

CLEAR: Understanding Citizen Participation in Local Government – and How to Make it Work Better

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The CLEAR model

Governments across the world, especially at the local level, are experimenting with different ways to engage citizens in decision-making (Smith 2005). The nature and purpose of these initiatives varies greatly but they are united in so far as they “aspire to deepen the ways in which ordinary people can effectively participate in and influence policies which directly affect their lives” (Fung and Wright 2003: 5). However, what works well in one place cannot necessarily be repeated in other locations. Many locally specific factors shape the implementation and validity of officially sponsored participation initiatives.

The academic literature is littered with accounts of what can go wrong in participation initiatives. The article presents a diagnostic tool – the CLEAR model – that both anticipates obstacles to empowerment and links these to policy responses.¹ Based upon case studies of participation practices in contrasting English localities (Lowndes et al 2006a), the model identifies five factors that underpin citizens’ uneven response to participation (Lowndes et al 2006b). The CLEAR tool argues that participation is most effective where citizens:

Can do—have the resources and knowledge to participate;

Like to—have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation;

Enabled to—are provided with the opportunity for participation;

Asked to—are mobilized through public agencies and civic channels;

Responded to—see evidence that their views have been considered.

The CLEAR model was operationalized for international use at the request of the Council of Europe’s Steering Committee on Local and Regional Democracy (CDLR). Since the spring of 2006, the CDLR organized two waves of testing, with the aim of developing the most effective self-diagnostic tool for local governments of the member states of the Council of Europe. Self-evaluation using the CLEAR model allows each municipality to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of their own public participation initiatives. Municipalities are able to examine in detail the context

¹ The CLEAR tool was developed in collaboration with Gerry Stoker, University of Southampton.

and fit of their existing practices, and to reflect upon how these might be changed to improve participation. CLEAR does not promote a blueprint or 'ideal type'. It recognizes that participation strategies need to be sensitive to local contexts and dynamic over time.

The CLEAR model prompts a reflective evaluation of current practice. Which of the five factors are being addressed in current initiatives? Which factors have not received sufficient attention? How can the links between the five factors be improved in developing more strategic responses to the challenge of citizen participation? Do changing contexts require municipalities to re-prioritise the attention paid to different factors?

Table 1 presents the CLEAR model. It summarizes the five participation factors and sets out an indicative set of policy responses. The five factors are now considered in more detail.

Table 1 about here

C

'Can do' refers largely to arguments about socio-economic-status, which have traditionally dominated explanations for variations in participation rates (Verba et al 1995). The claim is that when people have the appropriate skills and resources they are more able to participate. These skills range from the ability and confidence to speak in public or write letters, to the capacity to organise events and encourage others of similar mind to support initiatives. Access to the resources that facilitate such activities is also important (resources ranging from photocopying facilities through to internet access and so on). These skills and resources are much more commonly found among the better educated and employed sections of the population: those of higher socio-economic status. However, none of the requisite skills and resources is exclusively the property of high SES. It is possible for public, voluntary or community bodies to intervene to make up for socio-economic limitations in equipping citizens with the skills and resources for participation. 'Can do' can be delivered by capacity building efforts aimed at ensuring that citizens are given the support to develop the skills and resources needed for them to engage.

L

'Like to' rests on the idea that people's felt sense of being part of something encourages them to engage. The argument is that if you feel a part of something then you are more willing to engage. If you feel excluded or sense that you are not welcome then you may decide not to participate. If participation is seen as just for old people or for men then others may not feel comfortable or able to join in. A sense of trust, connection and linked networks can, according to the social capital argument, enable people to work together and co-operate more effectively (Putnam 2000). Sense of community can be a strong motivator for participation. But given the inherent diversity in many communities then, conversely, an absence of identity or a sense of being an outsider can militate against participation. This factor can also be addressed by policy makers and non-governmental practitioners seeking to promote participation (Lowndes and Wilson 2001). The most important initial step in

diagnosis is to gain an understanding of the sense of loyalties and identities held in various communities. It is not easy to manipulate or change these feelings held about the communities in which people live but it is possible to give people the opportunity to believe that they are part of a wider civic identity built around their locality or some sense of equal and shared citizenship. Recognising and promoting a sense of civic citizenship and community cohesion can help develop an environment in which people will like to participate.

E

'Enabled to', as a factor in participation, is premised on the research observation that most participation is facilitated through groups or organizations (Parry et al 1992, Pattie et al 2004). Political participation in isolation is more difficult and less sustainable (unless an individual is highly motivated) than the mutually reinforcing engagement of contact through groups and networks. Collective participation provides continuous reassurance and feedback that the cause of engagement is relevant and that participation is having some value. Indeed, for some, engagement in this manner is more important than the outcome of such participation. The existence of networks and groups which can support participation and which can provide a route into decision-makers, therefore, is vital to the vibrancy of participation in an area. Research shows the relevance of civic infrastructures to facilitating or inhibiting participation (Lowndes et al 2006a). Where the right range and variety of groups exists to organise participation there tends to be more of it. Umbrella organizations that can support civic, community and voluntary groups can play a particularly important role in providing and sustaining the context for the appropriate types of groups and participation platforms to emerge. They can help groups become established, provide networks of contacts and information, explain how to campaign and engage and ease access to the relevant decision-makers.

A

'Asked to' builds on the finding of much research that mobilisation matters. People tend to become engaged more often and more regularly when they are asked to engage. Research shows that people's readiness to participate often depends upon whether or not they are approached and how they are approached (Verba et al 1995). Mobilisation can come from a range of sources but the most powerful form is when those responsible for a decision ask others to engage with them in making the decision. Research shows that the degree of openness of political and managerial systems has a significant effect, with participation increasing where there is a variety of invitations and opportunities (Lowndes et al 2006a). The variety of participation options for engagement is important because some people are more comfortable with some forms of engagement, such as a public meeting, while others would prefer, for example, to engage through on-line discussions (Lowndes et al 2001a). Some people want to talk about the experiences of their community or neighbourhood while others want to engage based on their knowledge of a particular service as a user.

The nature of 'the ask' is also important. Participation can be mobilised by the use of incentives (e.g. honoraria), through establishing a sense of obligation (as in the case

of jury duty), or by offering bargains/exchanges (where participation is accompanied by investment or an enhanced service package). The focus of the 'ask' is also important. It could be directed at a particular neighbourhood or a larger cross-authority population. The sustainability of participation is relevant: can the 'ask' be sustained and will citizens keep responding? Who is being asked is another issue. There is a dilemma between developing 'expert citizens' and rotating/sampling involvement to get at 'ordinary citizens'. The 'asked to' factor asks municipalities to address the range and the repertoire of their initiatives? How do they appeal to different citizen groups?

R

'Responded to' captures the idea that for people to participate on a sustainable basis they have to believe that their involvement is making a difference, that it is achieving positive benefits. This factor provides simultaneously the most obvious but also the most difficult factor in enhancing political participation (Lowndes et al 2001b). For people to participate they have to believe that they are going to be listened to and, if not always agreed with, at least in a position to see that their views have been taken into account. Meeting the challenge of the 'responded to' factor means asking public authorities how they weigh messages from various consultation or participation events against other inputs to the decision-making process? How are the different or conflicting views of various participants and stakeholders to be prioritised? Responsiveness is about ensuring feedback, which may not be positive – in the sense of accepting the dominant view from participants. Feedback involves explaining how the decision was made and the role of participation within that. Response is vital for citizen education, and so has a bearing on the 'front end' of the process too. Citizens need to learn to live with disappointment: participation won't always 'deliver' on immediate concerns, but remains important. Citizens' confidence in the participation process cannot be premised upon 'getting their own way'. Indeed, ensuring responsiveness depends upon the quality of elected representatives and democratic leadership. Improving deliberation and accountability mechanisms within 'mainstream democracy' is a precondition for effective empowerment strategies.

Conclusions

The CLEAR diagnostic tool enables policy-makers to look at citizens and ask questions about their capacities, their sense of community and their civic organisations. It also asks them to examine their own organisational and decision-making structures and assess whether they have the qualities that allow them to listen to, and take account of, messages from citizen participation.

To apply the tool requires three stages of activity. The first involves refining the questions and challenges to be addressed in any particular setting. The second rests on a commitment to a multi-perspective evaluation of the state of citizen participation in the municipality. This means not relying on public officials' assessment of the five factors, but 'triangulating' this with the views of activist and non-activist citizens, community groups and local politicians. The third involves

coming to a judgement about priorities in terms of the factors that need to be addressed, and how.

The first flush of enthusiasm for citizen participation is behind us. The CLEAR model enables policy makers and practitioners to reflect on their current practice and analyse the obstacles to engaging citizens and how they might be overcome. Getting people to participate is not a simple task. There are blocks that stem from lack of capacity to participate or a lack of engagement with political organisations or issues. Long term measures can address these blocks, but building community capacity or a sense of citizenship are not challenges from which policy makers can expect easy or quick results. Deep-seated structural factors are clearly at work in shaping people's resources and attitudes. But the behaviour of politicians and managers is also important – and here change is more straightforwardly in the hands of policy makers. If we ask people to participate in a committed and consistent manner and respond effectively to their participative inputs, they are far more likely to engage.

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Table 1: Factors promoting participation: It's CLEAR

Key factor	How it works	Policy targets
Can do	The individual resources that people have to mobilise and organise (speaking, writing and technical skills, and the confidence to use them) make a difference	Capacity building, training and support of volunteers, mentoring, leadership development
Like to	To commit to participation requires an identification with the public entity that is the focus of engagement	Civil renewal, citizenship, community development, community cohesion, neighbourhood working, social capital
Enabled to	The civic infrastructure of groups and umbrella organisations makes a difference because it creates or blocks an opportunity structure for participation	Investing in civic infrastructure and community networks, improving channels of communication via compacts
Asked to	Mobilising people into participation by asking for their input can make a big difference	Public participation schemes that are diverse and reflexive
Responded to	When asked people say they will participate if they are listened to (not necessarily agreed with) and able to see a response	A public policy system that shows a capacity to respond - through specific outcomes, ongoing learning and feedback