Briefing Paper 136

Blending, braiding and balancing: combining formal and informal modes for social action

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Introduction

The interplay between formal and informal ways of organising for collective action generates several tensions and anomalies; some reflecting power differentials, others due to cultural differences. Formal procedures and structures tend to be regarded by policy makers and public officials as the optimal or default mode. This paper questions that view, arguing that informal processes are crucial and beneficial for inclusive community participation at grassroots level.

The study examined the various functions performed by formal and informal approaches and explored the opportunities and challenges these pose for community activists, volunteers, third sector organisations and the professionals who engage with them. Practical strategies and policies are identified, such as 'light touch' approaches to funding, integrating convivial activities within formal settings and adopting more flexible models for community engagement and organisation development.

Evidence was gathered from direct experience, practitioner workshops, interviews, a focus group discussion and an extensive review of academic and 'grey' literature, including policy papers, practical guidance, and funding programme evaluations. Community development values of equality, empowerment and experiential learning framed the inquiry, driving the analysis as well as policy and practice recommendations.

Context

For many years government policy has sought to tackle perceived democratic deficits by increasing citizen participation in local decision-making. The nature of regulation governing such activities has varied over time, driven by different ideologies concerning the role of the state vis-a-vis the economy, public services and civil society. A growth in cross-sectoral partnership working has enhanced the 'mixed economy' of welfare through co-production and user empowerment.

On the one hand, governments pursue an agenda of self-help, local empowerment and 'community rights' that aims to harness voluntary effort and social action in order to achieve national policy objectives, thus allowing the state to reduce its own role and responsibilities. On the other hand, state-sponsored initiatives attempt to render voluntary organisations more 'business-like' through formal models of governance and accountability, along with fixed frameworks for performance management.

These programmes have generated strains between formal and informal modes of operating that result in friction and frustration, sometimes dampening community enthusiasm or preventing useful dialogue and co-operation.

Findings

The picture that emerged was complicated and shaped by local circumstances, policies and inequalities. The findings are organised around several key themes, namely:

- Power, governance and engagement
- Knowledge, communication and learning
- Relationships and transactions
- Managing risk, maintaining standards
- Time and temporalities
- Organisation development
- Equalities, inclusion and diversity.

Each of these reveals the different functions played by formal protocols and informal styles of interactions in the everyday life of communities, affecting decision-making and people's motivation to participate in communal and civic activities.

Power, governance and engagement

Formal structures are usually seen as essential for effective management, efficient working and accountability. Governance documents enable organisations to run according to agreed rules and with clear roles. In theory this transparency enables collective democracy and the achievement of shared goals. However, formality can be intimidating and tedious, especially for those who are relatively powerless or who are unaccustomed to formal situations and styles. Holding power entails creating, seizing and occupying formal positions and using formal procedures to claim control and authority while disempowering rivals or dissenters. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, informal networking and disruption can undermine the whole edifice through the use of 'soft power'.

Knowledge, communication and learning

Different forms of communication perform various functions, including putting people at ease, asserting status or simply conveying precise messages. Informal situations provide valuable opportunities for learning through discussion, skill-sharing and mentoring but these are seldom accredited. Knowledge is prized differently depending on how it is produced and presented. The expertise of community members gained from experience or passed down through hearsay and tradition is habitually disregarded by professionals requiring more formal verification.

Relationships and transactions

Mutual trust and understanding allow co-operative relationships to form between partners and depend heavily on the nature of connections and exchanges. But formal contracts may also be needed (binding the respective parties to itemised costs, outputs, targets and timescales). The accompanying transaction costs include the time and bureaucratic efforts devoted to negotiation, monitoring and reporting whereas informal exchanges may simply involve gifts or sharing based on reciprocal commitment and solidarity.

These relational aspects, associated with inter-personal networks, provide vital foundations for the kind of sustained generosity and dedication to community or place that current policies entail. A propensity to take part in community action is driven as much by intangible factors such as local loyalties and affinities, as by the exigencies and opportunities found in individual circumstances.

Risks and standards

Formal protocols tend to be seen as necessary for mitigating risk and quality assurance. However, rigid models comprising checks, registers and competency criteria, may deter potential contributors arriving through informal channels, for example, invited to 'have a go' or 'come along' without having to conform to official requirements or meet strict conditions. Performance management frameworks may prove useful for evaluating progress towards specific goals but they have been found to distort work priorities and de-motivate staff. This is likely to apply even more so to volunteers and activists who are motivated by passion and philanthropy rather than material incentives.

Formal checklists and record-keeping can increase awareness and be used to apportion blame, but there are other means to uphold and improve standards including alertness to hazards, rough benchmarks and informal feedback. Indeed an over-reliance on formalities such as DBS checks can lead to complacency and reduced vigilance.

Nonetheless, standards are important. Poor services or advice can harm or disadvantage those whose rights may be jeopardised or lives endangered. Compromises are needed between informal models and formal regulations so that communities are empowered to develop their own approaches without too much detriment to users and each other.

Time and temporalities
Formal procedures seem to absorb disproportionate amounts of time: attending meetings, dealing with committee business, completing applications or detailed proformas. For many volunteers and community activists this diverts energy from their main concerns, with bureaucratic provisos regarded by some as 'hoops to jump through' delaying progress without apparent justification.

Informal processes can speed things up, circumventing formalities and allowing expedient or spontaneous responses to urgent matters. But informal interactions can themselves be distracting, with a danger that agendas are disregarded and meetings become engulfed in banter or gossip. Time for fun and conviviality is vital and can be sensitively and creatively woven into or alongside formal proceedings so that people find enjoyment as well as purpose from involvement in community activities.

The artificial timelines commonly found in project management schemes may be neither relevant nor realistic to communities for planning their activities or measuring progress. Given the complex environment in which communities operate, change is rarely linear or even predictable. The eventualities of everyday life generate co-operation, conflict and connection, creating unforeseen opportunities but also obstacles that can derail even the best intentions.

Organisation development
The formal features of organisations provide the stability that sustains collective visions and voluntary action over the long term, and forms the basis for both continuity and legacy. Constitutions and standing orders establish the aims and objectives, as well as the powers and rules that members need to follow. Formal governance structures allow an organisation to exist independently of its individual members, in terms of clarifying roles, liability, accountability and internal democracy.

This is a distinct advantage when disputes arise or in making sure that tasks are fairly allocated and followed through. Transparent, accurate record-keeping and formal reporting mechanisms ensure that an organisation maintains momentum in the medium term, refreshing its officers and staff and addressing conflicts of interest, without too much personal rancour or corruption.

The development of organisational protocols is often correlated with growing ambition, financial responsibilities and widening remit. Formal procedures are deemed necessary for 'properly incorporated' or mature organisations; indeed these are often required by potential funders or partners. They are certainly useful but can inadvertently exclude those who find constitutional niceties boring or baffling. It is sensible to let organisations evolve organically according to changing needs and functions rather than imposing an 'off-the-shelf' format. Formal procedures may help an organisation to achieve its purposes but should be kept under review, while informal processes are to be encouraged to facilitate lively participation and collective ownership.

Equality, inclusion and diversity
Power, its use and abuse, has been a critical theme in this study, with formal procedures sometimes preserving elite positions, yet also being used to challenge such privilege through, for example, equal opportunities policies or mechanisms for succession and shared accountability. Unless informal processes are

restrained, they tend to reflect social biases or personal prejudices and can be discriminatory.

Dimensions of inequality intersect with the formal-informal matrix in multi-faceted ways. Already disadvantaged social groups may be further marginalised by formal styles of organising, because they feel alienated and prefer to operate through more informal processes that seem more inclusive and 'level'. This needs to be addressed all round so that formal institutions become more sensitive to the diverse traditions of different communities, while society at large learns to be more adept at choosing and using appropriate levels of formality.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings indicate a complicated maze of benefits and drawbacks. Astute choices are needed as to how formal and informal modes are blended or balanced against each other. The study revealed a praxis – bringing together skills, judgements, techniques and understanding - that is applied in specific situations. This praxis may be a 'knack' acquired over a lifetime's experience or it may be a deliberate strategy implemented through a combination of conscious decisions, group exercises and behaviours. It involves judicious braiding of informal processes with formal procedures to create the optimal conditions for collective discussion, agreeing goals, making and measuring progress, involving people, keeping going, being fair and so on.

This practical wisdom is demonstrated by experienced chairs, facilitators and community workers. It has implications for policymakers in that it serves key underpinning values frequently associated with government's community-oriented policies – namely citizen participation, social inclusion and integration.

Ultimately informal processes are primarily about creating trust and managing emotions. Informal interactions allow people to express a more authentic, more human aspect of themselves, rather than being confined by official roles. Relationships are likely to grow as people more sincerely share their thoughts, reveal true feelings and discover common interests.

Conversely, formal conventions and structures offer mechanisms for controlling the influence of personal preferences so that proceedings appear objective, transparent and democratic. Formal aspects of organisations provide the discipline for sustainable growth and adaptation, but can also stifle originality, detract from people's motivation or exclude some from contributing.

Communities can be envisaged as complex and dynamic social systems full of unpredictable influences and outcomes. Agility and flexibility is needed to manage this uncertainty and encourage innovation. This can be achieved through a shrewd, but playful, fusion of formal and informal processes.

Recommendations for policy and practice are presented and discussed in the full report.

Acknowledgements

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