

Learning and locality: a research agenda for exploring the role of regeneration consultancies.

Tanya Merridew
University of Newcastle
School of Architecture Planning and Landscape
Claremont Tower
Newcastle Upon Tyne
NE1 7RU

T: +44 191 222 8818
F: +44 191 2228811

E: tanya.merridew@ncl.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper is based upon proposed research aimed at exploring in more depth the micro-politics of knowledge resources in stakeholder governance. In new systems of stakeholder governance it is increasingly assumed that a growing diversity of knowledge resources should be actively engaged in local regeneration processes (see for example Sandercock 2000). Alongside this development is the growing emphasis upon the role of the consultant in local regeneration processes, often perceived as an 'external' player' who nonetheless becomes part of local stakeholder structures. Whilst it may be assumed that these consultants will contribute in a range of ways to the stock of knowledge resources in the locality, little in-depth research has been done to explore this role. The aim of this paper is to develop a framework through which we might begin to unpack the role of consultancy in contributing to learning within local regeneration processes. The paper concludes that more research needs to be done on the role of consultants in regeneration and their contribution to the acquisition, flows and influence of knowledge resources in order to more fully understand their role within local policy processes.

Introduction

There is an increasing concern with the knowledge resources in local policy processes. This interest is being driven from a number of directions. First, there is a concern that existing knowledge is not being used effectively in the management of places:

‘The waste of information and knowledge in public sector organisations would be a public scandal if it were money’ (Leat quoted in Taylor 2000:23)

Second, in the UK under the New Labour administration more weight has been given to the importance of knowledge resources in policy processes, particularly through the recent emphasis upon evidence-based policy. In addition, the rhetoric concerning the significance not just of partnership working, but also of the need for local communities to have a greater voice in local governance, has been particularly acute in the arena of local regeneration. In the forward to the Social Exclusion Unit’s report *Bringing Britain Together* the Prime Minister states:

“Too much has been imposed from above, when experience shows that success depends on communities themselves having the power and taking the responsibility to make things better...the lessons haven’t been learned properly” (Social Exclusion Unit 1998:7)

Alongside this, academic urban studies literature alerts us to the diversity of voices that make up ‘communities’. Whilst a more pluralist approach to our understanding of the urban environment is perhaps implicit in the notion of partnership working, we are increasingly aware of the idea of multiple identities and knowledges that contribute to stakeholder governance (see for example Healey 1997, Sandercock 2000). In an era of stakeholding, the notion of experts and expert knowledge is challenged by our increasing interest in diverse and multiple voices in the urban policy arena.

Yet, as we increasingly turn towards recognizing a diverse range of knowledge resources within pluralist systems of stakeholder governance, new questions are thrown up concerning both the nature of the knowledge and learning resources that different groups of actors contribute to policy processes and the way in which they contribute. One topic of particular interest, taken up in this research proposal, is the role that consultants play in the acquisition and flow of these various knowledge resources. This interest is based partly upon the apparent growth in importance of consultants in local planning and urban regeneration policy processes and also because of their rather obscured role as stakeholder within local policy processes.

For some of those casting a critical eye over the involvement of consultants; their role has simply constituted an undermining of local democracy (see for example Reade 1996) and a movement away from local knowledge resources and the ability for local people to envision their own futures with the support of local government. Reade has argued fundamentally against the overall ascendancy of the consultancy and ‘presentation industry’ arguing that ‘the public and the councillors are then routinely squeezed out of the local policy making process’ (88). Moreover he contends that placing chunks of the policy making process beyond the local authority inherently entails a loss of continuity and coherence, partly by ignoring the past and by not necessarily responding to all the relevant policy connections. Consequently for Reade briefing the consultants and preparing bid documents had

replaced more active engagement in shaping and helping to run towns and cities. Whilst times have undoubtedly changed, Reade's analysis presents a stark critique of the nature of the consultancy industry. More recently, others have argued that the consultancy sector represents a positive force for change, providing a new dimension of expertise (providing even greater or more specialist knowledge than the local authority) and potentially playing a co-ordinating role bringing together other sets of experts (Baker 2001: 17). The implication of this perspective is that the consultancy sector has the capacity to contribute to local policy processes in distinctive ways.

In a more detailed exploration of the role of consultants based upon a case study of Tyne and Wear Development Corporation Davoudi and Healey (1990) rehearse in more depth some of the assumed benefits of consultants as being:

- neutral 'process managers' – mediators / brokers/ assessors
- a conduit for communication between interested parties
- a team with multiple/ specialist skills to assist in problem solving
- a source of new and /or innovative perspectives

However, they argue that such assumed benefits of consultancy-based approaches do not always come to fruition and that this is often well understood on the ground. This in turn opens up the question of why consultants are employed and what role they are expected to perform. Hence a key issue is about the clarity and explicitness of the objectives set in the brief that the consultants are given. Indeed Davoudi and Healey (*ibid*) have noted a cost in terms of the clarity of the brief when consultants are employed in the search for innovation and new visions.

Thompson (2000), a community architect and planner, has also commented that private sector clients are 'often better' with regard to the purposefulness with which they employ consultants. Hence, one theme requiring further investigation might be about the process of brief construction and the implications of this.

Whilst the vagueness of the brief may be a problem, recent empirical work (Merridew and Coaffee 2001) also suggests that the search for innovation or a new vision may well impede the extent to which a diverse range of knowledge sources may be incorporated within local policy processes. It seems that consultants may overlook a variety of diverse local knowledge resources in their quest for 'white paper' solutions (Smales 1996). Thus in regeneration work, the desire for new visions of places, may seek to 'scrub out' the past overlooking deeply embedded sets of knowledge and beliefs. This notion of overriding the past has some resonance with the claim by Leat (above) about the waste of knowledge and information resources. Work by the author and others has identified a tendency for the consultancy role to be about disentangling from past sets of relations and agendas, seeking to provide a new momentum through which to drive forward policy processes by helping establish new ways of working and new agendas. In this sense one dimension of the consultancy work may be seen as the attempt to 'scrub' out memories or past relations. For example, recent research conducted in the East End of Newcastle (Merridew 1999) has shown how consultants were used in an attempt to unlock a highly fractious situation over the location of a supermarket. The consultants were seen as being brought in to unblock a complex and difficult set of political wranglings and allow the past to somehow be left behind.

In a second example (Merridew and Coaffee 2001), the process of developing a sub-regional strategy for part of the North West dubbed 'New Vision' – raises questions about the ways in which the consultants might bring a fresh set of eyes to bear on long-standing economic problems. This process has led to some conflict between those actors who feel nothing new is being said and those who see the process as an opportunity to move on from the

past ways of doing things. As one commentator remarked 'the past needs gently leading outside and shooting'. This again reflects the sense of removing blockages that are part of past relations and practices. But, there is also a sense of frustration that existing knowledge and analysis – 'the reports sitting on shelves gathering dust' – is not being utilised within the process. This provokes the questions of how and in what ways the consultants might be extending or managing the arenas of policy debate and action? In the same example some of the limitations surrounding the need for 'innovative' or 'creative' responses to old problems also became apparent. The pressure on the consultants to conjure up 'new tricks' has led to local practitioners finding some of the suggestions at best superficial.

The questions that stem from these examples concern the extent to which consultancies are being used to circumvent the awkwardness of past events and relations. Also in attempting to beyond the past there is the question of whether there is a stock of ideas, which are being circulated and replicated largely irrespective of context. This in turn raises the question of how far these activities have any implications for the process of *learning about the city or how the city knows about itself*. In particular whether there in fact consultancies may somehow be short-circuiting the need for organisational learning by city governments. There is also a concern about how far governance processes may be reaching out to embrace more diverse knowledge resources or whether a stock of existing repertoires is being used to bolster learning processes. These questions are likely to become increasingly pertinent as we move towards a greater emphasis upon mainstreaming, which is likely to raise new questions about learning.

Work conducted by members of the Co-ordination of Area-Based Initiatives (CABI) team has begun to unpack some of the issues around mainstreaming (DETR 2000: 55-56). It identifies two aspects of mainstreaming which seem particularly pertinent to the proposed research. First mainstreaming good practice which is about ensuring that a mainstream agency adapts and reproduces examples of good practice from initiative activity. Second is mainstreaming policy issues, when the policy lessons from the work and experience of initiatives have a direct influence on the policy process and so therefore may over the longer term be the most powerful route to mainstreaming. Support for mainstreaming is likely to come from a number of different sources and includes the following. First, finding a means to engaging with the local policy system. This may involve finding a niche which is amenable to influence, particularly the learning of lessons. Second, is the existence of learning organisations, which by their nature have a culture of identifying lessons for more widespread practice - as well as achieving policy targets. The process of planning for mainstream also requires assessing the potential for changes and balancing the extent of innovation with the capacity of the system to accept change. In addition to this, mainstreaming implies open communication systems, channels of access between stakeholders and policy-making institutions and a champion to initiate reforms. It is not difficult to see therefore the role of learning in mainstreaming and the potential role which consultants might play in this process and connecting decision-making across the neighbourhood and strategic levels. Stemming from this, the research is premised on the need to find out more about how city governments learn about the city and what role external consultants play in these learning processes.

The proposed research is therefore premised on the need to seek a greater understanding of the role of consultancy in stakeholder governance focussing on local regeneration activities. Whilst a degree of complexity will stem from the range of actors and organisations engaged in various consultancy tasks in regeneration work, a contribution to local learning is often at some level assumed; yet the role of consultant as stakeholder often remains underplayed and under-explored. Whether through developing relations,

gaining a deeper understanding and analysis of problems and seeking potential solutions it seems that consultants are likely to have a potentially important impact on the *learning process* in some way. A number of theoretical insights seem useful in driving forward this research agenda including social learning and institutional capacity approaches.

Theoretical Framework

For Hall (1993), the 'collective puzzlement' of policy making can be unpacked through the concept of 'social learning'. This perspective draws attention to the role of ideas within political processes and relations since it views state and society as being linked together through the *flow of ideas*. One definition of social learning is therefore the 'deliberate attempt to adjust goals or techniques of policy in response to past experiences and new information.' Thus social learning implies that ideas lie at the heart of policy-making (1993: 279). This opens up the question of how this relationship between ideas and policy operates in practice. Whilst learning is indicated when 'policy changes as the result of such a process.' (278), Hall concedes the difficulties involved in determining exactly *when* and *how* such changes take place. First, if changes take place incrementally it can be hard to identify change since '...ideas do not leave much of a trail when they shift.' (290). Healey (1997: 256) confirms the importance of the social learning perspective, given that knowledge is not 'out there' as something that exists to be found. Rather, it is actively constructed through social interaction in ways that relate to purpose, or as Sandercock argues a mutual 'learning by doing' (1998: 158). Hall concludes that we need to know more about the *role of ideas* in policy-making and the processes of policy change given that the learning process will vary across different spatial and temporal contexts according to the different core beliefs which are held and which help structure the ideas which are adopted.

These core beliefs are held within the new institutional structures of governance such as partnership (see Atkinson 1999) and are affected by a number of factors, including for example, stakeholder membership. Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith (1993) explore, through the idea of the 'advocacy coalition framework' the way in which groups of actors come together as stable coalitions and how this stability is achieved. An important glue which binds coalitions together are *common belief systems*. Hence these core beliefs, which tend to underlie stable coalitions, are often employed in the work of framing policy – or deliberative strategy making - by shaping patterns of learning and thinking. There are therefore important links between stakeholder relations, core beliefs and framing work. One aspect of Healey's work is a concern with when and how the parameters and boundaries shift and the frameworks themselves are subject to change. Following Schon (Healey 1997: 257), learning can be understood as a two-dimensional process. 'Single loop' learning is the first dimension and involves improving action within a given set of parameters. The second dimension, or 'double-loop' learning, involves learning about existing parameters and potentially creating new boundaries thereby changing the conditions under which tasks are carried out. Viewing learning in this way opens up scope for assessing the type of role that consultants might be playing and evaluating whether the type of analysis they produce is likely to reinforce or shift existing boundaries.

In this sense the analytical work of consultants, may form an important, but not discrete task within local policy process. Rather, according to Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith it should be understood as '...part of a many-sided, ongoing exchange about the way issues should be perceived, what values are affected and how and what policy options merit consideration by policy elites' (1993: 234). They then seek to unpack the different type of role and

use of analysis which they argue may will depend on the nature, and in particular, the stability or volatility of the 'coalition' relations.

Under conditions of conflict, analysis can be seen as a political resource, addressing the beliefs and values of main concern to the policy sub-system participants. However, the use of analytical tools raises questions about the analyst-client relation and whether the client is committed to a pre-determined policy option. In the conflict scenario the client may simply be seeking an analysis which will provide ammunition within the political debate. However, the likelihood of employing analysis as a political resource will be influenced by the nature of the forum in which the issue is being debated. Hence they conclude that it is in: '...analytical debates characterised by high levels of conflict, over analytically intractable issues, and in open fora that analysis is most likely to be employed primarily as a political resource' (233). Consequently they suggest that analysts who expect their work to have an independent and influential role in shaping policy under conditions of conflict are likely to be disappointed. In other contexts analysis '...may significantly modify policy-relevant beliefs of policy elites'. Thus under conditions of moderate conflict, where there are analytically tractable issues of interest to a practitioner forum this may well encourage the mobilisation of analytical resources which can in turn significantly contribute to the way in which the policy elite perceive policy issues and options. This discussion of analysis highlights that as policy contexts vary in terms of degree of conflict, point in trajectory of debate and spatial and temporal position, so that the use of consultancy and impact upon learning is likely vary.

This perspective therefore has similarities with the interpretive policy analysis of Healey et al (2001), which explores the active construction of meaning and action within particular social contexts via relational dynamics and considers whether the analysis is likely to encourage or act as a defence against a re-framing process. This again relates to previous comments on the possible tension between consensus building tasks and innovating work and the potential for social learning as an institutional capacity building tool. Healey (1998) highlights different dimensions of institutional capacity: intellectual, social (trust) and political (mobilisation) capacity. To provide an analytical framework for institutional capacity building processes in local governance these are then recast as: knowledge resources, relational resources and mobilisation capabilities. Multi-dimensional and dynamic governance processes both draw upon these resources and capabilities and also generate them. In focussing upon the role of consultancy in local regeneration, we can develop a framework for investigation based upon the idea of which institutional capacities are being drawn upon and developed through particular processes. In the case of the proposed research the main focus would clearly be upon knowledge resources, however the social learning perspective clearly highlights the interplay between knowledge resources and the relational resources of stakeholding. It is also assumed that any study exploring both the existence of and generation of knowledge resources is likely to illuminate more about how relational resources work. The institutional approach is therefore useful for highlighting the two-fold need to both understand which knowledge resources consultants are drawing upon and the type of knowledge resources they feed into local policy processes.

Healey et al (2001) draw attention to the way in which *knowledge resources and relational resources* are mobilised and how this affects the frames of reference or discourses through which meanings are arrived at and disseminated and the relationship between discourse and practice through which action is achieved. Thus their understanding of shifting patterns of governance changes hinges upon the notion of *continuity and change* in frames, discourses and practices. A central theme of this analysis is that institutional capacity is fluid and therefore can generate new capacity for collective strategic action. One element of this is the type of knowledge

resources being drawn upon and how this in turn reinforces or changes the wider discourses which structure policy agendas and the nature of routinized practices.

Healey et al (2001) outline the different characteristics of *knowledge resources* that may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of social learning within local governance processes. This includes: range, frames, integration, capacity for learning and the degree of openness. *Range* refers to whether knowledge is explicit or tacit and whether it is systematised or experiential. *Frames of reference* refers to the way in which issues or problems are conceptualised and how in turn opportunities and interventions are conceived. This can also include the way in which places are understood. *Integration* refers to the degree to which there is a shared agreement and understanding about range and frames amongst different stakeholders; and therefore to what extent different spheres of policy development and action can become integrated. Finally the *capacity for openness and learning* relates to the degree to which local players are able to absorb new ideas and to learn from them.

This multi-layered understanding of knowledge resources begins to provide a lens through which to investigate the relationship between actors and knowledge resources in local governance processes. It also links to a recent body of work focussing on policy discourses and local regeneration processes. An example of this is work by Hastings (1999) exploring the micro dimensions of discourse, in which we are urged to pay attention to the specific vocabulary and imagery employed in policy debate as well as the structure of debate. She argues that shared ideas or constructions, about problem definition or possible solutions for example, may form the basis of a discourse coalition and in turn provide insight into the nature and operation of local power relations. For Hastings changes in language can help identify changes in assumptions and values – and so help track any transformation of attitudes, values and assumptions that may bring about changes in cultures and practices.

The work by Healey et al (2001) alerts us also to the active process of knowledge mobilisation – the question of how particular knowledge resources are mobilised. For Tarrow (1998) knowledge resources within a locality – like relational resources (range of stakeholders/ morphology of social networks/ inter-network integration) - provide a reservoir of capacities for urban governance initiatives but require deliberate mobilisation. In turn knowledge resources can be used to form symbolic frames of reference around which people can mobilise. Other dimensions of mobilisation identified by Tarrow include political opportunity, social networks (relational resources) and repertoires (ways of acting to achieve change). To this framework Healey et al (2001) add: the arenas where mobilisation takes place and the role of key change agents in initiating and managing governance innovation.

Research themes and questions

Drawing together the different threads of literature discussed above some key themes emerge to drive forward a research agenda into the role of consultancies in local regeneration processes.

The proposed research is particularly concerned with the following themes:

- Whether consultancy works to impede the process of organisational learning or is able to facilitate new learning processes.
- How, therefore consultants have or are likely to be able to contribute to shifting the mainstream?
- Reflect on relationship between knowledge resources, relational resources and learning in stakeholder governance.

This could be explored through investigation into a number of key ideas:

- Arenas of operation / action: position of client, the terms and clarity of brief, expectations and restrictions/ innovation/ consensus building, client-analyst relations, type of product/ process envisaged
- Stakeholder frameworks: nature of forums, knowledge and relational resources, degree of integration, shared stories, beliefs etc, stability of relations / conflict
- Strength of existing frames and concepts and images of the past
- Frames of reference and repertoires employed by consultancies: sources
- Reinterpretation of dominant concepts (symbolically, experientially)
- Enabling flow of capacity and resources: flows of learning / enthusiasm for learning
- Shifting the frameworks: intentions, ability and barriers
- Legacy: value attached to process (seeing things differently/ development of communicative infrastructure), traces of dominant ideas, creation of new capacities, role in framing work, type of product/ process produced, how used and by whom

Methodology

The research would seek to unpack consultancy perceptions of their role in unpacking, integrating or producing knowledge resources in the locality by exploring processes, products and outcomes. It would also explore the intentions of public sector agencies (city government) in employing consultants and the range of motivations and expectations. This work would initially consist of a small number of in-depth case studies, where there had been quite recent work by consultants and empirical material available to evaluate. This could then be followed up with a small-scale survey of consultants to assess the validity of models produced through the case study work. Whilst the focus of the research is particularly upon the contribution of consultancy to the learning processes of governance, there are problems inherent in tracking knowledge and learning. As previously mentioned, Hall has argued that learning is indicated when “policy changes as the result of such as process” (1993: 278). Whilst such a bold claim may require further unpacking, the salience of Hall’s comment with regard to methodology is revealed by the statement that there are some difficulties in identifying exactly when and how such changes take place, especially if such change occurs incrementally since ‘...ideas do not leave much of a trail when they shift.’ (290). This also reinforces Healey’s dynamic understanding of governance processes which the institutional perspective highlights. Hence, the methodological challenges include tracing the knowledge acquisition and generation in dynamic contexts. Hence this would probably require in-depth case study work in a couple of case study areas, where consultancy processes have recently reached some conclusion.

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