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EMPOWERMENT WITHOUT EQUALITY: IS IT WORTH IT?

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I'm extremely pleased to be here today and I'd like to thank ADEPT for their kind invitation. This is a debate that I am delighted to contribute to – it's one that my organisation has a particular interest in.

Who we are

brap began life in 1997 as an alternative race equality council of sorts but over the years we have evolved significantly. Central to this has been an attempt to formulate a more inclusive and transparent approach to equality – what we have called a 'de-ethnicised' approach – in which there is a *reduced* emphasis on individual faith, culture or ethnic identity as determinants of participation, and a much greater focus on issues: on what people know, their expertise and their understanding. This has special significance in the way that we think about community empowerment and participation – and especially their equalities implications.

Over the past few years – as will be the case for many of you here – we have also sought out new 'markets' for our expertise. We now have a regionally and nationally recognised research and consultancy reputation, for example, and have delivered work for a number of Whitehall departments as well as national bodies such as Voice for Change England and the Commission for Equality and Human Rights.

We have also developed key programmes focused on BME third sector support and development and currently manage Advantage West Midlands' Routes to Opportunity (R2O) programme. This is a £1m programme designed

to better equip greater numbers of BME-led third sector organisations to operate successfully in public service contracting and commissioning.

Community empowerment

Let me start by looking at the bigger picture.

The world financial system is in crisis. International banking and investment houses trading in 'toxic' debt products have created a situation in which banks don't even trust each other. A globalised economy has ensured the swift transmission of the effects of this current crisis right around the world and to all sections of the community. The scale of state intervention and nationalisation as Governments seek to stabilise the international financial system is absolutely unprecedented.

How bad will it get? No one seems to know. Suddenly everyone – even the middle class professional – is aware that his or her livelihood could rest on the outcome of a stock market trade taking place on the other side of the world.

The speed and scale of neo-liberal economic restructuring is a further source of anxiety. The gap between rich and poor is widening in virtually every country in the world. Here in the UK not only is inequality more pronounced but social mobility – for the first time in decades – is also declining. It feels as if our society and our communities are being reshaped by forces that are not just beyond our control but also beyond national governments' control.

When viewed against this backdrop, I personally do not believe it is simple coincidence that has driven community empowerment to the top of New Labour's policy agenda. It is, rather, a conscious attempt to reassure communities that they are in control – that they have the wherewithal to control their own destinies, supported by a willing, enabling Government.

And yet, it still appears to me that the *purpose* of this empowerment is actually remarkably narrow. The emphasis is primarily on citizens as consumers – of public services, of public money – and the main objective of that empowerment, that citizen participation, is involvement in the state's local management and decision-making structures.

For example:

If you look at the community empowerment White Paper, Hazel Blears talks about power being more dispersed and 'diffused'. Gordon Brown says empowerment is not about getting people to sit in meetings on wet Tuesday nights – it's about citizens getting involved in 'ways that suit them' and 'on their own terms'. And yet the objectives set out in the White Paper are predominantly to do with greater citizen participation in local spending and service delivery decisions...They sound remarkably like meetings on wet Tuesday evenings!

Take a look too at the guidance to local authorities on the Sustainable Communities Act – which gained royal assent last October. You'll find it even more explicit. The Act will ensure "that communities are better informed about the public funding that is spent in their area". There will be "new Local Spending Reports" to provide "quick and easy access to information about where public money is spent".

And if you look at the community policing Green Paper, *From the Neighbourhood to the National: Policing our communities together*, you'll see that this goes further still – and even provides us with a new buzz-word: "participatory budgeting".

I don't want you to get the impression that I completely disagree with these efforts. Greater involvement in the political, economic and social policy decisions that affect our lives is of course a good thing and should be

welcomed. But I do have three key concerns: I'll call these PURPOSE, OUTCOME and EFFECTIVENESS.

Purpose

Purpose, then. I think we do have to investigate the *purpose* of this so-called empowerment. Although I do think the policy began life as a genuine attempt to reconnect with a politically disillusioned and disengaged citizenry, I'm not yet convinced that it amounts to a fundamental redistribution of power. I think it is probably more accurate to talk about these efforts being *community participation* rather than community empowerment. Empowerment to me is inseparable from a broader political understanding of the forces shaping the circumstances of our lives – and the ability to challenge and change those forces. I don't think that this is what's on offer.

Outcome

Outcome is perhaps my biggest concern. I believe that equality is absolutely central to community empowerment: it should be its outcome and it should also be central to the way empowerment is practised. Let me explain what I mean by this.

Frankly, it would be possible – likely, even – to dream up no end of local management and involvement structures *without having the slightest impact on equality*; without a single shift in favour of fairness and social justice.

But community empowerment and participation raises another critical equality issue because:

- any structure or process for community empowerment will eventually raise the question of **who participates**?

- and who participates is invariably bound up closely with the question of **community representation**: of who gets represented, and on what terms, by whom, and to what ends.

This has always been especially the case for BME communities – much more so than for 'white' groups. In fact, for BME communities, the issue of representation follows on from participation as inseparably as the cart follows the horse. The notion goes back decades and is rooted in the view that BME communities are so different – so removed, so *peculiar* – that some kind of 'conduit', some kind of representative (or representative structure), is needed through which an understanding of that community can flow. This is so deeply ingrained as to be largely unquestioned.

If you want evidence of this, then consider for a moment that it is only in the past couple of years that the notion that BME communities can only be represented by influential, largely self-appointed 'community leaders' has come to be questioned... But even now not consistently.

Of course in theory, it ought to be perfectly possible to uncouple the issues of participation and representation – after all, they don't mean the same thing, and are not the same concepts. But in practice it becomes much more complex. Let me give you a recent example.

Driven partly by the community empowerment White Paper, Birmingham's local strategic partnership is significantly revising its membership and governance structures in an effort to boost community engagement. It has proposed that six Board places will be reserved for BME representatives.

But here's the issue that the LSP is now grappling with. Having said that six places will be set aside for BME nominees, how does it prevent those nominees being viewed as *representatives of specific communities* – and of

course, inevitably, how will it meet the charge that these six nominees will leave some specific communities without representation.

I mention this particular example not to criticise Birmingham's LSP but to illustrate that this is a genuinely complex issue.

Effectiveness

The third area of concern I mentioned is effectiveness. This is something I have become very conscious of in thinking through empowerment structures in Birmingham. Basically, what I mean by this is that community empowerment has to be worth the effort – the change it can create has to be sufficient to make those wet Tuesday night meetings that Gordon Brown dreads worthwhile.

I also find myself thinking increasingly that we have to learn lessons from elsewhere in how we 'do' community empowerment – and I think the principles of 'lean' thinking might offer some guidance here.

Many of you will be familiar with the concept of 'lean'. Lean thinking was pioneered largely in the automotive industry but is now filtering into public services, especially in the health sector.

The basic concept of lean is that obstacles and waste in a production process are eliminated using a 'whole systems' approach, enabling organisations to focus absolutely on the most effective means of producing value for their customers.

This might sound a long way from community empowerment, but I don't think it is. 'Customer value' for us is social justice, greater equality, the reduction and eventual removal of inequalities from the system.

Now to me this also means that what is asked of people by way of participation should involve efforts that are commensurate with these outcomes and with participants' other commitments:

- they shouldn't be asked to do more than we – or their public servants – would do... For example, they shouldn't be asked to attend endless late-night meetings: doing unpaid what public officials are paid handsomely to do.

- they shouldn't be asked to do the 'undo-able'. They should not be required to 'represent' entire communities, for example.

- if the purpose is to genuinely influence decision-making, or service design and delivery, then the structures and processes they are part of must be close to this delivery chain, and their efforts and involvement must genuinely have the potential to intervene in and change service delivery.

I think 'lean' principles offer us a better chance of producing community empowerment models that are optimised to create lasting change rather than ticks in boxes.

Challenges

I feel I've only really begun to scratch the surface but I'd better sum up...

I believe that empowerment is about more than local management or "participatory budgeting". In my view it should have a fundamentally political purpose too – it should genuinely enable people to take greater control of their own lives and be more able to challenge and change those things that shape their lives. I'm not sure that this is what I see as yet in the Government's new agenda. The current proposals began well but don't go far enough.

I am absolutely convinced that if equality is not at the heart of community empowerment – both in terms of outcome and how empowerment is practised – then it probably isn't worth it. And as part of this the central issue of 'representation' has to be addressed: how do we uncouple participation and representation? how do we move beyond "ethnic representation" models – models that emphasise what separates us rather than what constitutes our common humanity?

And finally, the structures and processes we do adopt and support have to be effective. They have to offer participants the potential to create genuine social change – not just change in this process or that budget-line. Anything else is tokenism. There are special dangers I feel in the bureaucratic structures of LSPs and Local Area Agreements in that they have a strong inherent tendency to over-complication, disproportionate effort (especially when that labour is unpaid), and process for the sake of process. This will take a huge effort to overcome.

I do believe that the community empowerment agenda offers positive opportunities. But I also believe that unless we keep the issues I've touched on at the forefront of our minds there is a risk that we could see not just time-wasting and ineffective empowerment, but empowerment that brings out the worst rather than the best that communities have to offer.

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