EVALUATING EMPOWERMENT
RECONCILING INDICATORS WITH LOCAL EXPERIENCE

This is one in a series of publications on the empowerment agenda produced by Empowering Communities, the Regional Empowerment Partnership for the South West of England, part of the National Empowerment Partnership. The NEP is funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government and managed by the Community Development Foundation.

The booklet is aimed to stimulate thought and discussion about the topic of evaluating empowerment. It is not aiming to be the solution.

Author: Gabriel Chanan on behalf of

South West Foundation

The Stables

West Way Farm

Bishop Sutton

BS39 5XP

Tel: 01275 333666

Info@southwestfoundation.org.uk

Introduction

Why evaluate empowerment?

Evaluating empowerment is important for several reasons:
- to make it clear that empowerment has a practical meaning;
- to ensure that empowerment practice is as good as it can be
- to meet government expectations;
- to justify investment in empowerment, whether as money or officer time; and
- to show sceptics that empowerment is not a 'fair weather' ideal but vital to hold society together at all times – and even more so in recession.

Problems to be overcome

Problems in producing convincing evidence of empowerment include these:
- common ways of evaluating empowerment are often limited or don't stand up well as objective evidence;
- the government indicator of empowerment (national indicator 4 in the local government performance framework, ie whether people feel they can influence their locality) is seen by many people as too narrow;
- many empowerment practitioners are not comfortable with indicators anyway.

This booklet suggests ways of overcoming these problems by:
- using both government indicators and project-based methods together;
- linking the official indicators to small-scale local experience
- extracting lessons from evaluation to improve practice.

Conflicting approaches

The way that evaluation of local empowerment and community development has been done in the past has often assumed that there is a conflict of interests between the aims of communities and the aims of authorities and funders. Funders and official bodies are seen as wanting 'tick box exercises', 'number crunching', 'quantifiable results', whilst communities and community workers are seen as wanting to understand and promote community processes and priorities.

The approach outlined here offers to reconcile the two perspectives. Seemingly conflicting approaches can benefit from each other. Either one taken on its own is incomplete, and we need to construct a combined picture.

What's wrong with the community-based approach?

Nothing's wrong with it but it's limited. In most research and case studies on empowerment there's a lack of hard information on results – effects on the individuals and groups who got involved, on the problems addressed and on the services and agencies to whom influence was directed. Accounts of most projects tell a story of 'how we did this empowering project and how much the participants liked it' not 'how people in this locality or network came to be more empowered'. It's usually the story of the project not the story of a change in a community.

A further problem around evaluation in this field is that it is often seen as an imposition by funders, and is difficult to separate from the tactics of getting more funding. Funders will often disingenuously say they value lessons from honest failure as much as testimony of success, but honest failure is rarely rewarded and there is an inherent pressure to present outcomes in the best light. It's not surprising then that many evaluations of local empowerment projects are difficult to distinguish from promotional reports. Between the anxiety of practitioners to get re-funded and the anxiety of funders to justify their decisions, little room is left for penetrating questions about methods and quality.

Unpacking the problem of scale

A lot of anxiety and misunderstanding about evaluation in this field centres on the problem of scale: authorities need evidence in terms of large numbers of people, since they have to deal with the whole population of their territories. Communities, and community empowerment projects, operate primarily through small, face-to-face groups of people.

The evaluation methods flowing from these two perspectives seem like two different worlds: authorities use large-scale population surveys, which are statistically objective but inevitably limited to a few finely-honed questions, whilst community workers rely on intensive dialogue with handfuls of participants, which is much more fluid but may lack breadth and objectivity.

The key to overcoming this is to unpack the way in which the contrasting approaches use – and misuse – the word 'community'.

Authorities fudge what they mean by 'community'

Authorities tend to use 'community' to mean simply population: all the residents of a given locality. This propagates a loose assumption that everyone in that locality (or other category) is more or less similar, is in touch with everyone else and has similar perceptions. So government can formulate a duty to involve 'representatives of local people', as though dialogue with any 'sample' of local residents would be an equally valid way of engaging with communities.

What this ignores is that some people are much more a part of the local community than others; that many are isolated; that many don't identify much with the life of the locality; that different groupings amongst the local population may have conflicting interests; and that people who find themselves nominated as 'community representatives' are not necessarily in communication with, or even known to, the majority of the local population.

What is overlooked, in short, is that a local population is not necessarily a community and that in order to feel and act as one, it may need

development of many more community activities and networks, more trust and cooperation amongst residents and more communication between active members and others.

... and so do activists and community workers

But community activists and workers, who do understand the internal dynamics of local people's relationships, are often equally guilty of fudging the use of the word community. They are inclined to designate the small numbers of people and community groups they work with as 'the community', because these are the people closest to them, and to ignore the question of how to establish whether the views and experiences of these small clusters of people do or don't reflect the views and experiences of the numerical majority.

With some notable exceptions, most evaluations and project descriptions in this field start off by describing problems affecting a whole locality and end up by describing the actions of a small group, without ever checking back to see what difference this made to the whole locality, or indeed if the project's existence was even known to most residents. The active group or project is described as 'the community', and its career is then taken as automatically indicative of the state of the whole locality.

So we may discover that a particular group overcame great obstacles to achieve important results but we are left with no idea as to whether in the same period the condition of the locality as a whole improved or deteriorated or whether other community projects were succeeding or failing. Often we aren't told how many people were affected by the project in question, or even what the population of the project's catchment area was.

The clue to the solution

The key to the solution is to see that community empowerment initiatives are essentially about **the relationship between an active minority and a benefitting majority.**

These are not fixed categories of people: a person may be an activist on one issue and a passive beneficiary on others; or active at one time and a passive beneficiary at others. No-one can be active on all issues at all times, and some people are not active in the community at any time.

But one sign of an empowered community is that a high proportion of people are active at one time or another on one issue or another. If a majority understand what being active is then the majority at any time are likely to understand how they are benefitting from the activities of others, and how to influence them if they want to.

It is typical of community development projects and other empowerment actions to find a small number of active residents carrying out an action from which both they and sometimes larger – sometimes much larger – numbers benefit.

What is rarely clear is (i) who this larger group of beneficiaries is; (ii) whether the wider beneficiaries are aware of the action; and crucially (iii) whether they identify with the feeling of empowerment that may be experienced by the actively involved residents. This throws emphasis onto the responsibility of the project to be outward facing and communicate its actions to the wider community.

It is not realistic – or necessary – to expect that all residents should go through the same intensive experience as the highly active minority, in relation to a particular action or project. What we could realistically look for, though, and should be an explicit objective, is that the numbers of people who do have conscious experience of empowerment should gradually increase through a series of activities, and that the majority of people in the local populations likely to be affected by the actions should be increasingly aware of them and identify with them and therefore share in the sense that the community as a whole has been empowered by them.

A two-pronged approach

So to register the growth of empowerment we need to look at both large and small scale types of evidence. Finding large scale evidence is greatly helped by the relevant indicators in the local government performance framework. Small scale evidence can go into greater depth and illustrate, by 'drilling down', processes which the large scale indicators miss.

Both the large and small-scale evidence should make as much use of official indicators. This is not to placate government or authorities but because the indicators are genuinely useful. They have not been plucked out of the air but honed down from many options, and extensively piloted to make sure they make sense to people when used in surveys.

Also, as the indicators have already been piloted and widely used there are often existing local figures with which new findings can be compared so that change can be tested. It is wasteful not to make use of this information or to spend valuable community effort reinventing these particular wheels.

Local workers and activists who are not used to using official indicators are understandably uneasy about them. There is also particular value in the process of residents choosing their own measures to reflect their own perceptions and priorities and collecting their own evidence. But these are not alternatives to the use of official indicators. Both methods can be used, and between them provide a richer narrative than either would on its own. Since the official statistics have to be collected anyway, there is little cost to community projects in making use of them, except the effort to find out about them and access them from the authorities who hold them. Indeed, authorities should be pressed to present the statistics accessibly, and to carry out analysis of them which reveal correlations between empowerment and other objectives.

A general scepticism towards numerical indicators and statistics is no bad thing but it is wasteful not to use them – with appropriate caution. To shun them altogether in relation to empowerment places this field at a disadvantage compared to others, not only in terms of getting investment

but simply in terms of getting a general picture of realities and trends. We wouldn't expect to be able to make sense of the state of people's health in a locality without knowing levels of disease and life expectancy; or of the state of safety without knowing the levels of crime; or of poverty without knowing the levels of income and employment. Yet all of these are based on limited indicators. Why then should we not have similar knowledge about the state of empowerment? Conversely, if we really want to understand what is *happening* in the field of health, crime or poverty we would have to dig down to more ample local experience – just as we do with empowerment.

Which official indicators are relevant to empowerment?

The main official indicators are those in the local government performance framework but there are also others, and we identify the most relevant at the end of this booklet.

The starting point is indicators 1 – 7 in the local government performance framework (Figure 1).

Bridges can be made between the official indicators and local experience in several ways:

First, while the figures at local authority level will be of limited use for the small scale because they will average out differences across different areas, the local authority or LSP partners could be urged to collect and analyse them in more local areas, so that the situation in a neighbourhood, ward, parish or other small area can be seen. Some authorities are already doing this.

Secondly, some of the same questions as used in the national indicators could be built into local project evaluations. This would make it easier to relate the outcomes of case studies and local projects to the LA-wide baselines and findings. If a neighbourhood-level project can show that it has made an impact on an official indicator just amongst its own small

catchment population, this can add a great deal to how the larger picture is understood.

Figure 1: National indicators 1-7

1   cohesion (% of people who believe people from different backgrounds can get on well together in their local area)

2   sense of belonging to neighbourhood

3   equality of civic participation (number of people from equalities groups who take on voluntary decision-making roles such as councillor, school governor, representative on a partnership or member of a management group)

4   empowerment (whether people feel they can influence local decision-making)

5   overall satisfaction with the locality

6   participation in regular volunteering

7   whether public bodies are helping the local third sector to thrive.

Projects can also use both the official and their own indicators to test out whether they are achieving their own objectives. If a project claims to be about empowerment but can't show any improvement on at Least a few of national indicators 1 – 7 amongst its actual users and beneficiaries, it should be questioning its objectives and re-examining its methods.

On the other hand, where improvements on indicators 1 – 7 move in the same direction as indicators on crime, education, health or other major issues, it is reasonable to deduce that empowerment has played a part in these results, and vice versa.

As well as the local government performance indicators, empowerment initiatives should consider making use of questions from the survey of the third sector which lies behind national indicator 7. The information for this indicator is collected by a separate, centrally-administered national survey

across all local authorities. The formal indicator is just one question on how voluntary and community organisations are getting on. But there are a lot of other useful questions in the survey about the strength and development of the sector as a whole. Findings for each LA area are to be separately available from around April 09 and could provide a valuable basis for planning how the local third sector can be strengthened. (See tables at the end.)

Situating empowerment initiatives in their local context

It is often assumed that small one-off initiatives and projects dedicated to community involvement ripple out automatically from the small number of people visibly involved to a larger number referred to vaguely as 'the wider community'. To what extent this actually happens is rarely examined. Within an overarching strategy however it should be a specific objective, and monitored as such.

Most examples and case studies of empowerment or involvement boil down to time-limited projects in which there is action with a small group of residents which are within some larger group such as the population of a neighbourhood.

In current evaluation conventions, case studies are described as if they exist in their own isolated bubbles. In order to judge whether involvement, let alone empowerment, is taking place on a scale that can be said to affect that community as a whole, we need to take a pace backwards and regard each of these small initiatives as molecules within a larger pattern.

Inevitably the core is a small group within a much larger population. The small group is often loosely called 'the community'. Sometimes the larger population is called 'the wider community'. Sometimes we know the size of population of the area, often we don't. But even when we do, there's rarely any examination of the relationship of the small group to the 'wider community' - ie whether the wider community is aware of the group's existence and are affected by what it's doing.

The following principles should be applied for judging whether a small scale initiative is having a wider impact. Firstly there must be a statement of who the wider community are in this context – an estimate of approximate numbers who might be expected to be affected by the initiative beyond its direct participants. Then when the project is evaluated the following seven questions should be asked:

AWARE. Is the wider population aware that the project is taking place?

ACCESS. Can people in the wider population get access to this initiative if they want to – become members or beneficiaries – be informed of its progress?

AWARENESS OF COMMUNITY SOURCE OF BENEFIT. Do the wider population know that any benefits from the project were brought about by resident involvement, and does that lead them to a sense of identification with the project?

WIDENING PARTICIPATION. Is the project widening the number of participating individuals, ie are there some people involved who have never been involved in this level or type of local activity before?

WIDENING RESPONSIBILITY. Is the project spreading its decision-making processes to more members and participants than were closely involved before?

BOOST TO INDEPENDENT COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS. Is there an increase in either the number or the strength and effectiveness of one or more independent groups, which continues beyond the initiative?

NETWORK STRENGTHENING. Is the network of independent groups and organisations across the locality enhanced in some practical way by the initiative?

The official indicators

Below are four lists of indicators relevant to empowerment from government sources. The principal source is the local government performance framework (LGPF) for England. Although there is only one indicator in this 198-indicator set (number 4) which is specifically and officially the government indicator on empowerment, many others are also relevant. By using a combination of several you get a richer picture of empowerment. A suggested basic combination would be numbers: 1 (people getting on with each other) ; 3 (participation in civic roles); 4 (feeling you can influence); 6 (volunteering); and 7 (thriving third sector).

Most of the LGPF indicators relevant to empowerment are collected through a survey called the Places Survey. The list of indicators and the Places Survey questionnaire are published in separate documents at www.communities.gov.uk . The list below sets the exact text of the questions alongside the name of the indicator.

Other indicators in the LGPF, dealing with such issues as education, crime, environment, employment and housing, are also collected by separate instruments. Findings on all 198 indicators are being collected in autumn 2008, published in spring 09, and for most will be collected again in 2010, published spring 2011.

They are collected by a statistical sample of the whole population across each of the 150 principal local authority areas in England, so the findings will be an average for the whole of that population (mostly between 200,000 and 350,000 people).

Some local authorities are also investing in collecting the findings at more detailed levels whereby it may be possible to distinguish between different areas, towns, neighbourhoods, wards or parishes.

Linking with local intelligence

The indicator system is designed as a large scale performance information tool for local authorities and their partners at the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) level. The large scale system is not evaluative, as it only captures outcomes. To relate them to action even at a local level requires local intelligence on inputs and processes. Most local evaluations of empowerment have exactly the opposite strengths and weaknesses – they are strong on inputs and processes and weak on outcomes.

Relating action to findings is much more feasible at small levels. Since most practical empowerment action takes place at small levels, it will be difficult to relate the large average findings to actions on empowerment unless there is widely coordinated information about empowerment action across the whole LA area.

The lists below have been selected to offer a bridge from the large scale system to smaller local evaluations and vice versa, by encouraging small scale evaluations to use some of the same questions as those in the large scale system, and encouraging those who interpret and inspect performance at principal local authority level to take note of smaller scale evaluations. Without this dialogue, there will continue to be two mutually uncomprehending worlds, each with incomplete information. Local authorities and LSPs will have large scale outcome information but only vague impressions about how it has been affected by deliberate empowerment actions dispersed through small localities. The small initiatives will each have their own descriptions of inputs and processes but only vague impressions of what they have achieved in terms of outcomes relevant to policy.

Joining up from below

At central government level each of the indicators is 'owned' by a different government unit and policy, and there is a tendency for those units to focus on them in isolation. For example empowerment policy is tied to NI 4 whereas the reality of empowerment is illuminated in a much richer way by taking account of a variety of the other indicators (whilst keeping NI 4

at the centre). In small scale evaluations it would be possible to do this more flexibly than in the large scale performance management system. But the large scale statistics can be analysed to find correlations between any selection of indicators.

We therefore recommend that when local evaluations of empowerment are being planned, they should:

(i) specify numerically and geographically the population intended to benefit from the project ('the wider community') as well as those involved

(ii) include a survey or sampling of the wider population in the evaluation

(iii) include a selection of the questions from the NI set, to help focus outcomes, and questions from other government sources included below;

(iv) include their own input and process questions, and any other outcome questions that are locally important, but:

(v) ensure that any extra question which they create for themselves, whether on input, process or output, strictly covers only one point of information each, otherwise the results of that question will be ambiguous;

(vi) inform the public services, council or LSP of what they are doing, and invite them to include the results in their policy reviews and evidence to inspectorates;

(vii) when writing up the results point out the connections between the local evaluation and the official indicators.

A local evaluation done in this way would therefore, as well as serving its local stakeholders, help to put flesh on the bones of the large scale policy by being a relevant case study illuminating the practical connection between real local action and large scale results.

APPENDIX 1

Four sources

Following are the four sets of indicators and/or questions:

(i)   26 questions from the national indicator set which are most relevant to empowerment;

(ii) some additional questions from the survey of third sector organisations being carried out by the Office for the Third Sector as background to National Indicator 7;

(iii) other questions from the places survey which do not appear as part of the indicator set but could provide useful supplementary information:

(iv) a summary of other indicators in the national indicator set which are not collected by the places survey – mostly those on education, crime, health, housing etc. Ultimately it will be useful to see whether empowerment is improving or declining in line with changes in these material issues, which would suggest a mutual relationship, or in a separate pattern.

(i) National Indicators collected by the Places Survey for the Local Government Performance Framework.

Number and name of indicator	The question/s asked or definition of evidence
1: % of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area. (Cohesion)	'To what extent do you agree or disagree that your local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together?' (Places Survey Q.18)
2: % of people who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood	How strongly do you feel that you belong to your immediate neighbourhood? (Places Survey Q5)
3: Civic participation in the local area (Equalities)	Preamble + 'In the last 12 months have you been - a local councillor (LA, town or parish) - member of a group making decisions on local health or education services - ….regeneration…crime…tenants' committee…services for young people… other…?' (Place survey Q16; targeted especially to equalities groups by gender, ethnicity, disability, age, religion/belief, sex orientation) (not poverty, income or class)
4: % of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality	'Do you agree or disagree that you can influence decisions affecting your local area?' (Places survey Q 13)
5: Overall satisfaction with the local area	Overall how satisfied are you with your local area as a place to live? (Places survey Q 3)
6. Participation in regular volunteering	Preamble + 'Overall how often over the last 12 months have you given unpaid help to any group(s), club(s) or organisation(s)? Please only include work that is unpaid and not for your family' [at least once a week/ at least once a month/ less often/ not through any organisation]
7. Environment for a thriving third sector	'Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the support available to your organisation in your local area?' (This is Q.18 in separate third sector survey commissioned by OTS,

	which also has many other useful questions – see below)
8. Adult participation in sport	% of 16+ population who participate in sport for at least 30 minutes three or more times a week (Active people survey, Sport England)
9. Use of public libraries	% of 16+ population who say they have used the public library service in the past 12 months (including on line). (DCMS survey.)
10. Visits to museums or galleries	% 16+ who say they have attended a museum or art gallery in the local area at least once in the preceding 12 months. (DCMS survey.)
11. Engagement in the arts	% 16+ who have engaged in the arts at least three times in the past 12 months. Engage= attend or participate (DCMS Survey)
13. Migrants' English language skills and knowledge	% of non-English speaking third country nationals successfully completing ESOL programmes in the year
17: Perceptions of antisocial behaviour	'Thinking about this local area how much of a problem do you think each of the following are: - noisy neighbours or loud parties - teenagers hanging round the streets - rubbish or litter lying around - vandalism, graffiti and other deliberate damage - people using or dealing drugs - people being drunk or rowdy in public places - abandoned or burnt out cars' (Places Survey Q.24)
21: Dealing with local concerns about antisocial behaviour by local council and police	'How much would you agree or disagree that the police and other local public services are successfully dealing with (antisocial behaviour) issues in your local area?' (Places Survey Q 26)
22. Perceptions of parents taking responsibility for the behaviour of their children in the area	'To what extent do you agree or disagree that in your local area parents take enough responsibility for the behaviour of their children?' (Places Survey Q 17)
23 Perceptions that people in the area treat one another with respect and	'In your local area how much of a problem do you think there is with people treating each other with respect and consideration?'

consideration.	(Places Survey Q 19)
24 Satisfaction with the way the police and local council dealt with anti-social behaviour	Survey of victims of antisocial behaviour
41 Perception of drunk or rowdy behaviour as a problem	(Places Survey Q.24 - see NI 17)
42 Perception of drug use or dealing as a problem	(Places Survey Q.24 - see NI 17)
50 Emotional health of children	Being developed from Ofsted 'Tell Us' survey
69 Children who have experienced bullying	'How often if at all have you been bullied in school?'(Ofsted TellUs survey)
128 user reported measure of respect and dignity in their treatment	'In the last year would you say that you have been treated with respect and consideration by your local public services?' (Places survey Q 20)
138 satisfaction of people over 65 with home and neighbourhood	'Overall, how satisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?' (Places survey Q3) and 'And how satisfied are you with your home as a place to live?' (Places Survey Q4)
139 the extent to which older people receive the support they need to live independently at home	'In your opinion are older people in your local area getting the services and support they need to continue to live at home for as long as they want to? (this could include help or support from public, private or voluntary services or from family friends or the wider community)'. (Places survey Q 21)
140 fair treatment by local services	Places survey Qs 6 - 11 - various questions about use of and satisfaction with variety of services

(ii) Some other questions from the OTS 'Thriving Third Sector' survey:

(Addressed to third sector organisations including community groups)

- Thinking back over the last 12 months, to what extent do you think your organisation has been successful, or not, in meeting its main objectives?

- Thinking back over the last 12 months has your organisation had sufficient or insufficient of the following resources to meet its main objectives [income; management and leadership staff; paid staff; volunteers; trustees/ management committee members; financial reserves; space to operate, eg office space; information and communications technology; advice and support; networking opportunities]?

- Looking forward over the next 12 months how confident or not are you that your organisation will be successful in meeting its main obejctives

- Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your ability to influence local decisions that are relevant to your organisation?

- Taking everything into account, overall, how do the statutory bodies in your local area influence your organisation's success? [Very positive influence/ positive influence/ neither positive nor negative/ negative/ very negative/ don't know]

Other questions in the OTS survey deal with types of activity and beneficiary, and sources and levels of funding.

(iii) Other questions from the places survey which do not appear as part of the indicator set but could provide useful supplementary information:

- Q 14 'Generally speaking, would you like to be more involved in the decisions that affect your local area?' (Cf NI 4)

- Q 22 'How safe or unsafe do you feel when outside in your local area after dark?'

- Q 23 'How safe or unsafe do you feel when outside in your local area during the day?'

- Q 25 'How much would you agree or disagree that the police and other local public services seek people's views about … issues in your local area?'

_____

(iv) Summary of other NIs not collected by the places survey

- 28-34 crime

- 35 Building resilience to violent extremism

- 71 Children who have run away from home or care

- 111 First time entrants to the youth justice system 10-17

- 137 healthy life expectancy age 65

- 43-46 young offenders

- 50 emotional health of children

- 51 effectiveness of child and adolescent mental health services

- 58 emotional and behavioural health of children in care

- 59- 71 child protection

- 72-87 educational standards

- 88 number of extended schools

- 91 participation of 17 yr olds in education or training

- 92-115 more on education and young people

- 116 proportion of children in poverty

- 120 mortality rate (all age/ all cause]

- 121-139 health / age

- 146 adults with learning disabilities in employment

- 151 overall employment rate

- 152 working age people on out of work benefits

- 153 working age people claiming out of work benefits in the worst performing neighbourhoods

- 154 net additional homes provided

- 155 no of affordable homes delivered

- 156 no of households in temporary accommodation

- 158 % decent council homes

- 160 LA tenants' satisfaction with landlord services

- 161 - 165 educational qualifications of people in work

- 166 average earnings of employees in the area [check]

- 167-69 roads/ congestion

- 171 vat registration rate

- 172 vat registered businesses in the area showing growth

- 173 people falling out of work and onto incapacity benefits

- 173 skills gaps in current workforce reported by employers

- 175 access to services and facilities by public transport, walking and cycling

- 176 working age people with access to employment by public transport and other specified modes

- 177 bus passenger journeys originating in the authority area

- 179 value for money

- 180 changes in housing benefit/ council tax benefit

- 183 impact of LA regulatory services on the fair trading environment

- 185 CO_2 reduction from LA operations

- 186 per capita reduction in CO_2 emissions in the LA area

- 188 adapting to climate change

- 195/196 improved street and environmental cleanliness

- 197 improved local biodiversity - active management of local sites

_____