

Public Deliberation, Community Capacity and Neighbourhood Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to explore how formal institutional settings for public deliberation affect the character and the quality of participation and the type of participants that actually join up. The central question examined in this paper is how the local community and its balance of power is affected when citizens are involved in public urban policy programmes, particularly area-based initiatives such as the New Deal for Communities in the UK, the German Soziale Stadt, and the Danish Kvarterloeft. The efficacy of area-based programmes addressing poverty alleviation, employment generation and social inclusion has been subject to some debate, but it is inevitable that there will be consequences with respect to participation, democracy and community politics, be it intended or unintended consequences.

The paper examines different models of formal institutional settings for public deliberations that were used in an area-based programme, which builds on the active participation of local actors. And it explores what types of citizens that actively join the work. What interests do they represent? What are the consequences of increased community participation? What becomes the role of the externally induced programme with respect to involvement, community networks and influence?

The analysis is based on data concerning the Danish area-based programme Kvarterloeft collected through qualitative interviews over a period of three years. Interviewees include residents, community-based activists, neighbourhood politicians, project managers and representatives of local government. A number of respondents were interviewed more than once in order to uncover shifts in their views as the programme progressed.

Results of the research show that the insertion of an area-based project affects the power balance of the local community in a variety of ways.

Some of these appear to be highly intentional on the part of the local government administration, for example deliberately to weaken the power of strong, local opposition groups and alliances. Not surprisingly the socially excluded participate less than other groups, but other effects are much more difficult to predict. What works well in one context seems to trigger conflict and strife in other neighbourhoods.

The attitude of the local public policy makers and the size of the financial support seem to be decisive in this respect.

Key Words: public deliberation, community capacity; urban politics