

Connecting Localism and Community Empowerment

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Executive Summary

The *Connecting Localism and Community Empowerment* project sought to assess the merits of the assumption that localisms brings about community empowerment through a review of the existing academic and policy literatures.

The key findings from the review point towards a lack of clarity and coherence in the **literature in the usage and interpretations of the terms 'localism' and 'community empowerment'**. They are often defined by implication or tacitly assumed to have an accepted definition. Whilst greater localism is generally claimed to increase community empowerment, there are substantive grounds for questioning this claim, which arise from critically analysing these concepts and how they interact. These grounds highlight conditions which need to be fulfilled if localism is to realise its potential to enhance community empowerment. Our review has identified four such conditions. Moreover, our evidence indicates that both **'localism' and 'community empowerment' are ideas** characterized by inherent tensions in relation to concepts such as scale, community, democracy and citizenship which the review had also critically analysed.

Future research should include policy focussed research on the fundamentally connected nature of the communities that are involved, and the importance of engaging with this interconnected nature as part of both free civil society and governance. Research should also be aimed at examining the conditions of citizenship and governance under which a distinctive localist politics can flourish in light of neoliberal ideology and state capitalism.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Key words

Localism, Empowerment, Community, Decentralisation, Devolution, Participation

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Background

The Coalition government formed in Britain in May 2010 has made localism a core part of its political programme. The Coalition Agreement promised 'a fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people' and said that the new government would 'promote decentralisation and democratic engagement' and 'end the era of top-down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals' (Cabinet Office, 2010: 11). In June 2010, Eric Pickles, Minister for Communities and Local Government, declared that his priorities were localism, localism and localism. In December 2010, the government introduced the *Decentralisation and Localism Bill*, as a **key component of the government's flagship 'Big Society' policy**, with the assumption that localism and decentralisation have a positive effect on community empowerment. International examples of localist attempts aimed at empowering communities also share this assumption. The *Connecting Localism and Community Empowerment* project sought to assess the merits of this assumption through a review of the existing academic and policy literatures.

Activities

The project, which ran from March to September 2011, involved three main activities: literature search, literature review, and critical synthesis. Working in the spirit of the Cochrane Collaboration's **protocols for Systematic Review**, we used Web of Science, Google Scholar and Google to undertake extensive searches of the academic and policy literatures on localism and community empowerment. These comprised 32 searches using Boolean combinations of keywords related to '**localism and decentralisation**' and '**community empowerment**', resulting in a total of 51,197 hits. These initial outputs were filtered to eliminate duplicates and false positives unrelated to the themes of the review, leaving 593 relevant records. Bibliographic data for each reference (including abstracts and citation counts) was downloaded and stored in an *Endnote* database. Abstracts were read where available and each record assigned a priority (high/medium/low) following **Bambra's (2011:18) guidance on conducting 'real world' systematic reviews** of qualitative and social science research evidence. Bambra recommends a '**pragmatic approach**' to selecting the '**best available evidence**' using a critical appraisal of the records in terms of relevance to the aims of the review. The final selection of papers for **review drew on the researchers' expertise and** supplementary searches complemented the selection of relevant sample literature in a structured systematic review. Our pragmatic real world review resulted in a select sample bibliography of 60 high priority papers (30 each on '**localism**' and '**community empowerment**') which were reviewed in depth and a further 60 lower priority items which were given more limited consideration. Each output was reviewed against an annotation template based on the research questions for each theme. The outputs of this phase were recorded in the *Endnote* database and consisted of structured notes and additional keyword codes. The database

was used to produce an annotated bibliography, an edited version of which forms one output of the project (available from the authors on request).

This evidence was used to produce a 20,000 word critical synthesis (available from the authors). In this, we evaluated the connections between localism and community empowerment using a **'Realist Synthesis' approach** to the use of systematic reviews for evidence-based policy research in the social sciences (Pawson, 2002). This approach was chosen for its ability to assess **a policy claim or hypothesis (in this case, that 'localism promotes community empowerment')** through **purposive sampling of evidence** from a range of forms, including formal research reports and case studies. It adopts a **'generative approach' to causation**, whereby **it is not 'programmes that work'** [that are sought] but the underlying reasons or affordance that they provide that generates change' (Pawson, 2002: 344). From this systematic review, four international case studies were identified which explored the **'affordances'** that link particular localist approaches to community empowerment and analyse the tensions inherent in the two concepts. (See references for case study sources).

Initial findings were presented at the Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (London, August 2011) and the Regional Studies Association Conference on Localism (Manchester, November 2011.)

Key Conclusions

Localism

Localism in various forms has a long history in Britain. Examples include strong municipal government in cities such as Birmingham in the nineteenth century, the radical politics of Poplarism in the 1920s, and the **'local socialism' of the new urban left in the 1980s**. Conversely, centralisation was a feature of the development of the national welfare state throughout the twentieth century, as were the restrictions placed on local authorities by the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher (1979-90) and John Major (1990-97). Strong central authority was also a feature of the first New Labour government (1997-2001). A renewed emphasis on localism gradually emerged during **the 2000s, leading to proposals for 'double devolution'**: from central government to local government and then from local government to neighbourhoods and households. This **'new localism'** (Stoker 2004, Davies 2008, Davies 2009) influenced White Papers on local government (*Strong and Prosperous Communities*, 2006) and community empowerment (*Communities in Control*, 2008) and prefigured many of the **coalition government's** proposals in the *Localism and Decentralisation Bill* (2010). There is no consensus about **the definition of 'localism'**. It is a **contested concept with a shifting range of meanings** and the academic literature on localism *per se* is limited (Powell, 2004). We therefore considered the concept of localism alongside related (and similarly contested) terms such as decentralisation (Smith, 1985), local democracy (Burns et al, 1994), local autonomy (Pratchett, 2004), local government (Jones & Stewart 1983, Cochrane 1993) and subsidiarity.

Community empowerment

Community empowerment is a similarly contested concept, which has become fashionable across the political spectrum. Its origins lie in the field of community action in the late 1960s and 1970s (Dominelli, 2000: 1) and its development parallels the evolution of the participatory development paradigm (Jupp et al 2010: 28). Many accounts of empowerment see it as a process which endows an individual or collective with the ability to orchestrate change in their lives to provide a degree of autonomy and control over the world around them (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988, Mayo and Craig 1995, Speer and Hughey 1995). It is conceptualised as having the power to make decisions and access and mobilise resources. **Notions of 'empowerment' operate on different scales, from empowering individuals to people within particular groups or localities that are often labelled as 'communities'. However, by putting these all together under the term 'community empowerment', there is a danger that tensions between different groups and the complex relationships between them (which may include patterns of multiple membership and diverse linkages) are obscured.** Localist forms of community empowerment intersect with debates on the politics of empowerment (Cruikshank 1999, Weissberg 1999), the relationship between collective and individual empowerment (Riger 1993, Laverack and Wallerstein 2000), social capital and empowerment (Mohan and Stokke, 2000, Woolcock and Sweetser 2002) and empowerment as participation (Arnstein 1969, Cooke & Khotari 2001, Hickey and Mohan 2004), all of which were examined in detail in our review.

Connecting Localism and Community Empowerment

Our analyses of the concepts of localism and community empowerment and the research literature on the interactions between them reveal substantive grounds for questioning the assumption that increased localism necessarily promotes community empowerment. We identified particular conditions that need to be fulfilled if localism and decentralisation are to enhance community empowerment. To understand these conditions we analysed four international case studies:

1. **Fung and Wright's (2001) study of Empowered Deliberative Democracy**
2. Avritzer (2006) study of participatory district budgeting in Brazil
3. **Gaventa's (2004) study of the legal and statutory frameworks for localism and community empowerment through participatory governance in India and Bolivia.**
4. **Glaser et al's (1997) study which provided one of very few quantitative and statistical studies analysing the impact of government-sponsored community empowerment initiatives.**

We also considered two assessments (NLGN 2005 and LRGRU 2005) of the New Labour **government's localist policies** in the UK.

We selected these case studies because each provides wide-ranging international examples of localist governance in both the global North and the South; focuses on a key area of the localism and community empowerment debate; and is widely cited, e.g., Fung and Wright's (2001) study had over 450 citations.

The case studies indicate that localism in its variants such as local government reform, decentralisation, devolution and participatory governance can be instrumental in bringing about different degrees of community empowerment, but only under certain conditions. The dominant model for community empowerment is based on *increasing citizen participation in the practices of local government*, rather than on independent community action. The case studies highlight four conditions under which this form of localism has a positive bearing on government efforts to increase community empowerment. These include localist initiatives that:

1. are actively pursued by different tiers of government as *policy priorities* in contrast to using community empowerment and localism as mere tokenistic additions to a centrally-driven and controlled policy;
2. involve a move away from the mere rhetoric of localism to active devolution of power to different scales of local government;
3. are supported by complementary legal and statutory frameworks to accompany the devolution of power; and
4. promote and encourage active forms of civil society to organise and engage by supporting community leadership and grass roots movements.

The case studies varied significantly in their scope, rationale and interpretation of the terms 'localism' and 'community empowerment'. **At best, they provide examples of encouraging signs of the potential effectiveness of localist initiatives in enhancing community empowerment.** In addition to the case study analysis, our review also identified four conceptual issues in the literature which problematise the links between localism and community empowerment:

1. ***Different and/or conflicting rationales for localism and community empowerment***
One of the key issues in the localism and community empowerment debate is the different rationales which drive the adoption of the terms localism and community empowerment as a metaphor for governance. For instance, as Clarke (1993: 5) argues, ' **the political rationales for localism are not based wholly on privatism or community values or even necessarily locational logics; they also include the instrumental use of localism as a political strategy to circumvent or replace outmoded structures of central bureaucracies**'. In a politics defined by media sound bites, government policy initiatives for localism get couched in an ever-newer vocabulary to keep up with the latest paradigms in governance but are not always supported by strong legal, conceptual or statutory frameworks. Consequently, efforts such as local government reform for community empowerment find the limit of their impact in merely changing institutional structures or redefining the remit of local authority functions.
2. ***Problems with conceptualisations of the term 'local scale'***
Geographers have long argued that in contrast to the nested 'Russian doll' mode' of the global, national, local levels, scale should be conceptualised as socially constructed (Marston, 2000). The particular characteristics which make up a given scale are not inherent, but contingent upon the different conditions and

opportunities offered to different actors in particular time and space conditions. As such, policies based on making one scale (such as the local) more desirable over others are fraught with contradictions. Some like Purcell (2006: 1925) argue **against the 'localist trap'** of thinking that **'decentralisation is necessary for democratisation'**, thus making the local the most favourable scale for intervention in pursuit of community empowerment by academics and policy makers alike. As **such, most of our evidence can be regarded as falling into the 'localist trap'**, with policy literature tending to do this more than academic literature. Purcell argues that localisation should raise no a priori assumptions (that it is necessarily linked to democratisation and empowerment), and claims it should be seen as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. This can be seen as a timely call in the **current zeitgeist where 'we are all localist now'** (Walker, 2002).

3. *Problems with conceptualisations of the term 'community'*

The uncertainty over what constitutes a 'community' and how to define its boundaries has a significant impact on localist-driven governance. At worst, this can result in community **becoming 'a false door'** (Herbert, 2005) which traps populations under misleading collective labels such as 'communities in need', 'problem communities' and 'ethnic communities'. As Wallace (2010: 805) argues in his assessment of New Labour's **approach to community empowerment 'in seeking to empower 'cohesive' and 'sustainable' communities, policy circumscribed local voices and obscured the complex interplay that constitutes local life worlds'**. **Similar critiques of the community empowerment rhetoric of New Labour policies have been made by Amin (2005: 614) who suggests that 'community' was a key unit in the 'repackaging of the economy and society'** associated with the Third Way, and a means of segregating and localizing the socio-economic problems generated by neoliberalism.

4. *Technologies of citizenship in community empowerment*

However well intentioned, empowerment initiatives are invariably aimed at **regulating citizens via the 'technologies of citizenship'**, where empowerment via **participatory forms of governance has seen the creation of 'new identities of citizen-users – identities which frequently combined an apparent increase in power (as partner, as customer) with increasing responsibilities (to participate in policy making or service delivery, to make informed choices)'** (Barnes and Prior, 2009: 5). In the words of Durose, Greasley & Richardson (2009: 3), the **changing character of local governance includes changes in the nature of the 'practice of citizenship' as linked to citizen rights and responsibilities**. Thus, when power is **devolved via 'technologies of citizenship'**, the governmentalities of active citizenship and participatory democracy can be regarded as competing and conflating with more representational and managerial modes of local governance, raising questions about the role of the welfare state, its legitimacy and authority and more widely, the nature of democracy itself.

Recommendations for future research

The links between the theoretical and empirical realms of localism and community empowerment are not always fully explored in the literature. Consequently, their adoption in public policy can run into difficulty related to the four tensions we have identified in the previous section. Localism and community empowerment should not be understood in terms of isolated islands of either particular local areas or particular empowered community groups. Instead, our review has highlighted the need for policy-focussed research on the fundamentally connected nature of the communities that are involved, and the importance of engaging with this interconnected nature as part of both free civil society and governance if they are to be truly empowered. Our review suggests the following directions for future research:

- **Examining the conceptual underpinnings of the terms 'localism' and 'community empowerment'**, together with research that uncovers the historical trajectory of the term 'localism' in policy and academic literature.
- Analysing the implications of diverse uses of the term 'community' and the scales of its practice and presence in relation to empowerment by addressing the linkages between the local, national and global through notions of social capital, wider networks and political relationships.
- Investigating the nature and constitution of the neighbourhood as the spatial expression of the local which captures to an extent the locus of many communities and is a functional site for policy targets.
- Exploring how the interplay between localist politics and wider collective movements interacts with community empowerment discourses and issues of diversity and identity within local interactions.
- Identifying the mechanisms through which the role of the state in relation to community empowerment is being changed for **instance, in light of the 'Big Society' agenda (including the Localism Bill) in England and the Community Empowerment Bill in Scotland.**

Lastly, all these research recommendations could go into addressing the bigger question about the conditions of citizenship and governance under which distinctive localist politics can flourish in the current political and economic context.

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