exclusion by methods or by removing the ambiguities in the complex life histories that combine to create the local culture of exclusion.

- Negative bias and distortions; treatment of banal and contentious.
- Identified issues surrounding 'institutionalised exclusion'.
- Governmental definitions of exclusion and editorial control over the definition of 'problems', generally informed by generic empirical indicators.

There is a challenge to organisational culture, where local municipalities are learning from local experts in the social situation and the processes of exclusion – about appropriateness and sensitivity of proposals. Mutual learning can help to overcome the lack of trust that exists between central and local levels of government (DETR 2000 p23) and between the local municipality and those excluded from the local decision-making processes.

Citizenship and learning networks

Mutual learning to improve understanding of the social situation - implying the open-ended approach. Organisations should be thinking about the power of *learning* as both a research methodology and as intervention, but intervention into *networks* not simply area based initiatives.

The idea of 'learning networks', reflects the growing understanding of social exclusion as a dynamic process where many of the factors associated with exclusion are not primarily physical or economic issues. Rather, they reflect inherited (or 'learnt') attitudes from within the social situation. This social situation can be described as a multiplicity of networks of family / friends, peer groups, organisations and neighbourhood – each with a unique perspective on the process of social exclusion.

Learnt attitudes can be in the form of (i) negative attitudes to authority and organisations; (ii) poor self-esteem and accordingly low expectations for education, employment and living standards; and (iii) negative area image and identity, often in a manner that is disparaging both internally and externally to the community.

One effect of this attitudinal culture of exclusion (or culture of poverty) is that it can repeat itself between different generations and networks in an example of 'self-learning'. This self-learning can be positive and negative. If social exclusion is accepted as a process then it has to be addressed by a procedural response. The potential is for developing a policy framework to exclusion that uses self-research and mutual learning processes to create positive self-learning.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Newcastle City Council.

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