

Economic perspectives

Closing the gap - a regeneration strategy for Scotland?

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There is a lengthy list of Scottish regeneration initiatives going back many years. Despite this, progress in bringing about lasting change often seems to have been limited. Indeed one of the more depressing things is how closely the distribution of deprived communities in 2002 matches that from the 1930s, something that Pacione comments upon in connection with Glasgow (Pacione, 1995). A cynic might be tempted to say that the main achievement of public policy since the 1930s has been not to solve the problems of deprivation, but to create new deprived areas through the social housing programmes of the 1950s and 1960s. Whilst there are many reasons for this limited success it may be that, as Edwards says, "somewhere along the way, the purpose of inner-city policies - to improve the quality of life and the life chances of people who live in the worst urban areas - has been lost sight of," (Edwards, 1995, p. 697). Running various programmes and ensuring that budgets were spent by the end of the financial year all too often seems to have become the goal of policy. The means have become synonymous with the ends.

However, if the aspirations of the Scottish Executive are now to be met this may change. In June 2002 the Executive published its Community Regeneration Statement, "Better Communities in Scotland: closing the gap" (Scottish Executive, 2002). This aims "to close the gap between our poorest communities and the rest of the country", (ibid, p. 1) and "turn round disadvantaged communities and create a better life for those who live in them", (ibid, p. 3). These ambitious and, as is argued below, ambiguous goals are to be attained through action in two areas. First, measures are to be taken to ensure that public services "have as much effect as possible on disadvantaged areas" (ibid, p.7). This means that, increasingly, mainstream services are to be used to tackle the problems faced by disadvantaged communities, rather than, as has tended to happen in the past, relying upon time-limited, spatially-targeted initiatives with dedicated budgets. Secondly measures are to be introduced to build social capital ("the skills, confidence, support networks and resources" (ibid, p. 7)) so that available opportunities can be taken, and created, by individuals and communities. A variety of managerial tools are to be used to attain these goals, the key one being community planning.

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Community planning

The forthcoming Scottish Local Government Bill will place community planning on a statutory footing. Local authorities will have a duty to initiate, and facilitate, community planning along with requirements to engage the community, voluntary organisations and a range of other bodies in the process (Scottish Executive, no date). Community planning is defined as “a process through which a council, other organisations and the local community come together to plan, provide and promote the well-being of their communities. The overall intention is to provide the basis for the delivery of better, more responsive services,” (ibid, p. 7). It is seen as improving both vertical and horizontal policy co-ordination so that national and local priorities and targets, and local initiatives and programmes, are linked. The key outcomes are involvement of communities in decision-making and services that meet the needs of users rather than providers. The legislation will also place a duty on other public bodies to become involved in the process: the main ones being the Health Boards, the police and the Enterprise Networks.

The concept of community planning is said to have originated in 1995, in the Labour Party's local government policy statement (see Rogers et al, 1999 and Ilisley and Lloyd, 2000 for details of the background). In 1998 five “Pathfinder” community-planning projects were set up. The evaluation of these, whilst it identified problems and tensions, found that “the actual and potential value of Community Planning is beyond doubt”, (Rogers et al, 1999, p. 9). Despite this firm endorsement, community planning's ability to deliver substantial change in the way services are delivered, and co-ordinated, is by no means proven. Indeed, although one would not doubt the value of the initiatives that have been delivered to date through existing community planning arrangements, it often seems as if these are either on-going projects that have been rebadged, or ones that are relatively marginal in the impact they have upon the partners' budgets and priorities. For an example of the type of projects that community planning is bringing forward see East Renfrewshire Council (no date). There is therefore a long way to go before the community planning partnerships, that will be set up to prepare and deliver the plans, are able to make the changes to mainstream programme priorities that will result in the “gap” being closed. The Executive recognises this when it identifies one of the barriers to successful joint working as being different working cultures (Scottish Executive, no date). Given this it may be that, even with legislation, the early days of community planning will be taken up with developing non-contentious projects to allow time for organisational priorities and methods of working to become aligned. The danger may then be that ensuring the process works becomes the policy goal, rather than the impact this process has upon disadvantaged communities.

Delivering change

Whilst community planning is to be the main tool for ensuring that public agencies provide services that bring about lasting change in disadvantaged communities, a range of more local management approaches are also to be used. At one extreme greater use is to be made of well-trying initiatives such as neighbourhood management, through which basic, but important, services are organised and co-ordinated at the local level. Use is also to be made of approaches that are more experimental, yet which seem to have much to offer. One such approach is community budgeting, which analyses local spending patterns and then uses this information to inform decision making and local outcome agreements on the outcomes that a programme is to achieve. The delivery agencies are then free to use resources as they see fit to attain these.

Within the context that community planning is to provide for more effective local services, attention is also to be paid to individuals and communities to enable “social capital” to be developed. At the individual level the focus is to be upon adult literacy and numeracy. Community development is to come through community learning and development, defined as “an approach to education based on working with communities to tackle the real issues in people's lives” (Scottish Executive, 2002, p. 23). Amongst other things this is seen as being a tool for facilitating participation in the community planning process.

Unlike previous approaches to regeneration, limited use is to be made of new delivery structures and organisations. The exceptions are the creation of two new units within Communities Scotland, the Executive Agency created in late 2001 out of Scottish Homes. Responsibility for community learning and adult literacy and numeracy is to be given to a national development centre. Its remit will include the development of a national curriculum and training programme for those providing literacy services and providing training support to the community learning partnerships. The other new structure, and the only one for which there is specific mention of resourcing, is the Scottish Centre for Regeneration. Based in Communities Scotland £3 million has been committed to setting it up. It will aim to improve the effectiveness of regeneration practice by sharing experiences and promoting new approaches to regeneration. This seems to be a Scottish counterpart to the centres of excellence that Lord Rogers proposed (Urban Task Force, 1999) and which are being set up in England.

Spatial targeting

One of the consistent themes in Scottish policy for tackling deprivation has been spatial targeting. This has involved identifying areas, usually on the basis of census statistics, whose resident populations have an above average incidence of social and economic problems, as measured on a range of variables including unemployment levels and

educational attainment. Within these areas additional financial support has then been provided to support a range of projects. There is a long history of this type of approach, going back at least to the 1930s. However, it became a key arm of central government policy in the 1960s with the introduction of the Urban Programme (Taylor 1988). Subsequently this evolved through the four Urban Partnerships, the Priority Partnership Areas to the current Social Inclusion Partnerships (SIPs) (see Lloyd et al 2001 for a fuller outline of policy development). Although the SIPs still have a spatial element inherent in them, they are far less spatially focused than earlier initiatives. Not only are there now thematic SIPs, focused on particular problems such as prostitution, but the wide spatial distribution of the 48 SIPs across Scotland means that they can almost be seen as a spatial policy response. This approach is taken a step further in the current strategy. In a sharp break with past practice the strategy does not involve the introduction of a new spatial initiative. Rather it sees the solution to the problems of deprivation as coming from the redirection of existing programmes. It is argued that in the past mainstream providers "have often not had the incentive or willingness to change their programmes and budgets" (Scottish Executive, 2002, p. 7). In the future there is to be greater emphasis upon focusing these on deprived areas. Whilst there is still felt to be a role for "targeted local projects and initiatives" this is "to 'top up' or fill in the gaps left by mainstream service providers," (ibid p. 8). Given that, as Edwards points out, "the urban deprived do receive most of their welfare by way of mainstream programmes," (Edwards, 1995, p. 71), this change seems both justified and overdue.

The explicit endorsement of this approach is a significant policy switch. In the past the proliferation of specific initiatives to tackle deprivation, with their own budgets and staff, meant that it was all too easy for mainstream service providers to see disadvantaged communities as someone else's problem. This will now be far more difficult to do. However the move away from having separately funded, targeted initiatives means that local authorities increasingly will have to tackle deprivation using their own resources. Whilst it may be possible to make efficiency gains, it is more likely that effective responses will require resources to be either withdrawn or reduced in some areas if greater priority is to be given to those that are the most deprived. For authorities that have minor problems this may be relatively easily done. However, for the main urban areas, and specifically Glasgow, such an approach may exacerbate what is already a bad situation. The City estimates that, on the basis of the scale of its social need, it is already underfunded by £79 million a year (Glasgow City Council, 2002). If it has now to start to reallocate its already inadequate resources there may be two consequences. First those areas that are currently "at risk" may find that they face service cuts. This may result in their situation worsening. The policy of more effective targeting on deprived areas may then prove to be a policy of equalising misery. Withdrawal, or worsening, of services may also put at risk the

attempts that Glasgow is making, through the Glasgow Alliance, to attract more middle and upper income groups back into the city. In part this strategy relies upon the provision of good public services such as schools. Without increased resources, targeting may result in the City's regeneration efforts being undermined. Indeed one of the issues for the Parliament and the Executive identified by the community-planning Pathfinder evaluation was the need for funding and budgetary flexibility, with it being claimed that "the benefits of community planning...will not be fully realised unless public sector organisations can respond to locally identified needs and strategies," (Rogers, et al, 1999, p. 19). If existing budgets are already inadequate it is difficult to see how such a response can be made. One can also argue that if the Executive expects local authorities to bend their programmes to favour deprived areas then the Executive should follow suit and, particularly with its grant aid to local authorities, favour those areas that have the greatest problems. Amongst other things this would see Glasgow allocated more funding. Indeed, as has been argued by others, Glasgow needs to be treated as a special case because of the severity of its problems (Turok and Hopkins, 1997).

Yet the difficulties of changing budget priorities should not be underestimated. It was 25 years ago that Peter Shore, in the Inner Cities White Paper, argued that if the inner city problem was to be solved then mainstream programmes needed to be bent to favour urban areas (Shaw and Robinson, 1998). The intervening period has been characterised by a kaleidoscope of regeneration initiatives, promoted by Conservative and Labour administrations, with limited evidence of much change in mainstream programmes priorities.

Joined-up policy?

One of the key aims of the strategy is to improve policy co-ordination and delivery between various agencies. Interestingly there is little mention of social exclusion. Instead, in language that is almost Old Labour, the strategy talks about poverty and deprivation. The justification for wanting to improve public services is that disadvantaged communities are heavily dependent upon the public sector, far more so than more affluent areas. Yet providing improved services may be little more than helping people to manage their poverty. If "the gap" is to be closed then poverty has to be tackled. This means, amongst other things, increasing disposable incomes. It is hard to see how the strategy can do this. Despite the talk of using community planning to improve policy co-ordination between agencies, the key agencies that can have an impact on solving poverty, rather than managing it, do not seem, explicitly, to be involved in the process. This is undoubtedly because they are delivering services for which responsibility has been reserved to Westminster. Yet fiscal changes, such as increasing the level of benefits and Working Families Tax Credit, may have a far greater impact upon poverty than any amount of improvements to public services. An effective response to

poverty has, therefore, to bring together a far wider range of public services than seems to be envisaged as being involved in community planning partnerships. That this is not being done may be one of the drawbacks of having a Parliament that is not responsible for the key services that have an impact upon poverty. The Parliament develops policy for those areas for which it has responsibility. Accordingly, the means of "closing the gap" are found within these areas, regardless of their ability to do this. This therefore may explain why the "solution" to deprivation is seen as essentially managerial rather than fiscal or redistributive.

Searching for a chimera?

One can criticise the philosophical underpinning of the strategy. The aim is normalisation, which is what closing or narrowing "the gap" implies. This is to be achieved, in part, by developing communities "where people have a sense of belonging and trust" (Scottish Executive, 2002, p. 6). The danger with this is that it is trying to create places and communities that perhaps exist only in the minds of politicians and community development workers. Kleinman (2000) argues that the implication behind many regeneration initiatives is the creation of social order through the development (imposition?) of social cohesion. As he points out, work in America has shown that the "tranquil and harmonious" (ibid, p. 56) suburb may be free from the sort of strife, which is seen as characteristic of the inner city. However it lacks the social cohesion, which many regeneration practitioners and politicians seem to see as a prerequisite for regeneration. The danger is that regeneration initiatives are trying to impose "modes of behaviour on the poor which the rest of society has rejected," (ibid, p. 56). He goes on to summarise the approach that is all too often adopted to regeneration:

"Socially excluded areas don't just need jobs and better homes - apparently they need community centres, self-help groups, voluntary organisations and community businesses. The logic here is not clear, as all these are things which better off areas don't have, or at least don't have much of," (ibid p. 56).

If normalisation is the aim, then what will be created are communities that are characterised by "transiency, fragmentation, isolation, atomisation and indifference among people," (Baumgartner, 1988, p. 134, quoted in Kleinman, 2000), rather than the caring, cuddly communities that so often seem to be implied in the objectives of regeneration initiatives. Normalisation implies such things as residents having a commercial bank account, rather than using a credit union, a job in a multi-national or national company rather than a social firm and spending time with their family rather than getting involved in imposed community initiatives. This is the reality of the "socially included" society, rather than the myth that seems so often to permeate regeneration initiatives. If this form of normalisation cannot be attained for Scotland's deprived communities then all

need to be clear about what is being proposed: the creation of a parallel set of institutions and methods of working for the disadvantaged. Along with this, it is implied that there will be almost a moral obligation on such people to become involved in the type of community action that the included have, for the most part, long since given up. The danger is that policy then effectively institutionalises deprivation. Rather than "closing the gap" two parallel communities are created, the included and the excluded, each with its own norms and institutions. Whilst the former may be dependent upon the vagaries of the global economy the latter has its foundations on the equally volatile sands of public funding and political whim.

Pursuing a myth, rather than the reality, is also evident when the strategy's view of the Scottish economy is considered. One of the reasons offered for trying to improve levels of literacy and numeracy is that many people in work in deprived communities are in low-skilled and low-paid jobs. Yet this is a mirror to the Scottish, and indeed the United Kingdom's, economy. Increasingly jobs are created in the service sector, in retailing and hotel and catering. These are not industries that are renowned for their high levels of pay, nor for the skills they need. Large numbers of people are in low paid and low skilled jobs, not necessarily because they themselves lack skills or indeed qualifications, but because these are the types of jobs the labour market is creating. To pretend otherwise, and to think that a regeneration strategy based upon improved service management and delivery will change this, is self-delusion on a major scale. This type of labour market solution also ignores the work of such people as Turok and Edge (1999) and Webster (1999) who argue that the problem of unemployment is primarily a reflection of lack of job opportunities in those areas in which the unemployed are concentrated. As such the type of supply side initiatives, that the strategy is advocating, may have limited impact. Indeed if they result in increased competition in the labour market then they may, paradoxically, result in poverty increasing as wage levels are driven down.

Power to the people?

One of the characteristics of Scottish regeneration policy has been its centralised nature. Initiatives were formulated and funded from the centre, be this The Scottish Office or the Executive. There was also strong central control. This would seem now to be on the brink of change. At the macro level the Executive is saying to local authorities that responsibility for tackling deprivation lies with them, rather than through some initiative that is parachuted in. There are also plans to pass control of the SIPs to the community planning partnerships, the expectation being that the first transfers will take place in 2004. At one level this can be welcomed as marking a reversal of a long period of centralisation. However, in the absence of more resources, what seems to be a decentralisation strategy could be interpreted as a means for the Executive to avoid taking responsibility for tackling deprivation. The severity of the problems

is considerable. Webster, in a number of articles has highlighted the scale of the task in Glasgow and the limited impact made in Castlemilk by the relatively well-funded Urban Partnership (Webster, 1999, 2000). Without a major increase in resources it is difficult to see how authorities such as Glasgow can begin to solve these long standing problems by managerial means alone. If, for example, in 5 years time there has been little progress in "closing the gap" in Glasgow then it could be all too easy for the Executive to lay the blame on the City Council and its community planning partners, accusing them of being unwilling to make policy changes. What may look at face value as if it is policy decentralisation may in fact be a means for the Executive to distance itself from a strategy that, in many authorities, may have little chance of success without major increases in funding to the mainstream services that are expected to change their priorities.

Monitoring progress

The strategy acknowledges the importance of trying to measure progress. To assist with monitoring a Neighbourhood Statistics project is to collect information on outcomes so that "it will allow us to tell...whether we are being effective in closing the gap," (Scottish Executive, 2002, p. 13). Indicators are also to be devised that are to be used to track progress. These are likely to relate to such things as employment, educational attainment and child poverty. This emphasis upon trying to assess the outcomes of policy is to be welcomed. However simply measuring statistics within deprived communities may give a misleading impression of progress. Deprived areas are not static, but experience population in- and out-flow. When trying to explain the varying unemployment experiences within the four Urban Partnership areas, in terms of labour market churning, McGregor and Fitzpatrick concluded that "population churning is at least as powerful an influence on the unemployment experiences of the Partnership areas," (McGregor and Fitzpatrick, 1995, p. 28). Their work also illustrates the dramatic effect that private sector house building can have upon local rates of unemployment. For example they suggest that for every 100 private sector houses built the net increase in the number of employed residents was 159. Monitoring, therefore, needs to attempt to track population movements and the characteristics of the movers, if an accurate picture of the impact of the strategy is to be gained. This is likely to be both expensive and time consuming. However if it is not done then it will be very difficult to substantiate any claims about policy success. Such claims can also only be verified if the aims of the strategy are clear. Unfortunately clarity is not helped by talk at various times of both "closing the gaps" (Scottish Executive, 2002, p. 6) and "narrowing the gap" (ibid p. 5). The implications of these are very different when it comes to evaluating policy impact.

There could also be a useful debate about the baseline against which closing or narrowing "the gap" is to be measured. The strategy talks about this being measured against the median: that is the middle point of a ranked

data set. However the median is likely to be affected by the spatial units for which the data is collected. For example, the size of "the gap" between unemployment in a deprived area and the median unemployment rate for the 32 unitary authorities is likely to be considerably different than if "the gap" were measured between the area and all wards within Scotland or some other sub-local authority unit.

Conclusion

The strategy marks a turning point for Scottish regeneration policy. Rather than regeneration being "delivered" through yet more spatially targeted initiatives it is now to be a central focus of mainstream service planning and delivery. Yet one of the problems with talking rather glibly about targeting mainstream programmes more effectively is that "we know precious little about the effectiveness of such programmes.... in targeting the deprived," (Edwards, 1995, p. 711). The use of such tools as community budgeting, outcome agreements and neighbourhood management should allow this deficiency to be rectified. The gradualist approach that is to be adopted to the introduction of the more experimental tools should also give time for reflection and analysis so that targeting can be fine-tuned. When linked to the use of community planning as the key delivery vehicle this provides a framework for ensuring that a range of public agencies work together with the community to try to deliver on the strategy's ambitious agenda. The development of co-ordinated strategies, use of partnerships, recognition of the interrelatedness of the various facets of regeneration, community involvement and greater use of local delivery mechanisms are all things that critics of current approaches to regeneration have argued for (for example Callison, 2001; Green, 1998; Shaw and Robinson, 1998). As such, the strategy seems to have made use of past experience of what does and what does not work, something that has not always been a characteristic of regeneration initiatives. However without increased funding, especially for Glasgow, these policy changes may have a marginal impact, other than in authorities whose deprivation problems are relatively minor.

The Executive's approach also needs to be recognised for what it is, being essentially managerial: deliver more effective services targeted at those in need and the problems will be solved. This can be seen when the lessons of past regeneration approaches are outlined (Scottish Executive, 2002, pp. 6-7). All are about delivery and management. There is no mention of structural issues, such as poverty or fiscal solutions such as income redistribution. The reasons for this are, as Kleinman points out, when drawing parallels between New Labour's regeneration policies and those of the American President Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s, because tackling poverty through income distribution is politically unacceptable. There, therefore, have to be programmes to end poverty, regardless of the fact that many of these are dealing with symptoms rather than causes and ultimately have a limited impact (Kleinman, 2000). The United Kingdom Government's attempts to tackle in-work and welfare based

poverty through mechanisms such as the minimum wage, tax credits and Child Benefit can be seen as an attempt to deal with poverty, albeit that this has been described as being “redistribution by stealth” (ibid p. 58). The danger for the Executive is that such structural issues become separated from local based action, both in policy analysis and in the formulation of solutions. Disadvantaged communities reflect a complex series of interactions between structural, local and individual factors and processes (Kleinman, 2000, Meegan and Mitchell, 2001). Delivering more effective public services is but one part, and possibly a minor part, of the solution. There needs to be more action to tackle the structural issues underlying poverty. If all that community planning and the associated management tools are capable of doing is dealing with the local and the individual, rather than make the linkages to structural issues, then this new form of partnership may ultimately be little more than “fragmented local crisis management,” (Geddes, 2000, p. 797). Such an outcome would reflect the division of responsibilities caused by devolution. The Executive has responsibility for the local and the individual whilst structural issues, especially income redistribution; remain within Whitehall’s remit. Unless this divide can be bridged the strategy may achieve limited real change. If this is the outcome then it, in its turn, will be displaced by the next political “solution” to the problems of Scotland’s deprived communities.

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