The 'In Bloom' competition: gardening work as a community involvement strategy

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2008

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August 2008

Manchester Metropolitan University

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Abstract
The 'In Bloom' competition offers local people to become active in improving their neighbourhoods through the planting of flowers throughout the spring and summer months. This paper will describe how the work of planting and looking after the flower beds and displays develops community cohesion and improves not only the physical environment, but also the relationships between community members. Fractured relationships are repaired and positive encounters replace confrontational ones. Furthermore the role of success in local and regional competitions will be explored in relation to community engagement. The importance of activity as a participative strategy will be explored. The discussion will draw on Habermas' concept of communication action context to understand some of the blocks to participation and the role that activity plays in engagement.

Introduction
The renewal of democratic participation and public engagement with government remains a central plank of the New Labour project, a decade on. Closely linked to this is a commitment to support community engagement and participation. A recent Government five year development plan for sustainable communities stated that:

> While traditional forms of democratic engagement such as voting have declined over time, a large and increasing number of people take an active part in shaping and caring for their local community. Approximately 20 million people now engage in volunteering – one and a half million more than in 2001. But for too many, dissatisfaction with the current state of their area is still accompanied by a sense of powerlessness to do much to improve it. …Community engagement also has intrinsic benefits to individuals and to communities. It can strengthen neighbourhoods and foster community cohesion, creating communities where people of all races, ages and backgrounds feel free to mix together in housing, in education, and in leisure.(ODPM, 2005 p.20,21

The same publication drew attention to the central role that the state of the local environment plays in people's lives:

> People want to live in attractive places that are clean and safe, with good parks, play areas and green spaces. Too many people, especially

in deprived areas, still live in dirty, vandalised places that feel unwelcome, unsafe and unhealthy. (ODPM, 2005. p.23)

In this paper we will discuss the nature of community engagement, involvement and participation, with reference to local people's action within an environmental improvement project, the National *In Bloom* competition.

What is Participation?
Most will be familiar with the now famous 'ladder of participation' of Arnstein (1969). Looking at participation from the point of view of these inviting participation she identifies eight levels of participation ranging from those processes that are not really participation through degrees of tokenism to degrees of citizen power (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation

8	Citizen control	6-8: degrees of citizen power
7	Delegated power	
6	Partnership	
5	Placation	3-6: degrees of tokenism
4	Consultation	
3	Informing	
2	Therapy	
1	Manipulation	1-2: non-participation

Wilcox has adapted this idea of levels of participation, suggesting five levels, with levels 3, 4 and 5 involving substantial participation. (see Figure 2). Each level suggests a different activity.

Figure 2: Wilcox's Levels of Participation and linked activity

Level of participation	Activity
1. Information	Tell people what is planned
2. Consultation	Offer a number of options and listen to the feedback
3. Deciding together	Encourage others to provide some additional ideas and options, and join in deciding what is the best way forward
4. Acting together	Not only do different interests decide together what is best, they also form a partnership to carry it out
5. Supporting independent community initiatives	Others are helped to do what they want – perhaps within a framework of grants advice and support provided by the resource holder

(Montero, 2004), writing from a Latin American community psychological perspective discusses participation from the perspective of those who are participating. She conceptualises participation as a process closely connected to the concept of 'commitment'. Rather than a linear ladder metaphor of higher and lower forms of participation, Montero conceptualises a dynamic system of concentric circles with the nucleus of maximum participation and commitment at the centre. The circles radiate through different levels of participation-commitment to the outer layer of positive friendly curiosity with no commitment (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Levels of participation and commitment in the community (Montero 2004)
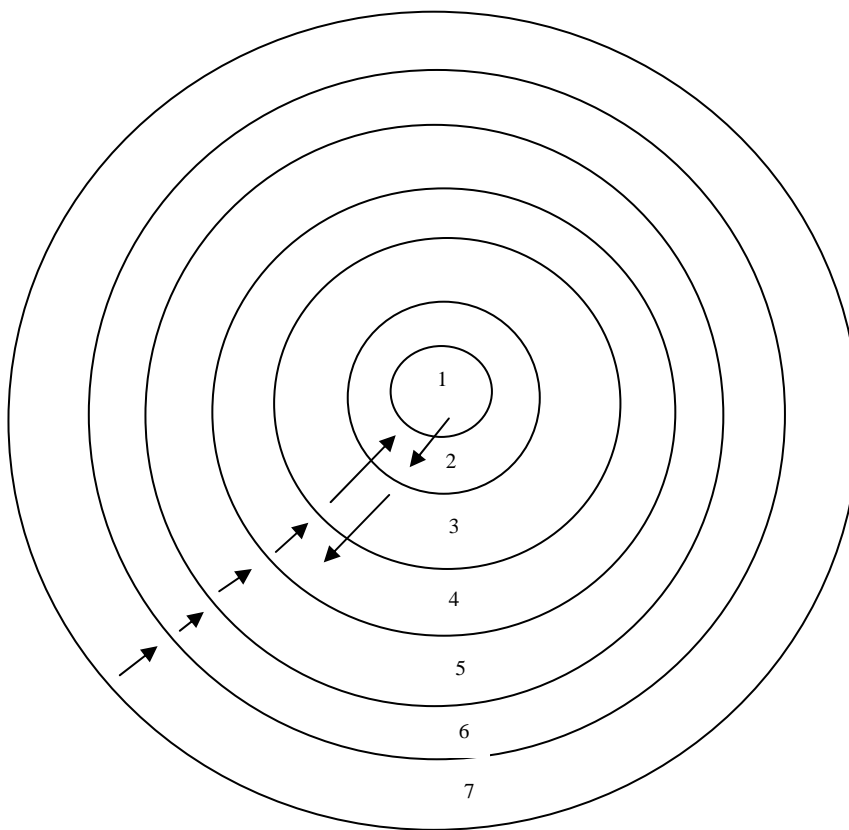
1. *Nucleus of maximum participation and commitment*
2. *Frequent participation and high commitment*
3. *Specific participation, medium commitment*
4. *Sporadic participation, low commitment*
5. *New and tentative participation, low commitment (e.g. financial donation, support material)*
6. *Tangential participation, unclear (e.g. approval, agreement)*
7. *Positive, friendly curiosity. No commitment.*

   Promotion of centripetal movement towards greater participation

   Rotation of first levels

Thus, for Montero participation is dynamic system wherein individuals or groups can move in and out. Part of the task of trying to gain participation is to enable movement from the outer to the inner levels, and to a further task is to support those at the inner levels so that they are able to retain their levels of commitment.

How then, can we look at the various forms of community participation in the UK? We may be talking about participation, engagement, involvement, consultation, all of which are enshrined in policy and professional practice ranging from community led (sic) regeneration initiatives, to primary health partnerships and involvement strategies, to best value consultations and so on.
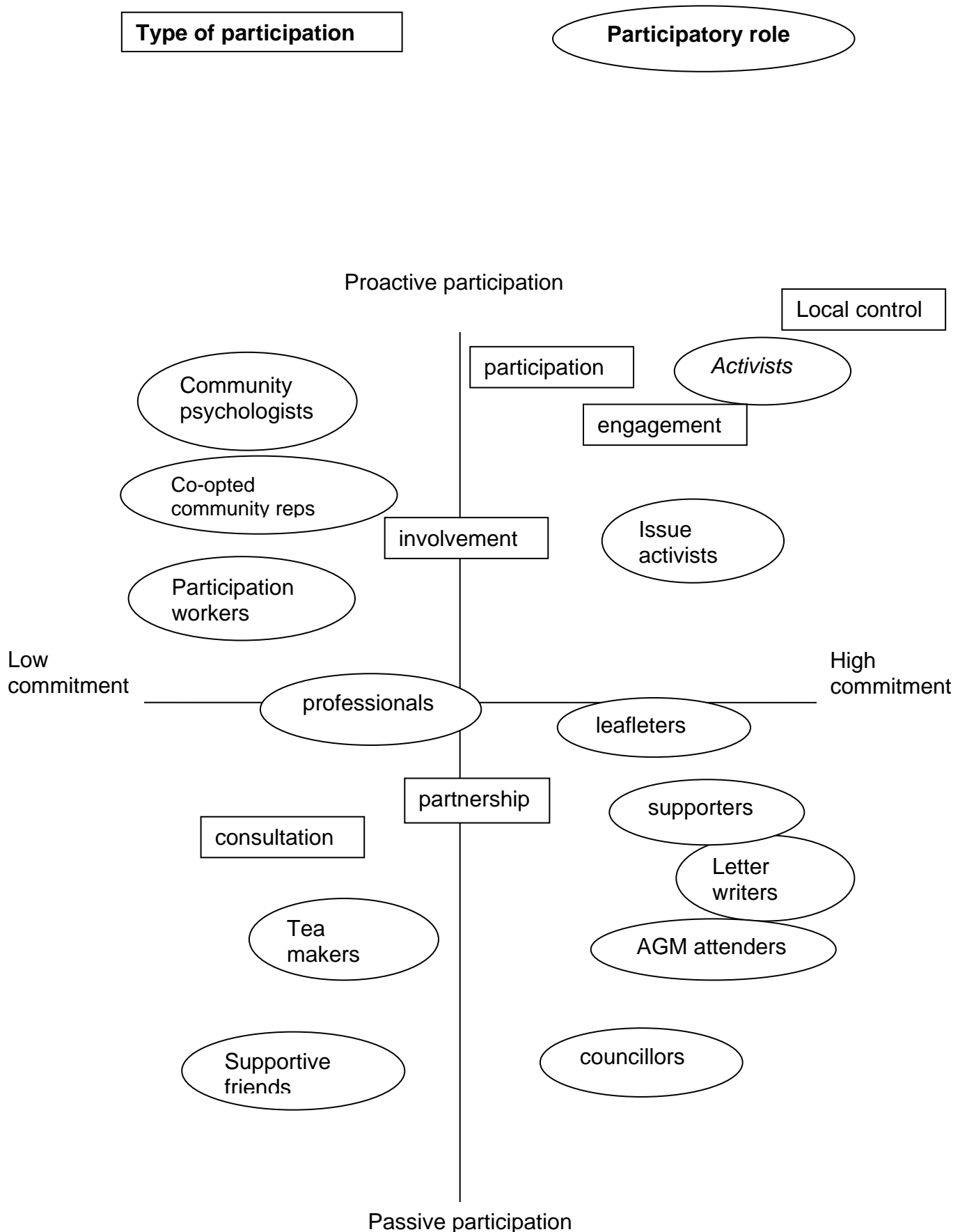
We have found it useful to map different activities on the two dimensions of participation (proactive and passive) and commitment (high to low) (Kagan, 2005). This can be represented as in Figure 4. Here, we can position the types of participation required by policy (similar to Arnstein's and Wilcox's steps) as well as participation roles in practice (similar to Montero's positions in the participation space).

Community activists, who identify their own needs and set their own agendas, and often find their own strategies for achieving change are in the proactive participation, high commitment quadrant. Community members and representatives who work in partnership with agencies on policy agendas can also be situated in this quadrant, whereas those self-appointed community representatives who get co-opted into processes with agendas set by professionals could be situated in the proactive participation, low commitment quadrant. Professionals who are committed to working on community issues but who work weekdays only and go home at night can also be placed in this quadrant. This mapping of participation and commitment can be useful for exploring movement over time, as shown in Figure 4.

Chanan (2004), writing from a community development perspective, suggests two aspects of participation, namely involvement and engagement. She describes the distinction as follows:

Participation can be divided broadly into two aspects, community involvement and community engagement. These are sometimes used interchangeably but we take community involvement to mean **people's involvement in community activity and organisations, and in co-operating with public services;** and community engagement to mean **the fostering of a cooperative relationship between public agencies and the whole of a local population and its independent organisations. (**_her emphasis_**)** (Chanan, 2004, p.9)

Figure 4: Mapping participation and commitment.

| Type of participation | Participatory role |

Proactive participation

Local control

participation

Activists

engagement

Community psychologists

Co-opted community reps

involvement

Issue activists

Participation workers

Low commitment

High commitment

professionals

leafleters

partnership

supporters

consultation

Letter writers

Tea makers

AGM attenders

Supportive friends

councillors

Passive participation

This view of engagement is echoed by the Scottish Community Development Centre:

> (*Community engagement is..*) Developing and sustaining a working relationship between one or more public body and one or more community group, to help them both to understand and act on the needs or issues that the community experiences (Scottish Community Development Centre, 2005,p.4).

Arnstein, Wilcox, Chanan, and less so Montero and Kagan, are looking at participation in a formal way - by invitation by agencies and public bodies, in the context of service delivery and improvement, planning, housing or regeneration processes. This is only one kind of participation in public life. Kagan (2005) also draws attention to three kinds of participation:

1. Formal participation by invitation from government, professionals or agencies, as discussed above.
2. Informal bottom-up participation in which people get together around specific campaigns and issues. This participation is often short lived but contributes to the development of other participation networks. The crucial thing about this kind of participation is that it is not initiated by a public agency - it emerges form the people.
3. General participation or involvement in community life. According to the latest census, many more people in the UK are involved in a low key way, on a one to one basis with others, than are in organised community groups.

There are different approaches to the means of stimulating community participation, and this activity has, in itself, become incorporated into public service thinking, with standards for participation and engagement being produced (e.g. Chanan, 2004). One regional Development Agency suggests there are:

> four *dimensions* of community participation (the Benchmarks), each of which includes a number of *key considerations*, the quality of which can be measured by a number of performance indicators. The four dimensions are the *influence* of the community, the *inclusivity* of the process of involvement, the effectiveness of *communication* with the community and, finally, that the community has the *capacity* (skills, knowledge, resources) to participate effectively. (COGS, 2000, p.8-9).

Local Authorities have a particular responsibility to develop processes of engagement with local people to ensure that all services meet community needs and that public services are held to account to local people. Studies of English Local Authorities by Lowndes et al (1998a, 1998b) and by Birch (2003), and a UK-wide review of evidence by Aspen and Birch (2005), together provide a picture of how public engagement in Local Authorities has been developing:

- Area/neighbourhood forums are commonly used (although levels in engagement in these are low)
- Informal strategies for public participation dominate, often dependent on a few key individuals, leaving initiatives vulnerable to political and personality-based changes. A wide variety of participation methods are used, with different methods being used in different contexts, but selection is ad hoc and sometimes driven by the advent of new techniques, rather than based on learning from formal evaluation. Cost is seen as an important limiting factor.
- Citizens are concerned with issues which cut across organisational boundaries, and have little awareness of or respect for those boundaries. The necessary inter-agency collaboration on public participation is stimulated by requirements of new funding streams, but is difficult to sustain over time, despite recognition of issues such as "consultation fatigue". Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs)could play an important role, but have tended to concentrate on specific consultation initiatives rather than developing a strategic approach to engagement. Some Community Empowerment Networks (CENs) and LSPs found it difficult to formalise joint working arrangements (NRU, 2003), and there have been concerns about statutory sector partners seeing CENs as solely responsible for community participation (Marilyn Taylor Associates, 2003).
- The degree of participation and control which local people actually have is limited, and despite some changes, and evidence that active participation has benefits, much Local Authority involvement of service users is passive, traditional and consumerist, rather than active. In addition, participation is often focused on specific initiatives rather than built into authority-wide decision-making structures.
- Involving people from marginalised groups, such as ethnic minority communities, is found difficult.
- It remains unclear whether those participating have a remit to represent and be accountable to the communities from whence they have come
- Progress is being made, but is slow, and there may be capacity issues within authorities. Burns et al (2004) identified as a highest priority the need for support for staff to learn about the issues raised by participation. Sharing of best practice is based on support provided by the Improvement and Development Agency and the Beacon Councils scheme.
- Participation is primarily externally driven

Although these dimensions of participation mostly relate to the formal participation processes, even within these parameters it has been recognised that there is a need to experiment with different and new methods of involvement (Conway and Konvitz, 2000).

The In Bloom competition is one way of encouraging residents in a locality to become involved, engage with each other, be in contact with each other, develop trust, and work to mutual benefit. The story of the last four years

activity in one locality of Manchester, raises a number of features of public involvement (in Chanan's terms, above), and reflects what initially was informal participation, but that moved to include general participation and touch upon formal participation.

The *In Bloom* Competition

A number of key stages to the development of the gardening group can be identified:
1. *One person took the initiative and started working on the gardens outside her flat.*
2. *Others gradually started becoming involved.*
3. *Children – in particular some of those with the worst reputations for bad behaviour, became involved*
4. *Other neighbours became involved, some not actively, but in providing refreshments for those that were gardening.*
5. *Links with the local Tenants and Residents' Association (TARA) grew and the activism spread from gardening to being involved with other local issues.*
6. *The group won awards and external recognition for its achievements. Over the years they were commended for their community involvement work.*
7. *Different members of the group now had new, valued roles in the local community. They were gardeners, winners of the In Bloom competition, members of the TARA, for example.*
8. *New relationships, founded on respect and mutual recognition were formed with the Environmental Services officers.*
9. *The initiator of the project has now become a community guardian, with a wider remit for ensuring the environmental quality of the neighbourhood, and has with drawn gradually from the gardening group, which is being run by other people.*

The group has received considerable press coverage which has ensured positive images of the area are publicised. These reflect the different stages throughout the project.

> *Tenants and residents and all the various agencies were praised for their tremendous team effort …to bring home the Rose Bowl for the Urban Communities award.* (Advertiser, 30.11.06)

> *Young and old alike have enjoyed planting and meeting new people…the flower displays are fantastic and it has brought local people together.* (J. Hitchin, Advertiser, 22.7.05)

> *..Local people have surpassed themselves and more people than ever have volunteered, which has brought the community together. We also had a lot more children who did a wonderful job …people are really taking a pride in their neighbourhood.* (S. Castile, Chair, Daisy Bank TARA, Advertiser, 22.7.05).

You get to know everybody - the good the bad and the ugly - and it changes behaviour such as litter and vandalism. (Advertiser, 22.2.07)

It seems to bring about some community pride and once people get involved they tend to support other local issues…One example is KS who knew no-one when he moved to Newton Heath 12 months ago. Then he got involved with last Year's In Bloom event. .. He now knows everybody and is treasurer for the Daisy Bank Tenants' and Residents' Association. All from getting involved in the gardening. (Advertiser, 22.2.07)

It is hard work and gives us a joyous feeling at the end of it. (A. Stewart, Advertiser, 22.2.07)

The entry is outstanding in terms of community involvement with lots of evidence of a very high level of community involvement initiatives, with all sections of the community doing their bit. The organisers are to be congratulated for galvanising their community into action with too numerous to mention initiatives underway. The judges were particularly impressed tiwth the involvement of young people and in particular the Eco Youth who were making a serious contribution to improving their local environment…The judges were most impressed by the organisation of the group which had put in place a model for a sustainable community. (Urban Community Judge's Comments, 18.7.05).

Discussion

It is often argued, and certainly assumed by the UK Government, that the building and usage of social capital is needed to underpin meaningful participation at a local level, whether this is formal, informal or general participation.

The most popular perspective in the UK on social capital is that of Putnam, who describes social capital thus:

> By analogy with physical capital and human capital - tools and training that enhance individual productivity - "social capital" refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit.....Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved...(Such) dense networks of interaction probably broaden the participants' sense of self, developing the "I" into the "we"... (Putnam, 1995, p. 67)

The main elements of social capital, then, from Putnam's perspective are trust and co-operation.

Without social capital, it is argued, there is little interest in mobilising for mutual benefit. There is a degree of circularity in the link between social

capital and participation. Social Capital is derived from interaction, and interaction for mutual benefit is only possible with high levels of social capital. What is more, as Jack and Jordan, point out, social capital can be used for public ills as well as public good.

> Social capital is produced through specific human interactions, and thus available only to members who share in certain ways of life (Jordan 1998a) and is freely available for the benefit of all members who take part in the community's interactions....the beneficial effects of norms, traditions and networks of trust and co-operation are as accessible to rogues and confidence tricksters, fraudsters and felons, as they are to the sociable, active or altruistic members of that society whose interactions sustain it. (Jack and Jordan, 1999 p.243)

Nevertheless, one way of thinking about what happened as a result of the gardening and In Bloom competition is in terms of the development of social capital. Trust between neighbours increased, young people who were previously seen as trouble were seen as positive workers for the collective good. People had a sense of pride produced through collective activity. On the other hand, it could be argued that the co-operative activity in gardening was only possible because of the build up and store of social capital.

It is unlikely, however, that social capital in Newton Heath was strong. Over the last four years it has ben difficult to get local people to be interested in local affairs. Attendance at residents' group meetings was low and the same few activists ere involved in different engagement activities. Levels of perceived crime and disorder were high and there was a lack of trust, n0ot only between neighbours, but between local people, elected representatives and public agencies. Hope Cheong (2006) argues that elements in the local community context, reflecting poor neighbourhood conditions (such as perceived trust, levels of disorder, crime and vandalism, along with fear of victimisation) restrict the everyday interactions and engagement that is necessary to build social capital. As she says:

> ..social capital cannot be switched on or off to produce community engagement and social cohesion since it is only one element operating in the larger social context ….communicative exchanges, norms and trust (all framed as components of social capital building) re facilitated or constrained by the context ... where families live and interact on a daily basis. (Hope Cheong, 2006, p. 371)

Hope Cheong suggests that at a neighbourhood level this context can be understood as the 'communication action context' (after Habermas' (1984)*Theory of Communicative Action*) of a neighbourhood's infrastructure. The following analysis will draw heavily on Hope Cheong's analysis in relation to the position of immigrant Hispanic families in Los Angeles.

Habermas draws attention to the importance of preconditions to civic engagement in the public sphere. We can use the term here to describe the interaction conditions for the gardening group. In Newton Heath, the

gardening group has become a network that encompasses social capital building processes between the local residents and local public services (especially environmental and housing services).

The concept of communication action context, allows us to identify features of the neighbourhood that facilitate or constrain interactions, trust and social capital building. Essentially, it is argued that in Newton Health, contextual conditions were such that participation and engagement would have been difficult. The contextual conditions that are thought to be important for supporting a positive sense of belonging, and enabling communication and interaction with others, include physical, psychological, socio-cultural, economic and technological dimensions (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). Detailed analysis of the social fabric of the area can be found in Raschini, Stewart and Kagan (2006).

The physical environment was poor with few places for people to gather and communicate. A local park was avoided because of trouble with youth. Prior to residents cleaning up, there were litter dumps and ongoing battle shad been held with the local authority about proper emptying of rubbish bins. Some housing was in poor condition. Gardens were untended and public beds were not kept up. There are few community facilities, and most of the places for interaction are outside in the streets. Young people in particular made use of street corners and the park to congregate, but his was a source of intimidation for others. The local market and supermarket provided some opportunities for casual interaction.

Psychological issues included weak sense of community and belonging, little attention paid to supporting one another, little engagement and involvement and fear of young peoples unruly behaviour. There was breakdown of trust between the police and residents. Intimidation and the fear of intimidation were both high. Several anti social behaviour orders had been taken out and some youths were the recipients of dispersal orders.

Socio-cultural context included the positive fact of shared identity amongst residents as working class. However, the British National Party had a presence in the area. There was little social disruption due to immigration which was low but growing. There was some conflict between generations, and there was some hostility between this neighbourhood and ones adjoining.

Economic factors include the time and resources available for communication and interaction with others (Hope Cheong, 2006). The insularity born of unemployment and dependency on welfare benefits was high. Work had disappeared form the area slowly over the last decade and half. The District has a population with some of the worst health indicators in the country, with diet and smoking related illness and mental ill-health all high. As Hope Cheong (2006:383) says:

> According to Salmon (2002), it is unrealistic to expect self-help and community programmes to regenerate neighbourhood renewal since the conditions in derived neighbourhoods are unconducive to

community involvement and social cohesion. Residents in deprived neighbourhoods are often more concerned about access to jobs, decent housing and public services, rather than engaging in the shared, time-consuming project of community building.(

Indeed, Kagan (2005) has shown how even those who are active in community building may experience stress and burnout, and a depletion of their resources.

Technological features include old and new communication facilities. Levels of internet connection are low, but telephone usage was high. Transport was on the whole adequate although there was some problem with buses refusing to stop and pick up passengers in the area. Disability access is variable and it is not always easy for those using mobility aids to get around. Car ownership is low and there is reliance on public transport. A f6 lane major trunk road severs most of the District from its post office and a new community learning centre.

A closed communication action context discourages civic engagement opportunities, whereas an open one encourages people to interact and participate in community building. Any particular area, boundaried by shared conventions, geographic labels and so on (such as Newton Heath) may be relatively closed or open. We suggest that the gardening project has not only raised the status of the area, but also moved it from a relatively closed context to a more open one. It is through the shared activity that social capital, trust, communication and engagement has been built, and the conditions for further participation are now favourable.

This is quite a different approach from that usually taken in the encouragement of engagement and involvement, as represented by the different sets of indicators and guidelines for managing it (Chanan, 2004; COGS, 2000; ODPM, 2005). In top down engagement there is already a purpose and local people are sought in order to engage with this pre-set purpose. Capacity building of residents for such engagement, so that they know how to be involved, are suggested, thus rendering participation itself an 'expert' process, knowledge about which resides in the professionals.

Th gardening project worked quite differently. This participative prpoject started with a purpose, identified and agreed by local people themselves. In pursuit of this, there was activity. Shared, culturally appropriate, activity that opened the communication action context and facilitated further involvement and participation of those involved. In order to better understand the activity and its link with participation, we turn to the socio-cultural and activity theory perspective of Vygotsky (1967) as a useful framework to understand the processes involved in the gardening project.   Van Vlaenderen (2004:136) summarises the advantages of the activity theory perspective:

> Activity theorists argue that in order to understand the nature of the interaction between people, one needs to focus on the joint activity in which they are involved. Human behaviour is seen as socially and

culturally mediated towards a purpose, obtaining meaning within a social context. P.136
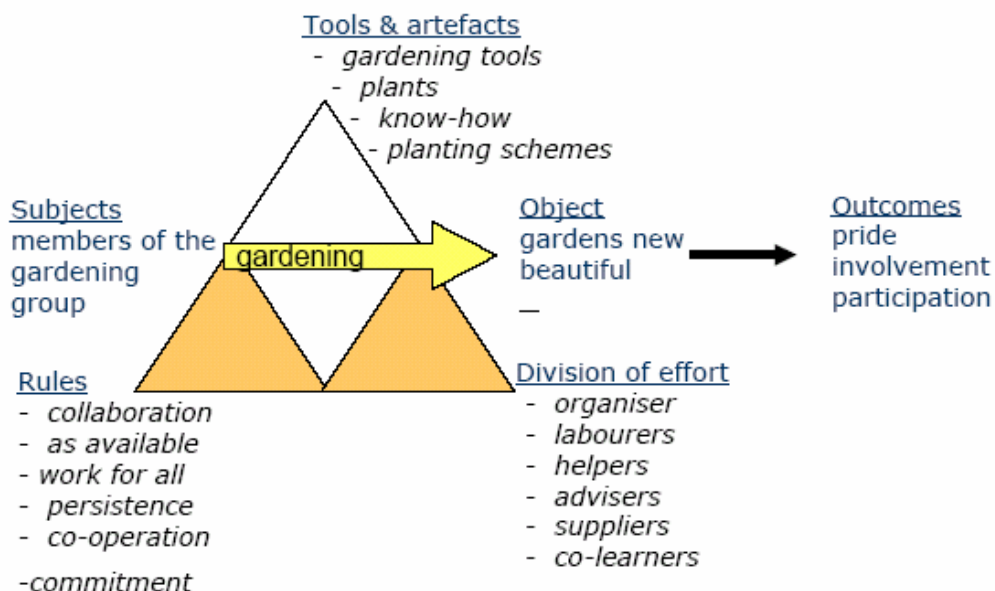
To develop new practice (in this case participation via the gardening project) requires alignment with three types of local factors:

Social – largely relationships…, eg, power, support. The support of the environmental officer and the enthusiasm and encouragement of initially the organiser and subsequently neighbours…

Cultural – ways things happen, what they mean…eg, whether or not residents or the Council should tend the gardens. Gardening as a legitimate household activity. In Bloom as a cultural process

Historical – current context, arrangements…eg, resources,. The availability of materials and the presence of the In Bloom competition

Gardening: Activity system

Tools & artefacts
- gardening tools
- plants
- know-how
- planting schemes

Subjects
members of the gardening group

gardening

Object
gardens new beautiful
—

Outcomes
pride
involvement
participation

Rules
- collaboration
- as available
- work for all
- persistence
- co-operation
-commitment

Division of effort
- organiser
- labourers
- helpers
- advisers
- suppliers
- co-learners

Adapted from:
http://www.educ.utas.edu.au/users/ilwebb/research/activity_theory.htm

Activity theory perspectives suggest that relationship between human agents (residents) and objects of environment (in this case participation, but the gardens may also be seen as objects in the environment)is mediated by cultural means, tools and rules (gardening, In Bloom competition). Not only this, but it is suggested that the human mind (experience) develops, and can only be understood within the context of meaningful, goal-oriented, and socially determined interaction between human beings and their material environment. Thus it is through the gardening that residents' understanding of the importance of 'community' and their role in building it. It is through the activity that those around the residents (professionals in particular) come to understand the capacity of local people to be involved, without the need for capacity building.

In this discussion we have looked at the way in which the communication action context of the residents enabled active participation, and saw how gardening is one means of developing a meaningful and open space for communication. Maybe the time is right to now look at the communication action context for those around residents. Almost certainly we will find features of their communication action context that disable open engagement with residents. Thus we might turn the tables and ask the question not what does it take for residents to engage with professionals, but rather, what does it take for professionals to engage with residents and how can their capacity to so do be built? What activity systems are professionals developing in order to participate with residents?

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