

Connected Communities

Notes from the LARCI/RCUK consultation meeting, held on 1 June 2009 at Thinktank, Birmingham

These notes were generated partly from the presentations and partly from the facilitated discussions.

What are the societal/policy/cultural contexts of the research?

This is a timely initiative. The commitment to engage with local government and other potential partners at an early stage in the development and shaping of proposals for the programme is a very welcome development.

Recent debates have tended to focus on markets & state / government private sector relationships and neglected the third sector and civil society / communities. What is the role of the state? What does government need to do for communities and citizens and what can communities/ citizens do for themselves?

These debates are likely to become more intensified as a result of the recession and increasing pressure on the public sector due to levels of public debt. What should the roles of the state, private sector and communities be in a post-recession indebted highly society? What will it be possible for the state, business and communities to achieve in the future?

Radical reform of the welfare state is occurring without a consensus vision for its replacement.

Nation/state less able to influence events in 21st century

Communities as more complex than they were hitherto

Demographic challenges: in the UK, both an ageing population and increasing birth rates amongst some sub-sections of the population leading to some communities ageing whilst others are seeing more children

Erosion of trust in public life / some institutions and disconnection between many people and government

Need to consider how technology can benefit society

Paradigm shift: impact of recession and the way it will change individuals, communities. As recession roles through, will there be a 'smaller state' and communities will take a bigger role. Localism versus centralism

Changing relationship between local people, leaders and institutions. How do institutions need to adapt to communicate better with communities in the 21st Century?

Individual choice and designing around individuals may be threatened by recession

Public services need to be more resilient (e.g. resilience to flood risk); technology not providing systems to change services

Need to appeal to citizens, rather than consumers

Growing but green economies – sustainable development revisited.

Solving complex problems need 'systems not widgets'

Considering places where people are at ease with each other

Significance of variation and diversity: how diverse communities can work together

New role for leadership in communities. Leadership versus management. Management can contain a problem but doesn't solve it

Increasing policy emphasis on empowerment.

Redesigned city centres, festivals and other activities as ways of promoting positive community engagement

What has already been done? What previous and current research needs to be acknowledged?

Much data and research available. How do we locate and access this? Idea that a starting point of the programme is to analyse / review / synthesise what has been done

Concentration of previous research on markets and the state, and the relationship between markets and the state. Less attention on civil society

Atomisation/fragmentation of recent research

What has worked in previous research on communities? Good practice. In what areas have actions changed behaviour? What are the characteristics of those initiatives?

We need to look at Futures work with Foresight

Simon Marvin's (Salford University) previous work looking at urban research programmes and how research across the Councils was connected and what worked and did not work.

We need to look at the Total Place Project, run by CLG and Treasury and reporting in September/October which is looking at 12 pilot community case studies. Although this is gathering material effectively to look to ways of cutting funding, and it is top down, the information gathered by this project may be useful in informing our own research programme, as it is looking at local priorities

IDeA website and CLG work on Local Area Agreements. Drawing together consolidated targets, reduction of targets and whole systems working. All information available via CLG. Recent changes in targets related to recession. We need to review these and look for synergies here

Does 'nudging' really help?

Note successes in some areas: recycling, smoking in public places, drink driving. Why have these behaviours changed?

What are the priority research questions for the programme?

One suggestion that the three big themes were environment (physical and infrastructural), cohesion (including migration as an issue) and entrepreneurship (the economy). The programme could be about how these themes inter-relate

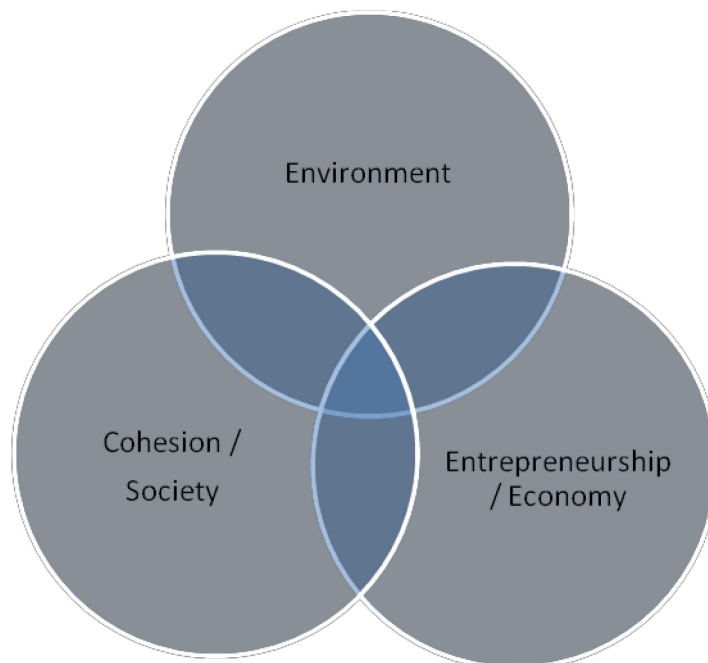


Figure 1: Possible Key Domains for a Connected Communities Programme

Another suggestion was that there should be 3 strategic themes: (1) what are the major structural changes that are going to have an impact on communities (financial, ecological, political)? (2) what are the implications of this for new forms of local governance (relationship between place shapers and place shielders; changes in forms of local government); (3) what are the changes that need to be made amongst citizens and communities; how do they need to change; what is their responsibility?

Research should include both short-, medium- and long-term outcomes

The 'wicked' issues: cross-cutting issues such as health inequalities, addiction, generational under-achievement, cycle of multiple deprivation, care for the elderly in an aging society, teenage pregnancy, children and young people at risk (e.g. groups with particular problems such as children in care, those not in education or training, homeless, those that fall into crime, addiction etc)

We need to ask new questions of old material, as well as new questions

What is the nature of 21st-century political engagement? What is the relationship between participation and well-being? What new forms of participation and empowerment are emerging?

How will the recession and increased public debt and the crisis of public trust in government change the relationship between citizens, communities and government and the way services are provided for communities in the future?

How can we build more resilient communities able to withstand future economic, social or environmental shocks?

Culture important to number of issues: e.g. example given of Fire Service developments need to be sensitive to different cultural issues. Learning within communities, from experience etc in a cultural context was a key issue

What methods should be used?

Co-production from the beginning of the project to help in defining the issues and problems. Co-production and community engagement may require either a phased approach to funding or more flexibility built into research design so that community/partner perspectives can genuinely have an influence on the research.

How can we integrate working with communities as an integral part of the Programme and its research? How can research reach out to disenfranchised communities?

Idea that the research processes themselves (if communities are involved) can change communities

Case studies seen to be highly desirable but the challenge would be to design these in ways which would enable identification of ideas or approaches that might be translated or tested or replicated in different contexts.

Whole systems thinking. Integrated/embedded/open research from the beginning. Action learning, 'citizen's eye view'

Methods should be holistic, integrative & embedded.

Noting complexity: that what works in one locality may not work in another

What partners should we engage with and what are the issues that need to be considered in partnership working?

Issues of academic and non-academic stakeholders responding to different kinds of audit requirements.

Need to identify communities of interest around particular research and policy challenges. LARCI may be able to help identify to such communities in a local government context.

Partnerships as long-term and developed over time, need to build trust.

Do we need to create protocol agreements between researchers and stakeholders?

Need to connect with partners from the earliest phases of the programme (the fact that this LARCI event was happening at the beginning was welcomed)

We need to identify researchers, statisticians, economists already working with government and look for connections

Researchers and partners may be working to different timescales – a mix of short, medium and longer term issues may be needed in the Programme.

Selection process needs to be able to identify excellent researchers who are also able to develop partnerships, good listeners etc (e.g. by looking at partnership track records, inviting to events with users, interviews etc.). Need to combine academic rigour with genuine engagement and practical outcomes.

Other organisations that could be approached included the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Wellcome Trust, Young Foundation and Carnegie Trust

Impact

Local authorities looking for clear and concise recommendations. Best for HEI and non-HEI stakeholders to examine findings together and ensure understanding of each other's territory.

Consideration of the potential implementation of research outcomes needs to be built into research from the outset. Consideration of issues of cost, support and expertise required, management, transferability etc are crucial. Projects could build in follow-through to implementation.

Problem of the cost falling in one place and the benefit in another. How do we relate cause and effect?

International relationships and impact should be considered. Some doubt about US as a model; suggestion of looking to Europe for comparative study

Unintended consequences. Cause and consequence not clear cut. If we use a systems or networking approach we cannot predict consequences.

'Research harvesting'. The Programme could make a significant impact quickly by providing follow-up funding to test the outcomes of previous research in practice e.g. through funding experimental /pilot research projects to explore the potential to implement outcomes / ideas from past research in a rigorous way.

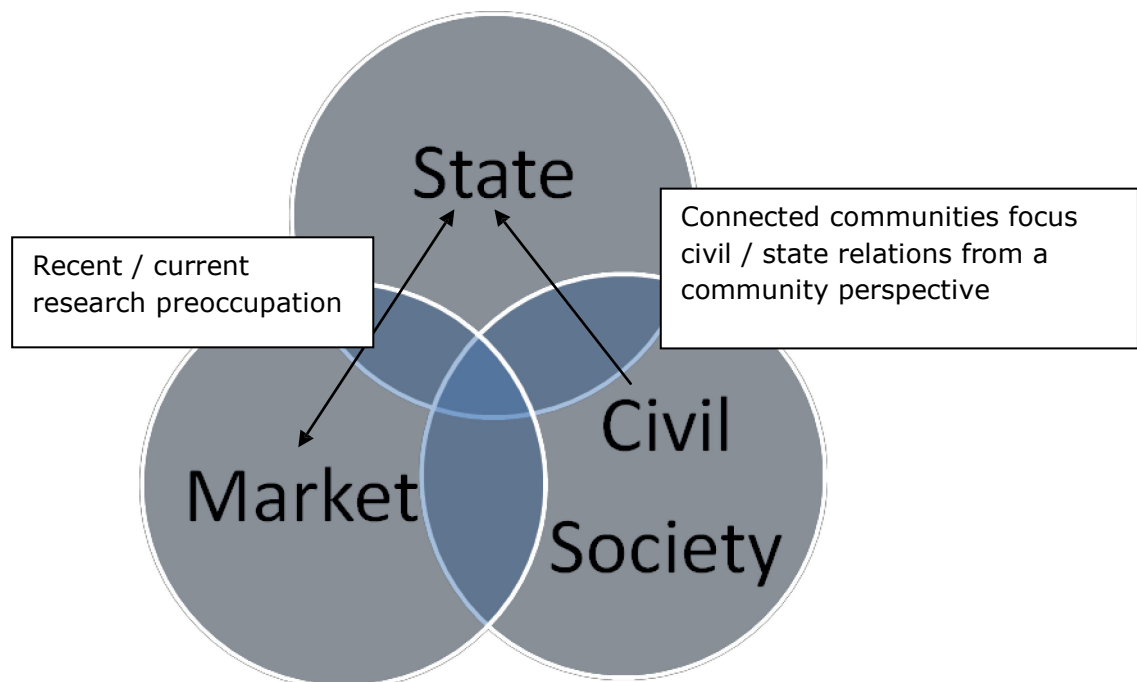
Could knowledge exchange hubs (virtual or physical) provide a focal point for synthesising and integrating research-based knowledge and understanding and support its communication / translation for policy and practice.

Need to engage policy-makers and practitioners in translating / writing up outcomes to overcome language and other barriers to effective communication.

John Bennington's Response to the Discussion of the Day

1. Concepts and Theories

Need to relate concepts and theories to the world of practice. Previously in theoretical terms, both the state and the market have received a great deal of attention, and the relationship between these two has also been the subject of scrutiny. What needs to be considered now is civil society and the relationship between citizens and the state (e.g. the renegotiation of the welfare state contract). Theoretical questions need to coincide with policy questions with community at the heart.



Does everything need to be connected? What is the relationship between connection and conformity/control/creativity? There needs to be a space for creativity and autonomy. What things *need* to be connected and what is best left unconnected? Issues of disconnection and fragmentation should also be key concerns of the programme.

Horizontal connections (networks) and vertical connections (top down). Not all connections will be horizontal. There is a need to find a balance between cohesion and diversity.

2. Design of research programmes

Whole systems design for research

Not simply about co-production but fundamental questions about the nature of knowledge (e.g. mode 2 knowledge production). We need to be aware of risks of going down consultancy road.

Need to design a research programme from end to end (not with impact just bolted on as in the outdated linear model); think about the final result/impact from the start and develop value chain for research process.

3. Themes

As above:

What are the impacts of big systemic structural changes on different communities of place, interest or culture)?

What are the implications of this for changing forms of local governance?

What are the implications and challenges for citizens and communities?

These themes could be integrated through looking at different forms of connected places / spaces (cf total places programme) and/or examining 'critical incidents'.

4. Methods

Accepted that methods need to reflect participatory, engaged, 'action' research approaches and deal with complex 'wicked issues'. Desire to return to an 'anthropological approach' in which researchers engage directly with/live in the communities they are researching. Multi-disciplinary and cross-national perspectives

5. How does one make this happen

Knowledge exchange depends on the people selected to do it and on people exchange. Effective leadership will be needed. Researchers will need good listening skills.

Apprenticeships: new generations of researchers need to be engaged

Essential to learn from history

Engagement with practitioners also essential, as well as politicians, local government trade unions, think tanks. Need to mobilise a broader network of people.