REPORT FOR THE REGIONAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION:

SUMMARY OF THE THIRD MEETING OF THE LEADING CITIZEN DRIVEN GOVERNANCE: COLLECTIVE REGIONAL AND SUB REGIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE UK AND BEYOND

GOVERNMENT OFFICE FOR THE SOUTH WEST, BRISTOL
20TH MARCH 2009

INTRODUCTION:

This was the third of three seminars organised by the convenors of the research group: Joyce Liddle (Nottingham Trent University); John Diamond (Edge Hill University) and Pip Tucker (Devon County Council).

This seminar took as its main theme the inclusiveness of citizen-driven governance – how well minority groups and rural communities were able to participate in structures that are often seen as best suited to densely populated urban neighbourhoods. The role and nature of partnership and community bodies in helping to guide economic growth was considered in a number of the presentations.

SUMMARY OF THE DAY'S PAPERS

The day was organized into three sessions, with time for discussion between the attending academics and practitioners.

Session one started with a brief introduction from Pip Tucker, one of the organizers. From an English local authority perspective, he described how there was a long tradition of 'citizen-led governance' in local government, with local elected representatives being responsible for actions. This sat alongside the more recent policies which sought to have representatives of 'the people', often from community groups, helping to allocate regeneration funds.

The first presentation was by Collette Bennett, from Equality South West. This regional organization is a registered charity, supported by a range of South West organisations including the Regional Development Agency, the Government, Regional Assembly, Trade Union Congress and the Big Lottery Fund. ESW was England's first regional equality and diversity body. In 2008 ESW had undertaken research for GOSW on the extent to which effective consultation had taken place around equality and diversity, in developing Local Area Agreements (LAAs) across the South West. These are agreements between local partnerships (led by local authorities) and central

government to achieve improvements in the local environment, economy, well being and community safety. The research found that the engagement with equality and diversity groups was generally poor, with only three out of seven equality and diversity representatives in the region feeling that their concerns had been adequately incorporated in the LAA. Barriers included the language – jargon - used during consultation, and poor timing, with equality and diversity often 'tacked on' at the end rather than being an integral part of the process. A final barrier – and one that was returned to in the day's final paper - discussed was the complexity of networks that represented diversity groups and developed the LAAs. Where structures were strong and mature, as in Somerset, the inclusion of equalities group in the LAA was far more effective than elsewhere.

Edward Chorlton, Deputy Chief Executive of Devon County Council, went on to describe the practical challenges associated with partnership working in the county. He stressed the geographical and population size of Devon, with the county council required to exercise leadership across a wide and diverse area. The organizational landscape was also complex, with the county sitting in a European, national and regional context as well as encompassing eight district councils and more than 400 parish, town and city councils, and acting according to a Sustainable Communities Strategy, the Devon Economic Strategy and a corporate Strategic Plan as well as the LAA. Amongst a range of examples that demonstrated the range and diversity of partners included in the networks helping reach the LAA's economic and environmental targets, he discussed the relatively recent promotion of the 'Devon brand' by the Devon Economic Partnership. This was seen as a way of uniting participants in economic developments and dispelling unhelpful 'negative' stereotypes of the county as a pleasant place to live but not to do business, and with no attractions for young people: this perception was seen as holding back tourism and economic growth. In addition to dispelling these stereotypes, considerations for the brand were simplicity and wide applicability, an ability to reflect local distinctiveness and yet not be associated with any organization in particular to ensure continued participation by the widest number. In economic development, he gave the example of the growth point to the east of Exeter where the county council had acted as a broker to enable development of employment land, housing and transport to take place when otherwise each might have waited for each other to make the first move. He concluded by discussing the county council's leadership role in the current recession – supporting modern apprenticeships, ICT infrastructure and local supply chains – and as an employer – using energy efficiently and promoting flexible working.

Economic development was also the theme of a paper by Oto Potluka from IREAS in Prague. He considered partnership in EU funded projects in the Czech Republic in the context of evolving civil society since 1989. His research focused on two questions, 'At what level are partnerships capable of influencing political decision-making?' and 'What influence do internal structures and management of the partnerships have on the results?' and was based on findings from 141 respondents. The structure of the partnerships was found to have little influence on their effectiveness. There were, though, striking differences between the perceptions of public sector, educational, private sector and NGO members of partnerships, with all perceiving their own sector's contribution more highly than did others; the overall perception of NGOs was, though,

seen overall as being the greatest. Almost half of public sector bodies were inactive in the partnerships. The higher value contribution of the NGOs as participants was also reflected in the perception of the partnerships, where those that were voluntary were more successful than those where the partnership was 'imposed' as part of a programme. This could also be seen in the increasing decentralization of partnership management and the increasing tendency for former competitors to cooperate.

Dave Adamson (University of Glamorgan) reported on his research on the 'Communities First' partnerships in Wales.   This is a multi-agency partnership delivery structure in which community members constitute one third of the membership. Actions within the programme are not prescribed by government but are determined by local community engagement and participation through the development of a Community Audit, a Community Capacity Development Plan and a Community Action Plan. They are expected to promote a 'bending' of mainstream services, and in this sense the community members of the partnership are intended to exercise influence over statutory and voluntary sector service providers.   His research found that there were often different expectations of the community and statutory partners, and whilst community representatives were often very skilled, they rarely chaired the partnerships, and although people were engaged in the process they were not 'empowered' in relation to the statutory authorities. As a consequence (perhaps), the 'bending' of services was not generally achieved. Interestingly, many of the most successful partnerships were in the most remote rural areas where the presence of statutory bodies was limited by distance and communities needed to fill the void. Unsurprisingly, those partnerships that were able to prioritize one or two actions were more successful in achieving their aims than those where numerous targets were set. One key finding was that in all cases where the intention was to bend services to local needs, it was not only necessary to provide the structures for engagement and empowerment, but also to fund the changes identified.

Further case studies of Celtic rural communities were given by Joanie Willett (University of Exeter) and Malcolm Brown (Cornwall County Council), who described activity in Cornwall. The Cornish identity within England was seen as being of particular local significance in an area that was not only undergoing a change from two tier local government structure of county and districts to a unitary pattern (less than a fortnight after the seminar) but where there is also a strong Cornish nationalist and devolutionist sentiment. Cornwall's recognition as a NUTS 2 region, separated from neighbouring Devon in 1998, had let to its qualification to receive EU objective 1 structural funds as a deprived and peripheral part of Europe. The speakers showed how deprivation in Cornwall was much more dispersed than in much of the rest of England, being characterized by poor access to services and unaffordable housing, with relatively few concentrations of unemployment and poverty as in more urban areas. Cornwall's identity was not uncontested though, and showed a discord between the 'pastoral' image of landscape and rural idyll, and the 'modernist' image of people and economic development (as Edward Chorlton had described in spurring creation of the 'Devon brand'). The increased emphasis on community engagement and empowerment, as

exemplified here in Cornwall's Local Area Agreement, had to accommodate these very different and conflicting perceptions of the county, as well as coping with the difficulties posed by population dispersal and the area's widespread poverty. They reported how the emerging unitary structure was seeking to make these accommodations by operating on a multi-centred basis, with mobile services, extended use of the internet and telephone and 19 community networks across the county. In this way it was hoped that an apparent centralization of power (with the removal of the district tier) could disperse provision more effectively across the rural area and allow greater citizen participation in 'bending' services.

In a more theoretical paper than those that had preceded it, Nicola Headlam (University of Manchester) returned to the question of partnership structures, in particular the analysis of the networks, and networks of networks, that are charged with putting government policy into practice. After reviewing the scales, mechanisms and delivery bodies for English regional policy, Nicola went on to present the theoretical insights of Simmel, Tőnnies, Granovetter and Castells into the working of governance networks in civil society. She pointed out that whilst reference to 'partnership' is ubiquitous in government policy, there is little mention of 'networks'. Nevertheless, the use of Social Network Analysis enables a greater understanding of how such partnerships work out in practice, and mapping the contacts between different actors not only describes the patterns but helps understand what the relationships 'do': who are those in central, powerful positions, who are peripheral and powerless, and who have the pressurized positions as the sole points of contact between different groups. However, as was stressed by Nicola and all participants, in the words of Stephenson 'the map is most certainly not the territory', and deeper understanding of how such networks operate in practice requires knowing the character of the organizational and personal relationships of which they are composed.

CONCLUSION:

As ever, the seminar raised as many questions as it answered. In particular, it was apparent that although touched on in the papers on Cornwall and the Czech Republic, the ways in which European Union funds assume that the recipients will deliver their objectives in partnership, even when the contexts are very different – as in these cases – were worthy of further investigation. The day provided a balance between the empirical and theoretical, and academic and practitioner that was, we believe, interesting and constructive. We hope that the investigations of this research network can be continued, and the findings published to a wider audience.

There were seventeen attenders at the seminar, from England, Wales and the Czech Republic, including PhD students and early career researchers, and practitioners at the local authority and English regional tier.

As part of our commitment to and interest in disseminating the ideas explored in these seminars we do intend to seek the support of the RSA for a further round of events. In particular, as a consequence of the international links established through these events,

we would hope to convene a seminar in the Czech Republic. The interest generated through the three events and the follow up discussions indicate the potential to be explored. Indeed, we would hope to convene a panel at the RSA International Conference in 2010. We have secured agreement from a number of the participants to be contributors to an edited book and we will be developing that into a detailed proposal shortly.

The themes identified in our original proposal to the RSA remain of significance and relevance. We would want to situate the debate in a broader comparative context drawing upon our own links and experience of undertaking comparative research as well as adding to the knowledge, experience and interest of members of the research network. We think that the research agenda which has emerged during these three seminars provides a rich and fascinating series of questions and ideas to explore further.

Papers from the day are at: www.regional-studies-assoc.ac.uk/research-networks/current/lcdg.asp