

The U.K Planning System: Are Neoliberalism and Community Empowerment Able to Work Together in Harmony?

Symone Jackson (University of Glasgow) in collaboration
with Planning Democracy



University
of Glasgow



Lay Report

INTRODUCTION

Community empowerment has become increasingly prominent with planning agendas (Craig and Mayo, 1995; Lord et al 2017), this has been supported by influential legislation such as the Localism Act 2011 and the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. This has led to a dominant narrative within planning (both in practical and academic circles) that associates successful planning as only being possible if it is underpinned by some form of community inclusion (Parker & Street 2017), this has led to a greater focus on fostering greater community empowerment within planning processes (Matthews 2013).

However, the rise of neoliberalism (a concept which directs attention towards de-centralisation of the role of the central government and self-responsibility and individualism which moves away from the concept of a 'community') and its remarkable staying power with it very much holding on to its dominant, hegemonic position across the political and economic spheres of the western world (Harvey, 2007), has perhaps hindered the potential advancements that have been able to be achieved in pursuit of trying to mobilise more community engagement in planning.

By having a neoliberal planning system which is concentrated around economic growth and development, questions have been raised about the 'true' intent of planning and whether its purpose is still to address the real needs of a community or whether economic driving factors have overruled this (Davies, 1998 Lord et al 2017). The project started from this premise: 'Can A Neoliberal Planning System Work Cohesively with Community Empowerment?'. The research sought to identify how this relationship has worked over time, using examples of planning decisions in Liverpool and Glasgow.

METHODOLOGY

In order to address the research question, two main research objectives were presented. Firstly, 'to understand the placement of community empowerment in a neoliberal focused governance' and secondly, 'to explore how community empowerment can be or should be progressed in a neoliberal framework'. A case study of how neoliberalism interacts with community empowerment was undertaken through past and current planning decisions within Liverpool and Glasgow – these cities

were chosen because they are said to be a microcosm for post-industrial Britain and have been subject to copious amounts of regeneration, so would be indicative of how the planning system has worked with communities with extensive needs whilst being driven by a neoliberal ideology. To do this, discourse analysis was used as the primary research method. Documents including newspaper articles, reports and policy and historic documents were analysed to gain a greater understanding of how community empowerment had been integrated into planning decisions which were underpinned by neoliberal policy. It should be noted that the research holds some major limitations; the absence of direct human-subject research prevented the presentation of 'new' information to be contributed to the field. Due to this, this research is essentially a systematic overview which attempts to combine existing information to produce new knowledges through a new lens; it may not be empirically sound but can provide theoretical relevance which can aid further research and practice.

KEY FINDINGS

- 1. The planning system favours development facilitating economic growth:** the case studies provided an insight into how planning decisions which are led by authorities, whether it be central or local, have a clear goal of regeneration to stimulate economic growth and attract investment to increase prosperity of a targeted area, seemingly at times, with little deliberation from members of the public in the very initial stages.
- 2. The practice of community empowerment has improved:** there is evidence of communities exercising their rights associated with empowerment acts. The case studies provided examples of how community groups are being pro-active in shaping the future of their space but legislations encouraging this demonstrate neoliberal agendas which at times, can undermine the intention of authentic community empowerment.
- 3. There is space for community empowerment to be more inclusive:** the research highlights that those engaging with the planning system from a community empowerment aspect are majority middle-class or hold previous civic experience in some capacity. Community empowerment needs to provide individuals with agency and the ability to influence planning decisions. The system requires community groups to have existing agency to be given empowerment – this means that those without agency or experience (which are

more likely to be working-class) will hold less influence into the future of their space and will not become empowered.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENABLE EMPOWERMENT

- ◆ **Communities need to be supported better.** The establishment of a communication portal (a social media like platform) for members of the local community to offer support and share ideas could demonstrate to others how to contend with a specific issue or advise others how to establish their own community council. Something as simple as communication could encourage other people to become involved in the planning system and would provide empowerment from the grass-root level.
- ◆ **Community Empowerment needs to be more inclusive.** Members of the public or local authorities could provide information or experience of the planning system and what has been achieved through pamphlets, visitors or community events in accessible places. This may encourage others whom would not primarily think of becoming involved in the system to develop their agency if other successful examples of community empowerment are conveyed.
- ◆ **The planning system needs to be understood better.** From the research, there is little suggestion that community empowerment is encouraged or publicised to a great extent. Communities need to feel empowered through knowledge; the first step in this would be to inform communities of their place and potential influence within the planning system and their local space. The planning system is extremely complex so communities will be able to better understand their placement within the system and could be more likely to participate with greater education. This breaks down the barrier between the 'expert' and the 'novice' and could erase the idea that planning is intimidating which would encourage better community empowerment.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it has been established that it is common for community empowerment to be neglected in favour of planning that stimulates economic growth. However, there has been a recent effort from the government to include community empowerment create a firm place for within the planning system. Community empowerment can be considered exclusionary of classes and those who have less

civic experience and agency to become empowered. Change is needed, with community empowerment playing a larger, more central part within the planning system but to do so, neoliberal governance needs to realign its planning objectives to side with the visionary ideals of societal improvements rather than its dominant focus on economic growth to facilitate change in the planning system.