Executive Summary

Lessons from Community Planning in Norway and Scotland

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The notion that public participation and ‘joining up government’ are the keys to reviving local politics is one of the mantras of current governmental discourse internationally. This research set out to ask whether this ideology was reflected in practice, and whether there was any international consistency in attempts to increase public participation and integrate government sectors. High on the list of tools to implement the agenda in the UK has been the introduction of comprehensive, community-based planning, known as ‘Community Planning’ or ‘Community Strategies’. These aim to involve local communities and stakeholders, and produce comprehensive plans that integrate sectoral divisions within government. An image of such planning is found in Norwegian Municipal Master Planning (‘kommuneplan’), which therefore provided a comparison by which to understand UK community-based planning.

Our approach posited that if, as it appeared, integration and participation were being thrown together without any real analytical argument, then their inherent discrepancies would become apparent during implementation. To assess the theoretical ‘gap’ between the discourse of participative comprehensive integrated planning and its implementation as practised by local planners we needed to examine it in practice. Documents and post-hoc interviews would tend to rationalise the difficulties of the process and disguise the inherent tensions. Therefore, we undertook two ethnographic projects, in Scotland and in Norway, to follow the production of Community Plans and ‘Kommuneplan’, alert to the possibilities of planning officers ‘internalising’ the structural dilemmas that the planning process entails (Lipsky 1980). We report our findings according to the objectives laid out in our application, each of which has been more than fully met.

Objective 1: A framework for analysis.

We begin with our assertion that lack of fit between the discourses of participation and integration is evident in underperformance when policies are implemented, and in the dilemmas of practice they present to practitioners. Fairclough argues that the new discourse of governance presents a logic of appearances typified by ‘lists of assumed irreconcilables reconciled’ that aim not to balance but to ‘transcend’ contrary themes (Fairclough 2000). We suggest that integration and participation are two such non-coherent principles that are merely presented together rather than analytically interwoven. As a result, producing holistic, comprehensive plans that involve direct participation of a broad range of community representatives presents innumerable, often insurmountable difficulties for authorities with large, diverse populations.

We also argue that UK-style Community Planning bears strong but superficial similarities to Scandinavian ‘Municipal Master Planning’. Some of the guidance and outcomes
appear remarkably similar. In practice, however, the plans are attempting quite different tasks as Norwegian municipal planning is essentially a political manifesto of council intentions over a 4 year election period, whereas Scottish Community Planning is an attempt to build coalitions between diverse agencies and authorities, interest groups and population sub-sections (generally as defined by the government) among whom political representatives have some kind of (undefined) role. In this perspective, Community Planning can be interpreted as a dissipation of local authority power in the face of competing local interests.

**Objective 2: Ethnographic analysis, understanding the context.**
Our ethnographic material demonstrates that ‘lessons’ about participation and integration are being circulated internationally directly through local authority exchange visits. However, these lessons are constructed in partial ways, often to serve local interests, and result in policy transfer that is often very shallow and instrumental. The gap between what lessons are ‘taught’ from one authority and which are ‘learnt’ by a different authority often serves to reduce policy lessons to justifications for particular agendas. Even when used ‘innocently’, lessons of failure are seldom analysed in relation to significant local conditions in a way that could help policy learning (so that other authorities might avoid the pitfalls of unsuccessful policies), but generalised ‘success stories’ are often grasped upon and poorly adapted to new contexts. The result is a mimetic rhetoric (i.e., discourse that ‘sounds the same’), with little contextual learning.

**Objective 3: Identifying ‘lessons’.**
Since practical policy ‘lessons’ are susceptible to the sort of uncritical transfer which we criticise above, we have, instead, proposed, in our ‘Key Findings’ publication, a set of context-related issues that may differentiate successful from unsuccessful policy learning. For instance, we have suggested that integrating services may be most effective when a named individual has responsibility for co-ordinating services for particular ‘clients’, but that these individuals need the explicit support of senior management. Our analysis confirms the observation of Degeling (1995) that significant power is required to re-work the sectoral structure of government. However, we have also noted that efforts to ‘integrate’ governmental sectors or, indeed, different institutions can not be ‘rationalised out’ by rearranging organisational structures. Co-ordinating local services for a wide range of ‘clients’ requires constant work, and a one-off organisational ‘integration’ will not remove the need for co-ordinating work by senior council officers.

**Objective 4: Theories of governance.**
To situate Community Planning practices within theories of governance in modern and post-modern states, we have examined Community Planning as a form of post hoc rationalisation (Flyvbjerg 1998), and as a ‘multi-scalar path-shaping’ activity (Jessop 1998). It appears that there may also be more direct comparisons to be drawn between the widespread adoption of ‘sustainable development’ discourses and those of ‘participation’, and these will be brought into future publications.
Objective 5: New empirical material.
The richness of our empirical material cannot be demonstrated here, but we would note two particular counter-intuitive findings. As above, integration of service sectors cannot be achieved ‘once and for all’ by any form of restructuring, but is an ongoing requirement of complex and diverse organisations. Secondly, flattening management structures appears not to help integration, as it may remove the hierarchical authority needed to bring sectors together, and results in a proliferation of units that are difficult to co-ordinate. Added to the disruption of working relationships involved in reorganisation, this may be a counter-productive strategy. In addition, we have found it very difficult to discover evidence that integration encourages public participation. While the opposite may be true (that poorly integrated councils discourage participation), the need to consult broad constituencies of participants to achieve a community plan may, in fact, discourage intense local participation in particular schemes. Well-integrated authorities (in the Norwegian case) may well have very little public participation in policy-making at all, Links between integration and participation are hard to discern, and it seems more likely that good participation grows out of a real commitment to working ‘with’ diverse communities, and out of a properly constructed relationship between representative democracy and direct public representation in policy-processes which may otherwise be seen to distort ‘true’ democracy.

Degeling, P
Fairclough, Norman
Flyvbjerg, Bent
Jessop, B
Lipsky, Michael