

## SKILLS & KNOWLEDGE FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARY

This research also suggests that it takes more than upgrading community capacity in terms of skills in creative thinking, negotiation, and consensus-building to cross some impasses. A citywide framework of planning principles and statutes, within which local negotiations about sensitive spatial re-definitions can be conducted may also ease the intensity of very micro clashes about contested land distribution, and provide a more auspicious starting point.

Two further lessons emerge from the study:

1. The process of agonistic collaborative planning holds more scope for addressing differences in power and contention than traditional approaches that stress the need to reach consensus. The process allows difficult and contentious issues to be acknowledged and put on the agenda.

2. Although there were some issues and skills specific to the Belfast situation such as the coping skills within communities, or exploring the potential for paramilitaries to transfer their organisational and leadership skills to community development, the broad conclusion from discussion with colleagues from England and the USA is that the process has considerable potential for use in most situations, particularly where there is any level of conflict.



This research is one of 11 research projects commissioned from Universities across the UK, under the ESRC/HCA Academy Joint Targeted Initiative on Skills and Knowledge for Sustainable Communities.

To see how the HCA Academy is taking forward lessons from the research, visit:

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### Building Capacity in Divided Communities

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### Achieving cohesion through spirited debate

#### Key Policy Implications

- Planning cannot operate neutrally in a divided society where space lies at the heart of conflict
- Agonistic collaborative planning holds more scope for addressing power and contention than deliberative approaches that stress consensus
- Policy making processes need to accommodate the co-production of knowledge through partnerships of public officials and other stakeholders
- Exploration of different perspectives on the meaning of sustainable communities is useful at a local community level and as part of the collaborative planning process
- The general approach to collaborative planning adopted here is applicable to other places and circumstances
- The same skills sets and processes are required both in the Belfast context and elsewhere

#### Key Words

- Generic Skills
- Sustainable Communities
- Community Cohesion
- Local Empowerment
- Social capital

## Background

Two broad approaches have dominated local participation in 'community' planning. One is learner-centred, bottom-up and suspicious about the pre-eminence of professional expertise. The second approach is more top-down, prescribing a suite of skills and competencies necessary for effective community-building, against which the performance of any particular participant community can be measured.

An alternative model was tested in this project involving an equitable partnership between experts and activists in the **co-production of knowledge** needed for plan development and delivery.

## Approach

Working with four local organisations, the researchers and local community leaders generated strategic development plans for their areas. The process emphasised learning and empowerment for ALL participants and required planning groups to acknowledge:

- ❖ links between reconciliation and regeneration;
- ❖ the connection of broader community goals to spatial planning & design;
- ❖ the need to see each community within a broader geography, and
- ❖ each community's role within an open and connected city.

Through this process, the researchers tested a process of 'agonistic collaborative planning'. This approach is based on the belief that people are not simply rational, but may be passionate, emotional, intuitive and prejudiced. They will often hold conflicting values and ideas. The process recognises that participants' views are not always open to rational argument, that social harmony is not the norm and there will always be inequalities in power relations around any table. It also recognises how statistics and other evidence may be interpreted in contrasting ways by different groups. During the generation of the plans, participants were required to show respect for one another's views when they could not be reconciled. The process accepts the rather messy social reality of incremental agreements, continued dissent and persistent conflict.

In preparation for work directly with communities in Belfast, the researchers undertook:

- ❖ A review of available data on the relative position of Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland to establish whether the economic and social differences between these religious groups have widened or narrowed over the past decades;
- ❖ Community Profiling of four case study areas in Belfast;
- ❖ A baseline analysis of skills in each of the four case study areas;
- ❖ Interviews with community activists, senior planners and government officials, developers, estate agents and academics

Conflict was perceived to be linked to increased culturalism and the growth of identity politics, so the research also explored identity and how it changed in conflict situations.

The research team also visited sites in Oldham and Bradford, conducting interviews with planners and held a seminar with government, community and academics exploring the relevance of the work to English cities. Discussions were also held with colleagues in the Great Cities Institute, University of Chicago, USA.

## Findings

The focus of the research was on the learning process and the skills required to generate the plans, rather than on the longevity of the plans themselves. Together the projects indicate that this agonistic, collaborative approach is both viable and valuable in aiding regeneration in contested cities. Importantly, the co-production of knowledge emphasised that there was no single source or repository of superior knowledge (either within the group or amongst secondary sources). The agonistic approach allowed spirited debate that led to recognition of some of the hard choices that have to be made where consensus is not reached, whereas a more conventional approach adopting conflict resolution approaches would be unlikely to confront the consequences of failing to achieve consensus.

“spirited debate allows recognition of some of the hard choices that have to be made where consensus is not reached”

Skills among **community participants** that were enhanced by participation in the project included strategic thinking, developing civic responsibility and the use of evidence-based research. Skills enhancements among **professionals** included the art of engagement and understanding such themes as community, identity and mental mapping. The researchers identified a productive role for those adept at bridging disciplines and proposing 'new scripts for development'. All of these match closely with the skill sets required in less contested areas.

The collaborative planning process also

- ❖ helped to create links between urban regeneration and
- ❖ peace-building,
- ❖ encouraged a concept of civic capacity and
- ❖ equipped participants to use 6 forms of capital: intellectual, social, physical, financial, natural and political.

The research explored the ways peoples' identity forms and changes as a consequence of their experience, suggesting that this approach might contribute to shifting perceptions and promoting debate in environments where conflict is endemic.

Discussions about the meaning of 'sustainability' helped participants to broaden their horizons beyond their immediate locality.

“there is a useful conversation to be had with communities....”

However, the research also raises questions about the definition of 'sustainable community' and how 'communities of interest' fit into notions of sustainable and cohesive spatial communities. For example, Belfast's objective to optimise its Brownfield capacity for new development is compromised by the awkward political reality that much of such land supply is in or near traditional Protestant territory, while the demand for new settlement comes mostly from the Catholic side. Thus, a 'sustainable' answer to Catholic housing need can be seen by Protestant interests to be a threat to their sustainability. Does every community have an inherent right to be sustainable in its own terms, even if this involves its deliberate segregation from adversarial communities, or the exclusion of those it perceives as 'alien'? Is the 'skilling up' of such communities simply enhancing ethnic over civic capital, thereby improving capacity to advance tribal factionalism? Some interviewees questioned whether the 'skilling up' of such gatekeepers was the best way to empower the community as a whole.