

Consumer or Citizen? – The Difference in Theory and Practice Empowerment Tools 4

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This article charts the origins of community empowerment and compares the ‘consumerist’ or ‘user and chooser’ approach with the ‘citizens’ or ‘maker and shaper’ approaches to empowering people. It also identifies the key people involved in the community empowerment process.

Introduction

Community empowerment is not new. Citizens claiming their individual and mutual rights and acting upon their individual and mutual responsibilities is deeply embedded in the agencies and institutions of any human society. Community empowerment has expressed itself in many different ways. Social movements such as in mental health and housing have claimed influence and power for citizens and communities. Many movements and campaigns led by citizens have their roots in the late 1960s and 1970s pressure groups and campaigns of tenants, patients, women, trades unions and others.

This followed a time when the consensual politics of the 1940s 1950s and 1960s had all but collapsed. No longer would citizens accept the unfettered power of the politician or the professional. Citizens groups and pressure groups sought to challenge large public sector failings such as almost universally poor education, blighted public housing and poor urban planning. The public domain required better democratic accountability and community involvement and the voices and demands of many different groups in society needed expression.

Since the 1980s community empowerment – that is influence over public services and the public sphere in general - has been exercised through two approaches. One is the ‘citizenship approach’ that puts the individual person as citizen at the centre of public service transactions. The other is the ‘consumer approach’ that constructs quasi markets or attempts to mimic market dynamics in order to add dynamic shaping and change to public services delivery. These two approaches contrast in several ways as is described and discussed below.

Community empowerment approaches

The language of community empowerment is rich with different ways of describing relationships between different groups, communities, citizens, service users, service providers, government, companies and charities.

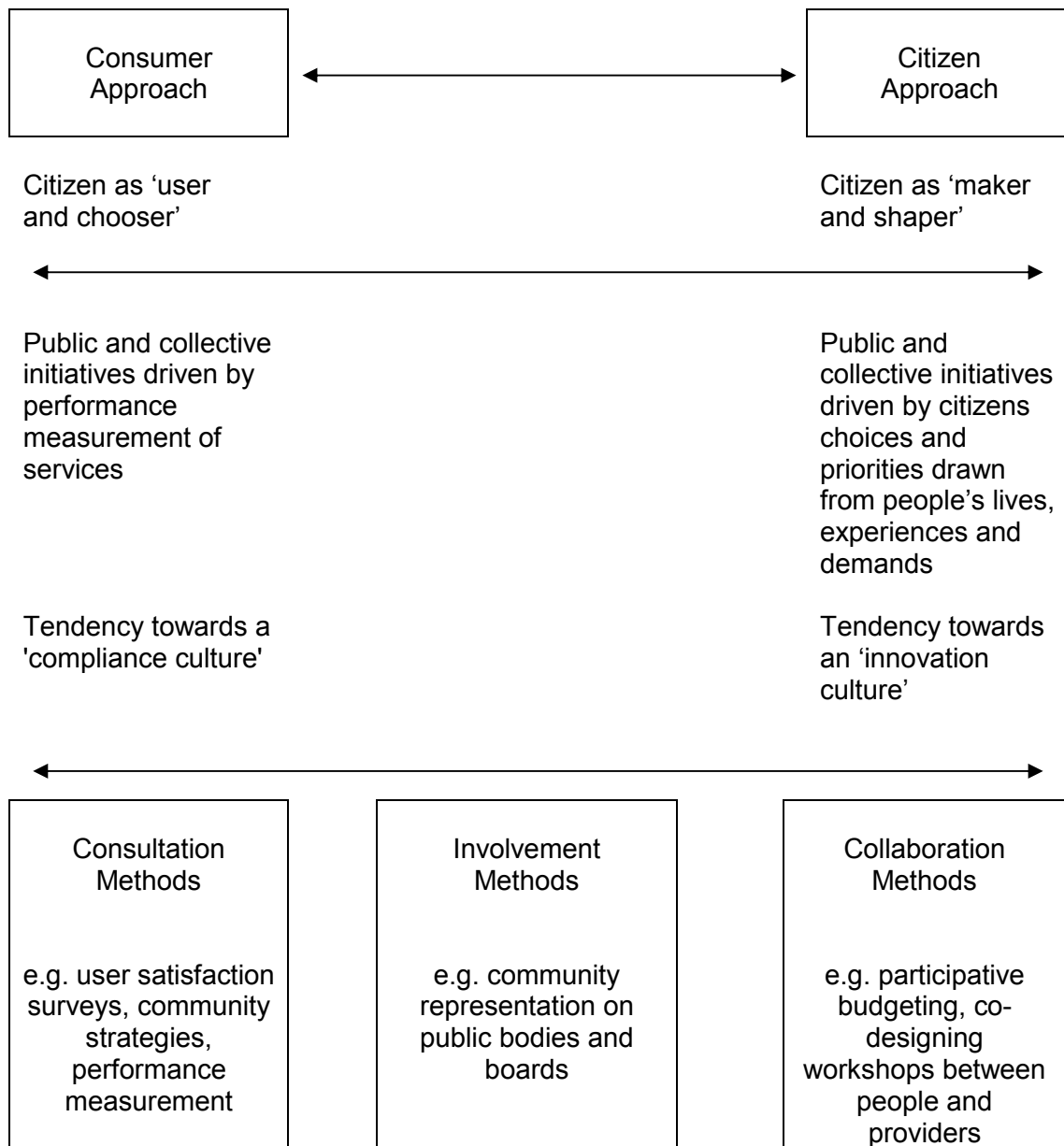
Phrases like 'community engagement', 'consultation' or 'involvement' are often used interchangeably even though they convey quite different meanings. Extension of community empowerment also begs the questions, who is being empowered and to do what? When people use the term community empowerment they can be meaning all sorts of different things. This can include: shifting decision making from one group (say professionals) to another (say services users); getting people to take responsibility for themselves and to do things for themselves; engaging 'hard-to-reach' groups of people in something considered good for them; or moving liabilities from one group to another. Community empowerment has become something of a motherhood and apple pie phrase suggesting something altogether good. However there can be losers as well as winners in shifting the balance and nature of power.

Involving people in different relationships within communities and between communities and between service providers (like public, voluntary or private sector) requires an understanding of the different levels at which 'involvement' or 'engagement' takes place.

The table below brings together and contrasts the different approaches to community empowerment that are in use. The purpose of this table is to help anyone thinking about how to introduce, change, review or 'level up' their methods of engaging with communities to locate their approach and their methods.

The key here is for those with responsibility and power for delivering public or voluntary services to locate their chosen methods of engagement on a kind of map that charts both the strengths and limitations of involving communities and citizens in service provision. This synthesis makes no particular judgement on the overall strengths and weaknesses of the contrasting community empowerment approaches. It merely asks the practitioner to consider why they are (or are not) seeking to empower communities and to underpin their methods within a clear theoretical framework.

Community empowerment – approaches in use



The Consumer Approach –

The consumer approach to community empowerment has made progress in enabling citizens to have greater control over public services whether they are provided by public sector bodies, voluntary organisations or companies. 'Consumerisation' seeks to construct different public services user groups (e.g. parents or residents or patients) into groups that can choose public services. It also seeks to construct services into easily identifiable 'commodified' products that can be purchased, made more efficient, managed and rationed. The consumer approach continues to be the dominant model of running almost any service or public activity.

The consumer approach has borrowed extensively from the models of business and of the market place creating some of the features of buyers and sellers; demand and supply; and price and competition. It attempts to model the experience of buying your groceries or your clothes as similar to 'buying' your healthcare or council services.

Quasi-markets in the public sphere are now well established and the quasi market mechanisms such as competitive tendering or personalised care purchasing continue to be developed by the public and voluntary sectors. With this has come the auditing and performance approach where policy makers have sought to achieve greater economy, efficiency and effectiveness. This process has made public services more transparent and accountable and nurtured a culture where citizens - as consumers - have greater expectations of what the public services are supposed to achieve.

As consumers they are more empowered than they once were as passive recipients of services. It also has brought with it distinct problems too. Unlike in free markets the 'customer' is not sovereign and the provider of services is not determined by competitive conditions and customer choice is specified by the political process and legal statute.

The consumer approach creates uniformity in services where improving services has been driven by the need for efficiency rather than effectiveness. This is due to public money being restricted and therefore a desire to get more value for money as the main driver of public policy. Efficiency is concerned with striving to 'do things right'. Conversely effectiveness is driven to 'do the right things'.

For instance looking after people with mental health problems or learning disabilities used to be through the one size fits all residential institution. Many of these homes and residential schools used to 'do things right' and many were happy and healthy places. However they did not 'do the right things' and give people control of their lives in their communities. It took a decade of innovating care in the community and user involvement to change the models of care and support and start to do the right things.

The consumer approach tends towards efficiency and thus a compliance culture where frontline professional workers and managers have little incentive to innovate for fear of not meeting efficiency targets that drive their organisations. Consumer approaches to community empowerment are helped by using consultative methods and, to some extent, involvement methods. Typically quantitative measurement of satisfaction, reaction, preferences and usage of services are used to engage people. This is now well established in the public sector with 92% of local authorities using satisfaction surveys on a regular basis¹

The consumer approach can foster an approach where citizens as consumers can be the 'user and chooser' and in some ways can have influence and power over providers. However empowering one group of citizens to be consumers of public services through having a 'choice' can significantly disadvantage another group who, as a result, become disempowered. For instance more affluent citizens moving to areas where there are better schools or more localised health services. Perversely

¹ Public Participation in Local Government – A Survey of Local Authorities, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2001

this can lead to the better off having better choices and the poorer having more limited access to services they need. A further disadvantage of the performance measurement approach that comes with consumerisation is the possibility of disempowering professionalism. For this read the police's concern about being driven by national detection performance indicators and targets rather than local, citizen-driven concerns about particular crimes. The target culture can also bring about quite unintended consequences such as the repeated tendency to favour targets with good results and less resource use (e.g. kidney stone operations or targeting just below the standard attainment children) over those with less good results (e.g. chronic back pain or targeting very low achieving or disengaged children) irrespective of the need or priority.

Consumerised public services methods and ideas can not replace or replicate citizen-driven models of empowerment.

The Citizen Approach –

Citizen based approaches have a starting point rooted in people and their lives, struggles, aspirations, needs and wants. It is founded on the idea of people's relationship to the state and to one another – i.e. citizenship. Participation in civil society and the shared public sphere is rooted in people's lives in contrast to the consumer approach that is rooted in the service system². Large public authorities are getting very interested in a new facilitative role that is less bound by service operations and more driven by enabling people to improve their lives and sustain their communities. For instance 'place-making' tries to engineer whole functioning and prosperous communities and tries to facilitate 'lifestyle offerings' rather than 'services solutions'³. This significantly shifts the role of the public authority in to one of facilitator over and above professional provider.

The citizen approach to empowerment is concerned with co-opting the citizen as a partners in 'making and shaping'⁴ public services, communal facilities, common public 'goods' (such as the environment or public space) and longer term desired outcomes. This is a quite different partnership and relationship to the 'user and chooser' model that underpins the consumer approach to community empowerment.

Many public services and specific towns and cities are grasping hold of a more collaborative citizen-driven approach. A fast growing model of involving citizens is in neighbourhood boards and neighbourhood management which are deliberative rather than purely consultative. Also interactive websites, citizen's panels, participatory appraisal and user driven models of service provision such as Expert Patients have all grown in use since 2000⁵. These deliberative ways of involving and empowering citizens bring with them the experiential responses and interests of

² Use involvement in Research and Evaluation: Liberation or Regulation, Peter Beresford, Social Policy and Society, 2002

³ Paul Coen, Chief executive of the Local Government Association quoted in the Social Innovation Lab for Kent paper, Sophia Parker, Kent County Council, 2008

⁴ 'From Users and Choosers to Makers and Shapers: Repositioning Participation in Social Policy' Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa, Institute for Development Studies, 2001

⁵ Ibid 18

citizens (in contrast to the purely responsive opinions made in closed question surveys and satisfaction questionnaire research).

A citizen-based approach to community empowerment asks the community empowerment practitioner to deploy collaborative methods. The job of tackling social, economic or environmental problems is seen as co-operative task between the different participants all with their part to play and all with their own expertise - the players being citizens and communities, front-line workers, managers and policy-makers.

A citizen-based approach tends public authorities or voluntary and community organisations towards an innovative culture that seeks to find solutions and create opportunities. It tends towards being focused on effectiveness and outcomes – ‘co-evolving’ solutions and innovations and ‘co-producing’ projects, services and long term goals. For instance, in health services innovation is focused on creating better health and wellbeing and innovating ways of achieving this.

There is an inherent danger to developing a citizen's approach to community empowerment in a public and private economy principally driven by a consumerist approach. Firstly, the disadvantaged citizen has lost in the public and private consumerist market place - they are forced to choose have less good services, live in less good neighbourhoods and are less able to buy services that level up their disadvantages. Secondly the citizen is identified as needing to be 'empowered' by others to pull themselves up by their bootstraps improve 'their' less good situation.

Community empowerment practitioners and participants need to analyse the causes and consequences of, respectively, dis-empowerment and empowerment in order to avoid the danger of re-enforcing dis-empowering policies and behaviors.

Developing a Citizens Approach -

Creating new democratic places, spaces and methods in which community empowerment can take place demands resources and skills to be invested in ‘community empowerment practitioners’ across the full range of public, voluntary and corporate service providers. It also requires the present leveling up of the strategic importance of community empowerment - e.g. through new ‘duties to involve’ citizens - to be further accelerated by public sector organisations.

Citizen-based approaches to community empowerment requires a shift in thinking about how citizens are engaged. There are at least 5 shift points illustrated below.

A Shift in Participation⁶	
From	To
Beneficiary →	Citizen
Project →	Policy
Consultation →	Decision-Making
Appraisal →	Implementation
Micro →	Macro

Participation in civil society and decisions about the public interest and the public good is a citizen's natural right that needs to be further embedded as a statutory right and not merely a conditional invitation.

The 'Players' in community empowerment

The diagram illustrates the players in community empowerment and the public domain in general. Each player has a part to play in shaping the public domain and public services within this and each has a different kind of influence and power over the public domain. The shape is deliberately chosen as an illustration of power.



⁶ Gaventa J, Institute for Development Studies

Policy makers are at the top of the power pyramid because they are either elected to run public institutions or appointed in order to influence the policy and strategy of public institutions. The electoral process determines the personnel of the policy makers though the policies they adopt will take their influences from interest groups across all kinds of local, national and international scenes.

Managers control and deliver public policy running public institutions like health bodies, educational institutions, local authorities, civil services departments and police services.

Front-line workers simply describes the workforce who deliver services across the public services domain. They are the principle and largest resource of public services (in the public and the voluntary sectors and, to some extent, in the private sector). They have the job of providing services and interacting with the general public and with services users.

Community Activists is a broad generic term used here to describe citizens who take on some kind of community and voluntary activity in civil society as community volunteers, school governors or campaigners. 'Activism' comes about because people can only meet their needs through a level of co-operation with other people.

Citizens participate in the public domain at many levels that influence public services – in particular the extent to which public services effectively achieve positive outcomes (or not). For community empowerment to take place each of these groups need to act together and understand each other's role in bringing about change. Citizens need to do things for themselves, organise and make their demands and wishes clear from the 'bottom up'. Policy makers and managers need to act in ways that facilitate what citizens want at a meaningful level. They also need to create the conditions in which citizens can participate.

Conclusions

Community empowerment involves co-operation between different participant groups – citizens, community activists and volunteers, front-line workers, managers and policy makers. There are contrastingly different approaches to empowering communities and citizens most notable a consumer based approach and a citizen's based approach. They produce quite different relationships and expectations amongst the participants.

The consumerist approach frames the citizen or service user as the 'user and chooser' of services. Though they may, to an extent be empowered, they may also have a passive role in determining the type, level and extent of services provision. The consumer approach tends also towards a compliant public sector working culture.

The citizen's based approach to community empowerment frames the citizen as the 'maker and shaper' of services and the public domain. The citizen or services user is active and there is a tendency towards an innovative public sector working culture.

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‘Empowerment Tools 1 – Healthy Partnership Checklist’ is a checklist for reflection, learning and evaluation for anyone involved in supporting partnerships. It is easy to use collaboratively or individually and will help you evaluate the key building blocks to a healthy partnership.

‘Empowerment Tools 2 - Practicing participation, methods and stages’ revisits and relocates the international practice ideas about the stages of participation in public places and what this means by way of the public promise that service providers are making to local people.

‘Empowerment Tools 3 - Partnership with Purpose - Involving All the Players’ is another short think-piece that explains the different roles that are key to unlocking the power and potential for an empowered, people-driven public sector.

‘Empowerment Tools 4 - Consumer or Citizen, theory and practice’ debates the theory and idea of empowerment from different viewpoints. Empowering people, communities, citizens and services-users will be critical to the public sector and third sector organisations ‘doing better’ rather than merely ‘doing more for less’. This paper locates both participative and ‘market’ theories of the public sector in a brief and comparative analysis.

‘Empowerment Tools 5 – Public Sector Professional Work and Social Capital’ is a shorter think-piece that emphasise the need for public organisations to nurture social capital rather than ignore it or act against it.

‘Empowerment Tools 6 - Discovering ‘Facilitative Public Management’ is an ideas paper drawing together all of the empowerment tools research. It contrasts the best of a new and more innovative style of public management and decision making with the disadvantages of mechanistic public management that dominates our public services. Whatever your point of view or your role in any public service or community there is something in this for you!