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b:RAP briefing
no. 12

**Community Participation in 'Governance':
Old Medicine, New Bottles?**

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Introducing b:RAP briefings

Welcome to this new b:RAP briefing on community participation and governance, the twelfth in a continuing series of short, accessible briefing papers on key policy issues. Our papers are aimed at voluntary, community and public sector readers, local, regional and national institutions, and policy-makers across a wide range of equalities-related areas.

Equalities is one of the most volatile and politically sensitive areas of policy and practice. Practitioners need to be able to take the long view, but they also need to be able to respond swiftly to the pressure of contemporary events. In addition they must also play their part in shaping the equalities agenda – which increasingly means having the capacity to act at the local level while also scrutinising and influencing wider regional and national policy.

This is a period of transition for equalities in the UK. A concrete example of this is the establishment of the Commission for Equality & Human Rights (CEHR), following the Equality Act 2006. The CEHR is intended to provide a single, national focal point for all equalities work in relation to gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion and belief, age, race and human rights. The CEHR will be fully operational from October 2007 and we like many others will be watching to see how this major new initiative actually performs.

But we also believe that equality is about more than just the latest theory or the newest policy idea, important as these can be. It is about creating real and lasting **social change** – social change in the big issues that affect the whole of society, of course, but social change too in the attitudes and actions that shape our relations with each other, as citizens, service-users, customers, residents and community members. And that is very much our purpose in producing these briefing papers – to examine key public policy ideas and assess their real potential to help bring about that social change.

b:RAP's expertise and priorities are grounded in race equality, and we remain committed to combatting racial discrimination, but we also believe it is vital to develop more progressive and inclusive approaches to equalities that can benefit everyone, irrespective of their 'race'.

We hope that after reading this paper you too will want to join with us in that aim.

Please do contact me if you would like more information about b:RAP and its work.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Community participation, it might be argued, is almost as old as the hills. Under the Blair government, however, the term has taken on a more specific meaning focused on the involvement of ordinary citizens in the *governance* of public services and public institutions, and as such has emerged as a key idea in what has been called the 'new localism'.

Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation defines *governance* as 'any body or structure which exists within a local authority area [with] a remit to affect public service planning and/or delivery', and *participation* as 'involvement in...governance [as defined above]' rather than the many other civic activities we might engage in, such as volunteering.¹

Community participation in governance is now seen as central to public service reform, to revitalizing democratic processes and institutions, and to ensuring stronger, more cohesive communities.

This desire, then, to give ever greater numbers of ordinary citizens a voice in public decision-making has become a cornerstone of Government policy – in housing, regeneration, foundation hospitals, school governance and neighbourhood management – and is now shared by all the main opposition parties. Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the extent to which these 'representative' and 'participative' structures have proliferated in the decade since Labour came to power: the Rowntree research identified 25 separate areas of community participation and approximately 480,000 'governance roles' in England alone that need filling.²

But is this widening of community involvement – this supposed passing of power to the people – producing the kind of empowered and active communities of citizens that the Government wants to see? The Rowntree Foundation says it isn't and claims that the way existing governance structures work is reinforcing a situation in which those already richest in 'community influence' get richer, while the rest get poorer.

There is undoubtedly some truth in this view, but in this short paper we would like to go slightly further and analyse the historical reasons why this should be so. We believe there are two key reasons.

¹ See *Community Participation: Who Benefits?* Skidmore, Bound & Lownsborough for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation [2006]. PDF available at: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=838>

² Skidmore et al, *ibid*: p51/52.

The first revolves around a profoundly mistaken assumption which underlies virtually all community participation practices and which we call the 'representation plus participation equals equality' syndrome. In other words, the belief that if you can 'deliver' participation, you will have 'solved' equality. In fact, history tends to suggest that this obsession with representation and participation may serve merely to distract from the real equality issues of discrimination, disadvantage and structural inequality.

The second reason is that many of the engagement practices originally developed for poor black and Asian communities are inherently flawed because they emphasise and depend on *ethnic difference*. The Government's current re-evaluation of Britain's multicultural policies in light of concerns about cohesion and national identity is now leading some to the view that these policies may have been responsible for reinforcing rather than overcoming difference and division.

In the remainder of this paper we explore these ideas and also look at some techniques that we believe can help us move towards fairer and more effective approaches to community participation.

2.0 'REPRESENTATION' – WHO, HOW & WHY

Community participation did not begin in a kind of 1997 'Year Zero' with the election of New Labour. Community participation and especially the thorny underlying question of *community representation* – of who gets represented, how and by whom – has been a central issue in equalities for decades. Indeed, in Birmingham and other major cities it would not be overstating the case to say that for BME communities the issues of community participation and representation *are* the history of race relations and of public policy-makers' responses to "race issues".

In a recent issue of *Catalyst*, the Commission for Racial Equality's magazine, Tanuka Loha and Kenan Malik debate the issue of community representation in a thought-provoking exchange.³ Quoting Diane Abbott MP, Loha argues that representation must be rooted in and speak from *direct personal experience* of discrimination. Malik on the other hand maintains that representation should be seen as a primarily 'political issue', explaining: 'I want my representatives to give voice not to my experiences but to my political aspirations.'

These two positions still very much mark out the competing schools of thought about how representation should be 'done' and community representatives chosen.

In the first of these two positions it is assumed that communities have a shared view of their discrimination and disadvantage, with the primary role of community representation being to speak out of, and give representation to, that experience. It is usually assumed that this is best done by someone who shares what is presumed to be a common sense of 'group identity' – someone who 'looks like us'.

The second view, however, argues that there is no single experience of racism or discrimination because minority groups are themselves divided – by class, gender, faith, age, educational attainment and so forth – and as such are as diverse as the rest of the population. Therefore, argues Malik, there is no determining link between personal experience and representation, and 'group representation' – especially when based, as is often the case, on 'generally unelected, self-appointed and unaccountable' community leaders – is 'inherently undemocratic'.

³ See *Who speaks for me?* by Tanuka Loha and Kenan Malik in *Catalyst* magazine, issue 6 [November 2006]. The full article can be viewed at: <http://www.catalystmagazine.org/Default.aspx?LocID=0hgnew0n7.RefLocID=0hg01b00100k.Lang-EN.htm>

While we are *not* advocating that people should simply negate or ignore their ethnicity, we do believe that community representation models that are based primarily on ethnicity and in which 'entitlement' is explicitly linked to ethnic identity do have the potential to increase rather than reduce the sense of difference between one community and another, with wider implications as a consequence for social cohesion. By encouraging individuals to think narrowly within what they deem to be their 'community's interests' such approaches can also:

- Cause representatives to advocate solutions or actions that perpetuate damaging stereotypes rather than draw on the available evidence (i.e. what they *think* their community needs or should have rather than what the evidence demonstrates);
- Exclude those within the community, such as women and young people, whose views and needs are marginalised by 'leaders';
- Perpetuate tokenism rather than genuine representation;
- And further disadvantage the community by promoting those who are most vocal rather than most able.

We would also argue that models of representation that are based on ever-finer distinctions of ethnic origin (or, indeed, of culture, faith, or religion) make increasingly less sense in a society that is becoming more diverse by the day.

By linking entitlement explicitly to ethnicity, such models also make it harder to manage public service expectations and to determine what are realistic and legitimate public service demands. 'Personalisation' of services, after all, can only be taken so far – and most of the time most of us understand this. We acknowledge that the state cannot offer a set of universal public service entitlements infinitely fine-tuned to our personal needs or preferences. But this becomes far more problematical if people have been led to believe that their 'ethnic identity' can and should determine the relationship they have with the state and hence their 'entitlement'. It is this coupling of ethnicity and entitlement in British policy-making which in our view most urgently needs re-examination.

These are not new problems, of course, and nor are they exactly new analyses of the problems. And yet despite Birmingham's long and arguably unparalleled understanding of the limitations of ethnicity-based representative models, we are already seeing new tiers of community participants chosen in the mistaken belief that their ethnicity, faith, or

'identity' enables them to speak representatively on behalf of entire and supposedly 'homogenous' communities.⁴

Hand-in-hand with this we are also seeing widespread initiatives to strengthen the role of religious groups in public decision-making, with little apparent understanding of the potentially divisive consequences that might flow from this.

But there are other problems too which must be considered. For example:

Quality and equality

Our most disadvantaged communities need both quality and equality in their representation and yet they are often further disadvantaged by representatives that cannot achieve what is expected of them – even assuming these expectations have been made clear in the first place.

Community representatives are often playing on profoundly unequal terms, lacking the training, skills, expertise and resources that others – and especially those representing major institutional partners – have constantly at their fingertips. They lack capacity, they lack support, and there is often no one they can turn to for help or assistance. (Let's be honest: we have all been at board and partnership meetings where local authority and other public sector officers attend in groups but community representatives are there as lone individuals, trying to navigate through mounds of paper they have been unable to read and digest in advance of the meeting.)

Purpose and clarity

The purpose, remit, responsibilities and expectations of public representation are also often unclear, as are the specific intentions and objectives. Again, this disadvantages community representatives who are not on the 'inside' and may not be well versed in the bigger picture, the wider policy implications or the longer-term objectives.

Deficit-model participation

And all too often community participation starts from a deficit model. By this we mean that the assumption is that statutory and public partners know too little about the community in question and this almost invariably is seen to be the community's 'fault': it is so different to the 'mainstream' and so 'hard to reach' that public service providers cannot be expected to meet its 'specific needs' without further research, consultation and scoping. We hear this time and again of BME com-

⁴ See *Do They Mean Us? BME Community Engagement in Birmingham*, b:RAP briefing #3 [November 2004], b:RAP, for a detailed analysis of the role of ethnicity-based forums and consultative structures in Birmingham.

munities, and it is almost always an excuse for inaction. BME and poor working class communities are the most researched communities in the country – how can we not know enough about them?

Rights and entitlements

But in addition to labouring under distinct disadvantages in issues of public representation, the poorest and most excluded communities are also required to make special efforts in order to secure the kinds of services which for everyone else are a *right and an entitlement*.

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In the next section we explain an alternative model to ethnicity-based representation and the applications to which b:RAP has recently put this.

3.0 MOVING BEYOND 'ETHNIC IDENTITY'

The critical issue, then, in equality terms is not *participation*. Indeed, we, like many other organisations, want to see more effective, more transparent and better enabled community participation at all levels and in all situations where this is appropriate. No, the critical issue is *representation*, because for those from BME communities the underlying assumption, even now, is almost invariably that they are representative precisely *because* of their ethnicity, their faith or their 'cultural identity'.

Advocacy not representation – a practical approach

While equality *does* require one's ethnicity to be taken into account *in so far as it is relevant*, it also, we believe, requires us to make a distinction between the private and the public spheres. Let us explain why this is important.

The private sphere is inherently unequal: all manner of personal factors pay a role in determining one's individual, personal identity and how this is seen by others. This is the case for all of us. But such an inherently subjective approach cannot realistically offer a basis for *equality in the public sphere*. Equality in the public sphere requires a space where everyone can act as *political equals*, irrespective of their economic, cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds. We cannot have a public 'system' of equalities in which my religion trumps your disability, his gender trumps her age, your sexual orientation trumps my ethnic origin.

For these reasons, then, b:RAP considered it imperative to find a way to 'decouple' participation and representation and we have been working along these lines since the late-1990s. We have called this **moving beyond 'racial identity'** and in essence it involves a shift from an ethnicity-based approach to an issues-based approach.⁵ Here's an example of how it works.

Under an issues-based approach people are chosen for community participation roles because of **what they do and what they know** rather than because of their ethnicity or faith.

In keeping with this approach we established a series of issues-based forums – on housing, education and health and social care, for example – aimed at drawing together groups, agencies and institutions with specific expertise or responsibility in these areas. We felt these forums might offer a vehicle whereby communities and their organisations

⁵ For a full discussion of 'racial identity' see *Beyond Racial Identity*, b:RAP [2004].

could pool their expertise and understanding in a spirit of mutuality, rather than competing with each other on the basis of ethnicity.

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In the final section we briefly discuss what we learnt from this process and how these lessons might be applied to community participation in governance.

4.0 LESSONS LEARNT & CONCLUSIONS

The proliferation since 1997 of community-based 'governance' structures and positions has fundamentally changed the landscape and in some respects the purposes of community participation.

With community governance now permeating virtually all of our state services it is clear that we have got to get better at these forms of participation or risk 'institutionalising' unfairness on an unprecedented scale.

But while fairer, more inclusive and transparent community participation is critical, it should not be mistaken for the end itself. Let us not forget that what we all want to see is greater equality – and equality requires social, institutional *and* personal change on a massive scale. We were reminded of this in the course of testing our own community advocacy model.

Although we do believe that the community advocacy approach is genuinely more people-centred and that its principles do offer a way forward for fairer community participation models, we too were seduced to some extent by the notion that a sufficiently fine-tuned *participative process* could deliver wider social change. We learnt, in fact, that it cannot and we believe that the same will prove to be true of community participation in governance.

Although we began the community advocacy process thinking that the very act of participation would *enable change*, we ended it with a much better practical understanding of the *limits* of participation and representation. This was an instructive experience and its lessons enabled us to think much more critically about participation and representation and what these activities can and cannot achieve.

We also learnt that all groups – and by this, we mean *all* groups, not just BME communities – need assistance and encouragement to think outside the box of their own narrow community- or self-interest. This should of course be a guiding principle in Birmingham's devolution and localisation efforts but it is a principle that should lie at the heart of broader national approaches to community governance.

We also learnt that community participation requires more than just good governance skills, important as these are and we are now more than ever convinced that building community governance skills needs to be conducted hand-in-hand with a much broader grassroots equalities campaign. In this way, local governance could also play a part in helping to equip people, organisations and entire communities with

the tools they need to understand and challenge inequality and disadvantage.

Now that would be a community governance worth working for.

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Other b:RAP briefings

- No. 1: Community Consultation
- No. 2: Race Equality Schemes
- No. 3: "Do They Mean Us?" BME Community Engagement in Birmingham
- No. 4: Community Cohesion: The Emperor's New Clothes?
- No. 5: Myth and Maxim: Myth Busting Report on Asylum Seekers and Refugees
- No. 6: From 'Anti-Racism' to 'Diversity': Revisiting the Race Equality Agenda
- No. 7: Community Cohesion & Asylum
- No. 8: Islamophobia: Echoes of the Past?
- No. 9: The Social Construction of Race
- No. 10: Race into Action: Lessons from b:RAP's Organisational Change Programme
- No. 11: Taking Liberties: Faith, freedom and the way forward
- No. 12: Community Participation in 'Governance': Old Medicine, New Bottles?

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