

MASS PARTICIPATION IS BETTER THAN CENTRALISED POWER

Power is concentrated in the hands of too few people. More decisions should be made by larger groups of people with a shared interest or expertise in the subject, starting with those whose voices have not been heard: 'no decisions about us without us'. Moreover, public agencies, charities and businesses achieve most when they move away from command and control by the few and stimulate the resourcefulness of the many.

ENGAGING DIVERSE VOICES IN MASS PARTICIPATION: THE SOCIAL INNOVATION EXCHANGE



A CASE STUDY BY SO JUNG RIM

I started working in this field known as 'social innovation' at the Hope Institute, a think-and-do tank in South Korea, with the motto 'I hope, therefore, I am'. I was drawn to the Complaint Choir, a participatory project organised by the Hope Institute, which invited people to complain about any issues they want to talk about and then turn them into a song, which everyone sings together at the final concert.

Korea was going through turbulent times in the 1980s. As a child, I remember going into the city with my parents and seeing mass street demonstrations against the authoritarian regime in Seoul – my parents always apprehensive that they would lose me and my brother in the busy streets. I remember the protests and rallies in single file, people with the same colour ribbons around their forehead, shouting the same words – it seemed like a very orderly gathering with a centralised way of working.

'The Complaint Choir enabled individual dissent'

The Complaint Choir represented something different and new for me. It showed individual dissent and in a creative way. The complaints were diverse, from women complaining how the standard subway handles were all standardised to average male height, young people complaining about pressures to achieve academic success to mums complaining about lack of green spaces or places to breastfeed.

In order to turn complaints into real action, we ran more projects at the Hope Institute such as the Social Invention Competition and Social Designer School that enabled citizens to participate and co-create solutions to the challenges they were facing. We saw social innovation as an end as well as means.

The idea of ‘social innovation’ really took off in Korea, especially in Seoul City, when the founder of the Hope Institute, Wonsoon Park, became the Mayor of Seoul in 2011. With a strong mandate from this ‘social innovation mayor’, Seoul City created more funding, spaces, and projects for social innovation. At the heart of the social innovation movement led by Seoul City was the idea of participatory democracy, opening up different spaces and ways for citizens to contribute to decision-making.

‘The participatory process could distribute power unequally, to those who are more vocal and have resources to engage’

It would seem that the Seoul story is one of success but I think we are at a very critical moment in our social innovation movement. While the general pathways for mass participation have increased, I think one of the unintended oversights has been around the continuous effort to engage with the most vulnerable population in our society who are generally left behind. Who gets to participate? Generally, people with time and resources. The participatory channels intend to decentralise power, however, we must recognise that this is not a neutral process. The power distributed could be

very unequal. The agenda that is discussed through participatory process could be the agenda of a limited section of the society, who are more vocal or has the time and resources to engage.

I recently had a call with an activist friend working at a Korean women’s rights organization, supporting young people who are victims of sexual exploitation – the ‘hard to reach’ groups with complex needs. She told me that she has visited social innovation hub spaces (which offer support and resources for social innovation projects) in Seoul. However, it was difficult for her to find a way to engage. She could not find a way to connect the ‘heaviness’ of her work, filled with stories of abuse and exploitation, with the ‘lightness’ of the space. I imagine that the young people she works with rarely engage with social innovation spaces in Seoul.

Frances Westley notes, ‘The capacity of any society to create a steady flow of social innovations, particularly those which re-engage vulnerable populations, is an important contributor to overall social and ecological resilience.’ The challenge is to stay open and continue to create ways to bring in people that are excluded – the most vulnerable in our society. This

diversity is not something that is just a 'nice to have' or a 'right thing to do'. If we fail to do so, we risk losing valuable viewpoints and contributions of these excluded people. We risk being less resilient as a society as a whole.

Fast forward a few years and I currently work at the Social Innovation Exchange in the UK and we are taking the Unusual Suspects Festival to Seoul this year. The festival is a platform to bring together diverse voices in society to craft solutions to some of society's most pressing challenges.

'At SIX, it's our job to bring together an unusual mix of voices, to create safe spaces to provide different perspectives'

It's our job to bring together an unusual mix of voices and collaborators. We act as translators or mediators to give people the autonomy to talk to each other, build relationships and collaboration, shape the agenda and have new conversations. It's our job to create safe spaces for people like my friend and the young people she works with to engage and provide different perspectives and find shared meaning and action forward with others.

So Jung Rim works at [SIX](#), the worldwide social innovation exchange and is part of [SPREAD-i](#), a collaborative team spreading inspiration and knowledge between Asia and Europe. So Jung is passionate about surfacing, exchanging and co-creating knowledge and collaboration for social change by bringing different groups of people and organisations together.

'MASS PARTICIPATION IS ABOUT MASS ENJOYMENT': THE SELBY CENTRE IN TOTTENHAM



A CASE STUDY BY SONA MAHTANI

We know instinctively that there is a better way to organise society, and occasionally come across examples that really reflect that in practice. For me, the Selby Centre is such an example, with its motto of 'Many Cultures, One Community'. A multi-purpose community centre set in dowdy 1960s school buildings. Peel back the onion, you'll find it is a dynamic social action hub run by the Selby Trust, a registered charity. It generates £1 million annually, covers our main bills, including salaries for twenty local staff from earned income.

We reach over 173,000 people annually and attracted 797 volunteers from twenty-eight firms in 2017. Open eighteen hours a day, 7 days a week, the Centre brings in 130+ community groups, charities, sports clubs, community businesses, faith groups, employment support

agencies, learning providers and skills agencies. Most are community led, by people often from the same diverse communities they seek to support. Norwegian, Japanese, German, Urdu, Somali, Arabic, Twi, Caribbean Patois, Malayalam and English speakers feel welcome at our reception desk, reflecting a long history of open arms to refugees and migrants in Tottenham.

Over thirty years, the Centre's tenants, often small grassroots groups, have collectively raised over £35 million, spent primarily on improving local lives and standards. Under one roof, there is capacity and key community services in health, well-being, youth, learning and employment. This represents an accumulated community investment in the local Tottenham area and its residents.

'A wedding banqueting hall, an Olympic sized boxing ring, the Ding Dong play bus, a global garden..'

Enter one set of double doors to get married in a salubrious wedding banqueting hall, before going into a boxing club with an Olympic sized ring. If you're not careful, you'll find yourself on the Ding Dong play bus in a children's party or a strategic away day in our global garden or going upstairs to learn a skill or fifty. It feels more strategic, more impactful and energising somehow which only comes from being where it really matters – on the ground, working with people and finding that they hold the answers to all those wicked problems. And boy is the food good!

For me, Selby has been the gift that has never really stopped giving, finding me love, endless amusement and satisfaction in all sorts of ways. This long arc started with me offering to work on an HIV and AIDS project promoting safe sex messages to young people in a cartoon project that involved us rampantly sexually active youngsters leading and shaping the project from beginning to end. After eighteen months, my boss phoned the Head of HIV and AIDS work, and insisted he give 'this young girl' a reference. This guy's reputation as a referee got me the interview at London Lighthouse and the rest is history.

I've been lucky to find work that has fed and stretched my brain, changed my personality. I've seen the same happen to many people – literally thousands of lives transformed amongst North London's residents over a thirty-year history. Not like a sausage machine, but by creating a platform for community organisers to come together, community organisations and networks to form, finding people jobs and opportunities, sharing cultures, languages, skills that strengthen all our hands in surviving and becoming an established part of British society.

The Selby Centre is a focal point of devolved or distributed power, tucked away on a council estate. It is also the third largest concentration of employment in Tottenham, collectively employing over 200 staff in an area lacking in big business and well-known for a high concentration of small businesses, apart from one very famous football club and our local Council.

Mass participation is about mass enjoyment. Mohamed, one of our community organisers, a young Somali father of four, said in one of those 'theory of change' sessions, to the amusement of his colleagues, that 'coming to work did not feel like work!' Pure heresy! How did we manage to instigate joy in one of

the country's most deprived areas – Tottenham?! We're not in Finland you know – where there's childcare support, help for the young, the old and new parents, benefits systems that work and housing? Erm.... that's what we do have here.

The Centre – which dates back to 1996 – was made possible by a community committed to diversity and a local authority that provided the building and support. It's founded on a belief that people can do a lot themselves and the Centre frees people to find jobs, get advice, learn new skills and put back into society and the state's coffers locally and nationally. It's a living demonstration that mass participation – or community development as we call it – *is* better than centralised power.

'The simple act of bringing people together unleashes creativity, opportunity and energy people create themselves'

Creating these informal havens in a largely unforgiving city by the simple act of bringing people together unleashes creativity, opportunity and energy people create themselves. It's the answer, let's do more of it and build better facilities to do it in that give credit to our communities and our work.

Sona is the Chief Executive of the [Selby Trust](#) following a period as a consultant, network manager and project manager. Her career in the voluntary sector spans thirty years and has involved working in sectors such as homelessness, HIV and AIDs support, capacity building in area regeneration, and community asset management.

FOOD POWER: TACKLING FOOD POVERTY THROUGH EMPOWERING PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE TO SAY WHAT THEY WANT



A CASE STUDY BY SIMON SHAW

The Food Power programme works with a network of approximately fifty alliances or networks developing preventative and long-term responses to food poverty. The programme is delivered by Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming and Church Action on Poverty and funded by the National Lottery. The programme includes a particular focus on involving experts by experience at a strategic level. In this series of three interviews, some of those involved in the programme explore what this really means.

1. **Simon Shaw, Food Power Programme Coordinator and Better Way London cell member in conversation with Ben Pearson, Food Power Involvement Officer**

SS: What is your approach to involvement of experts by experience? Are you trying something new or different?

BP: I think often in the food poverty sector those with lived experience of food poverty are seen as 'service users' or 'participants'. We are trying to embed a different approach so that individuals have meaningful roles as experts with strategic influence. Co-design and co-delivery are central to involving experts by experience, empowering them from the very start in designing the pilot projects to ensure the methodology and tools used are engaging for people. For example, young people have designed empowerment exchanges and delivered workshops to other children and young people on the issues they

have identified and using the tools they enjoy. Asylum seekers and refugees in Luton will use food and eating together as a catalyst for conversation and storytelling. Young people and older people in rural Lancashire will co-design tools with Imagination Lancaster to allow them to listen to each other and then involve food producers. In Hull creative activities with parents and young children will capture their own experiences.

SS: What can be the benefits of involving experts by experience to shape a response to food poverty?

‘Experts by experience are incredibly resilient’

BP: Without wishing to generalise I find that experts by experience are incredibly resilient, they know what’s worked and what hasn’t worked, understanding at a grassroots level the impact services and strategies have on their daily lives. It’s difficult, if not impossible, for those who haven’t lived through poverty to truly understand the emotions, both good and bad, that are experienced on a daily basis. These emotions will influence people’s decisions, where they will and won’t go for support and what they will and won’t eat. It’s also important to remember the assets, such as knowledge and skills that those living in food poverty have.

Empowering individuals to share these at both a practical and strategic level is important.

SS: How have you overcome any challenges?

BP: The biggest challenge in involving experts has been around the language and terminology we use around food poverty. Many of those ‘living it’ don’t identify with it, they are ‘struggling’, ‘coping’, living like their parents and grandparents or in a community with many others in the same situation: it’s part of their daily lives. It’s important to remember these are all individuals; their identities aren’t defined by poverty. So when recruiting or working with those who could be involved as experts it’s choosing the right language, starting the conversation with food, not poverty and talking about access and affordability, the food people like and want to eat. It usually means working closely with partner organisations which have trusting relationships with people and can help to get them on board. It’s also important to be flexible; often the adversities people face means attending a meeting or event isn’t straightforward. Providing childcare and travel expenses can overcome some of these barriers, but also exploring other ways for people to communicate and contribute.

SS: How do you encourage people to participate when some may feel that they can't make a difference?

BP: People will sometimes feel that they can't make any significant impact on their own. I think it's about identifying small changes they can make in their community to start with; this is often what people will most relate to or be most passionate about. It's really important to feed back to people what difference their contribution has made to ensure that they appreciate this. Other benefits include meeting like-minded individuals with similar experiences, amplifying their voices, and to feel it's okay to challenge the decisions of professionals who may not have lived experience. People already involved have said how just by being identified as an expert – in itself – is empowering.

2. Ben Pearson in conversation with Gillian Beeley, Blackburn with Darwen Food Alliance

BP: What value has involving those with lived experience of food poverty brought to Blackburn with Darwen Food Alliance?

GB: I think the involvement of the young people and observing their workshops has been really quite salutary on two levels. Firstly that they don't necessarily recognise

what food poverty is, and secondly they then don't really see it applying to themselves. Because the young people are talking about it, it means that when they present at our food alliance meetings it has more resonance and its making people think more widely from just food parcels and crisis food. It's really helped to inform where the priorities need to be, moving away from crisis food to actually cooking and eating, using food as a catalyst for building communities and improving family dynamics is really important. The challenge now for me is how something that in essence started as a public health eat well strategy now gets converted into a whole range of activities that are community driven and will impact on the wellbeing of the communities in Blackburn with Darwen.

BP: How will people with lived experience be increasingly involved in the alliance's work?

GB: It will help us prioritise what the food plan should be about. I'm struggling at the moment calling it a food poverty action plan because it's how you talk about poverty and the stigma attached, and so at the moment I'm calling it a good food plan, good food for all. I think involving those with lived experience will help us prioritise what we do,

but more critically affect how we talk about it and how we deliver or encourage the development of community based responses to food poverty. I think it's challenging when they don't recognise what food poverty is. I think all of us need to be a bit more circumspect. Say for example we try not to talk about the holiday hunger programme in summer; its holiday nurture, because it's more than just food. It's about supporting families through those long holidays; food is the catalyst to bring them in.

BP: How will involving people help develop a preventative response to food poverty?

'A means to live better'

GB: I think by involving those with lived experience and understanding their stories, collecting those stories and converting those into issues that can be campaigned on with those that have the power to make a difference. So for example, it may be about not collecting council tax in one lump if you've missed two payments because you haven't a hope of ever managing that. The more we understand, the more people we can get to talk about food poverty and poverty more generally. Hopefully this will mean politically we are more aware and

we will get rid of a lot of the stigma attached to food poverty. I think it's a really big ask because when people are under pressure then food is just the fuel to keep them going and the *good* food bit tends to be the secondary consideration. By building communities maybe we can have an impact on individuals and those in family units by making food more than just calories to keep you going, but a means to live better.

3. Ben Pearson in conversation with Tia Clarke, young expert by experience, Blackburn with Darwen Food Alliance

BP: What value do you think young people bring to tackling food poverty locally?

TC: People are starting to listen more to what we have to say.

BP: Do you feel talking to people with lived experience of food poverty can result in better solutions to tackling it, and if so why?

TC: Because they know how it feels, they're not just guessing and making assumptions of how it is. Some adults are condescending; [young people] just agree with them because they [adults] don't really care. But this feels different, young people open up more to other young people.

BP: How do you think other young people across the UK could be involved?

TC: They need to be empowered, treated like an adult and taken seriously. Then just get involved as much as you can and don't be afraid of giving your own opinions. Get people to listen to you and tell other people about it.

BP: Could you tell me about how you have been involved in Blackburn with Darwen? How do you feel these activities can help prevent food poverty before crisis?

'Empowerment exchanges help us share opinions, making people more aware'

TC: We've designed and run workshops called 'empowerment exchanges' with other young people, people who sometimes don't understand food poverty. The things

we do help them understand more and they share their own opinions, helping adults to understand. People are then more aware of what's happening.

BP: What does 'people power' mean to you?

TC: Empowering people to speak about what they want.

Stories and any resources coming out of Food Power's work will be available here in due course: sustainweb.org/foodpower/.

Simon Shaw is the Food Power Programme Manager, at [Sustain](#): the alliance for better food and farming, which centres on developing local responses to the root causes of food poverty. Simon has worked in both in the third and public sector, influencing policy and practice across a range of areas.

GRENPELL TOWER — WHAT STORIES WILL BE TOLD?

INSIGHTS FROM BETTER WAY DISCUSSIONS

In July 2017, we spent time talking in our London cells about what Grenfell Tower meant for a Better Way. This note reflects the discussion in our founding cell. We were optimistic about the potential for the shock it created to lead to some positive change, but since then events have been surprisingly slow moving.

We thought that what happened at Grenfell had the power to significantly influence the post-austerity narrative which has just begun to be opened up and it will undoubtedly shape future policy on social housing and possibly public services in important ways. We've been here before, we reflected. We were reminded about *The Story of Baby P* which documented what actually happened but also found that it was the 'political story', rather than the facts, that shaped the changes in social policy that followed, and not necessarily for the good. This is something we think is likely to happen in the case of

Grenfell. We thought we'd like to influence that narrative if we could.

There are clearly many angles to the Grenfell story, with vested interests seeking to skew things in various directions (eg national government wanting to highlight local authority failures). Some elements of what happened will only be clear once the facts are fully established. But what is evident now is that the voices of residents, who had been raising concerns in their building for years, were not heard and their expertise based on lived experience was undervalued.

This is in contrast to what happened at Ronan Point (as documented by Frances Clarke from Community Links [in the Guardian](#)). There, residents and campaigners – aided and amplified by Community Links, an architectural expert and his students and the Evening Standard – managed to get the building tested and eventually demolished, along

with many others like it across the country (though this was only half a success, as wider lessons were not learnt, as demonstrated by the recent tragedy). One of the campaigners in Glasgow remains active to this day, and in Glasgow building standards in tower blocks are apparently higher today.

'The moral of the two stories of Grenfell Tower and Ronan Point was that society would be so much better if we can get the best out of all of us'

The moral of these two stories, we thought, was that society would be so much better if we can get the best out of all of us. What happened after Grenfell does illustrate this to a degree, despite the chaos and terrible weaknesses it also exposed. The many acts of kindness, the breakdown of communication barriers between rich and poor local residents as a result of individual and corporate acts of care, the individual voices that have now been heard in the media, these have all led to insights that before were lacking and new potential alliances. The human right to a safe place to live, which has been lost in the tangle of what looks like weakened regulation and enforcement, limited budgets and possible profiteering, has risen to the surface again.

It is so easy to see the Grenfell story in terms of conflict, eg rich versus poor, state power versus citizen's rights – and there may be justification in this. But we all agreed that this was potentially a 'teachable moment' in which new inclusive alliances could be built, unexpected allies created, and fundamental rights acknowledged and protected. In the face of understandable anger, it is important not to assume that everyone else is the enemy or to assert that one party has a monopoly on the truth: others, also, have insights into what has happened and forensic approaches to establishing the facts are important, alongside the need for empathy and listening to those who have suffered.

'Ronan Point was demolished because of a coalition between those who had expertise through lived experience and experts, academics and the media'

Ronan Point was demolished because of a coalition between those who had expertise through lived experience (eg residents who could smell cooking through the floor from two stories down who knew therefore that any fire could not be fully self-contained, despite 'expert' assurances to the contrary) and experts, academics and the media. If this could have happened when

local residents raised concerns in Grenfell Tower, perhaps the tragedy would have been averted.

It is often true, as Danny Kruger argued in his [Spectator think piece](#) at the time, that change ultimately only happens when one member of the elite persuades the rest of the elite, but such change is far more likely to happen when these kind of coalitions are built and in particular where local people are given power in the debate. This is not a matter of 'giving' people's voices, or enabling them to speak, we thought. People already have voices and in the era of social media have no difficulty expressing that voice. Indeed, the residents of Grenfell Tower were articulate and well informed and had made their points persistently.

The shift needed here is to create cultures and environments in which those voices are heard. Public services and politicians struggle to

hear within existing structures and constraints and need support and facilitation. Papers like *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* can appear to be the enemy but could be an important force, if harnessed. It is a core role of the voluntary sector to help voices be heard, we observed. But it is not doing this job well, we thought (though this was not the case with Community Links and Ronan Point).

Finally, an interesting point about backlash and Ronan Point. Local people who were homeless in B & Bs were very angry with those who wanted to demolish Ronan Point as they just wanted a roof over their heads and this frustration broke out in destructive ways. This may happen again. Their voice must be heard too if Grenfell is not to result just in widespread demolition in a way that simply fuels the housing crisis and results in currently homeless people being pushed further down the waiting lists.