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Key Barriers to Community Cohesion: Views from Residents of 20 London Deprived Neighbourhoods

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Abstract

The notion of community has been central to the political project of renewal of New Labour in the UK. The paper explores how the discourses of community are framed within New Labour and discusses these in the light of the results from research which focuses on how people within urban deprived areas construct their community. It draws upon the results of one part of a larger research project (the 'Well London' programme) which aimed to capture the views of residents from 20 disadvantaged neighbourhoods throughout London using an innovative qualitative method known as the 'World Café'. Our results show the centrality of young people to the development of cohesive communities, the importance of building informal relationships between residents alongside encouraging greater participation to policy making, and the need to see these places as fragile and temporary locations but with considerable social strengths. Government policies are only partially addressing these issues. They pay greater attention to formally encouraging citizens to become more involved in policy making, largely ignore the contribution young people could make to the community cohesion agenda, and weakly define the shared norms and values that are crucial in building cohesive communities. Thus, the conclusion is that whilst an emphasis of the government on 'community' is to be welcome, more needs to be done in terms of considering the 'voices' of the community as well as enabling communities to determine and act upon their priorities.

Keywords

Community cohesion; community participation; community development; social capital; disadvantaged neighbourhoods

1 Introduction

There is general agreement that the notions of community and communitarianism have been central to the development of New Labour policies since 1997 (Hale 2006; Imrie and Raco 2003) and to the debates and discourses of “Third Way” politics (Etzioni 1994; Blair 1998; Giddens 2000). A focus on building communities is argued to directly or indirectly provide opportunities to widen and deepen democratic processes of empowerment (Putnam 2000), to support crime reduction (Haezwindt 2003), to maximise employment opportunities (OECD 2003), and help to diffuse racial tensions (Home Office 2001). But government publications emphasise different elements of community according to specific agendas and in response to specific problems.

The purpose of this paper is to compare insights from government policies on community cohesion with the views of residents from 20 disadvantaged London neighbourhoods. The first part of this paper explores how the various dimensions of community proposed by Forrest and Kearns (2001) (see below) are deployed within New Labour policy documents. We then outline the approach and methods we used - the World Café - to capture and analyse how residents from deprived urban neighbourhoods view ‘community’ and the barriers to community cohesion. The third part of the paper presents the findings from this research. The final section is devoted to a discussion of the research findings in the light of the direction of New Labour policies on community cohesion.

2 The elements of community in New Labour

In order to illustrate the concept of ‘community’, at least five elements need to be considered including ‘supporting networks and reciprocity’, ‘shared norms and values’, ‘empowerment’, ‘capacity building’, and ‘safety’ (Forrest and Kearns 2001; DCLG 2005, 2008a). These are summarised in Table 1 together with the associated characteristics of strong communities and counter-indicators.

Support networks and reciprocity

Various government publications (Home Office, 2001; Home Office 2004; DCLG 2008a) mention the importance of supporting networks and reciprocity in order to build cohesive communities. This is based on the idea that strong communities are characterised by trust and reciprocity which ultimately lead to building and sustaining networks of relations between individuals. It is thought that individuals are more likely to engage in positive social behaviour if they know, talk to and trust each other. Trust is built over time and is helped by a stable set of relationships between people who live in a particular area for a long time. High levels of trust, reciprocity and social interaction are thought to offer a number of advantages including improvement of economic opportunities (DCLG 2008a), high levels of

well-being, and reduced racial tensions and crime (NICE 2008). More broadly, trust and reciprocity may help to build and sustain a social infrastructure that supports people in various forms of need. Disadvantaged neighbourhoods have a high concentration of people in need as they are characterised by higher proportions of lone parents, older people, the unemployed, and people with disabilities. These groups tend to spend more time in their local area. Buck et al (2002) found that the long-term sick or disabled and the retired are the most likely to say they have no one to rely on outside the household for help when depressed, when they need to find a job, or when they need to borrow money for urgent needs.

Shared norms and values

The notion of '*shared norms and values*' is central to the concept of community in UK policy (Home Office 2001; DCLG 2008). The local government White Paper (DCLG 2006: 158) identifies these as "*a set of non-negotiables shared across all communities*", but provides few clues as how they are to be identified, or how their recognition might be important for policy implementation on the ground. Moreover, a concept of community based upon 'shared norms and values' appears to belong to a rather sentimental perspective drawn from the old days of racially homogenous small towns, reciprocal obligations and relationships that are stable over time. In the context of disadvantaged urban areas and those characterised by super-diversity (Vertovec 2007), a high population churn, and a significant number of newly arrived migrants it seems unlikely that shared norms and values will be easily achieved.

The importance of shared norms and values within government policy was reinforced after the riots in the UK cities of Bradford, Oldham and Burnley in 2001. The causes of the unrest were attributed to a lack of community cohesion (Home Office 2001) and the range of measures to diffuse racial tensions between ethnic groups and encourage greater racial equality were put in place (Home Office 2005). But some commentators (Worley 2005) have recently argued that the concept of community has been used as a vehicle for attempts to assimilate ethnic groups into British culture (e.g. citizenship tests) (Home Office, 2001a), particularly for newly-arrived migrants. This policy tension between multiculturalism and assimilationism has been identified by Shukra et al (2004) as a key feature of the current debate on migration.

Empowerment

Strong communities are thought to have high levels of civic participation. Policies propose that civic participation is to be achieved by providing the community with a 'voice' to influence the local decision-making via novel participatory processes which complement more conventional representational democratic process (DCLG 2008; DH 2008; Home Office 2004). Greater civic participation promises more inclusive forms of democracy and has been seen as a potential balance to the power of the state and the market (Lipietz 1997). It is essentially a response to the recognised problem of lack of citizenship and an attempt to address problems of racial tension (Home Office 2001). However, some authors question the extent to which communities and local service providers have been given the policy space, resources and autonomy needed for effective civic participation, proposing the government's

real position to be centralist in essence, despite the veneer of devolutionist rhetoric (Mossberger and Stoker, 2001).

It is also unclear how the voice of local communities influences policy (Pearce and Mawson 2003). Some see the process involving communities as a means of securing greater apparent legitimacy for policy, whilst ceding little real influence to the voluntary, community (Foley and Martin 2000) or business sectors (Bertotti 2008). Others see community involvement as a strategy to deflect criticism for potentially difficult policy decisions (Potter, 2001). Thus, participation may be seen as a cover for policies and actions which harm communities as well as an element of, or means towards, their strengthening.

The critique of empowerment through participation is also directed at communities themselves. Foley and Martin (2000) argue that experience of community-based initiatives repeatedly demonstrates that local people rarely speak with one voice and that their influence is not unambiguously positive. Martin et al (2001) noted that only a fifth of residents living in 'Best Value'¹ pilot areas in the UK stated that they would like to have more say in the way local services were run. He also noted those that did favoured passive forms of consultation such as postal surveys as opposed to more interactive approaches such as public meetings and citizens' juries.

Capacity to participate

Capacity to participate is also highlighted as an important element of community cohesion in UK policy, with people's level of participation in social and community activities seen as an indicator of levels of community cohesion. The influential 'State of English Cities' report (Robson et al 2000) recommended establishing a special fund to support capacity to participate. This was implemented and extended by the Home Office (Home Office 2004a) and more recently by the Local Government White Paper (DCLG 2006). The latter emphasised support for capacity-building within disadvantaged areas and support for third-sector organisations to deliver services on the ground. Building community capacity is therefore seen as a necessary complement to devolution of decision and policy making.

Safety

A recurring theme in government documents is that crime and fear of crime result in community fragmentation. People become defensive and suspicious of one another and retreat into their homes (DCLG 2007). As the crime rates rise, the community becomes ever more fragmented and informal social controls which encourage conformity are weakened (Haralambos et al 2004). A downwards spiral is created. Moreover, high crime rates are often concentrated in deprived urban areas. According to Murray's influential account (Murray 1984) deprived urban areas harbour an underclass living on various forms of benefit, unemployed or working in the informal economy. This 'underclass' is thought to present serious obstacles to economic and social regeneration through a rejection of societal values and the embracing of a 'ghetto culture'.

¹Best Value is public sector performance management mechanism that provides the statutory basis upon which councils plan, review and manage their performance in order to deliver continuous improvement in all services and to meet the needs and expectations of service users.

The relationship between community and safety is rooted in the idea that communities have a role to play in crime prevention. Cohesive communities with established networks of trust and reciprocity are thought less fertile soil for crime and to be more effective in tackling it. Docking (2003) found that residents do feel that communities have a role to play in crime prevention and the UK government's strategy combines implementation of top-down policing strategies with bottom-up community initiatives (Home Office 2005). However, Forrest and Kearns (2001) critique the impact of trust and reciprocity on reducing crime. They point out that the majority of suburban areas are based on non-violence, non-confrontation and where civility prevails, but this is not caused by connectedness between individuals who often ignore each other. This suggests that crime is not necessarily an outcome of the breakdown of networks of trust and reciprocity between individuals, but perhaps the result of more structural explanations such as the geographical concentration of people affected by a range of social and economic problems.

3 Capturing the views of residents using the World Café methodology

The world café methodology (Brown and Isaac 2005) was employed as one part of 'Well London' (WL), a large five-year programme which aims to promote the health and well-being of people living in 20 of the most deprived Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in London². This methodology has been advocated as a useful tool to promote creative, informal and participatory conversations which can generate new insights to help people to make sense of the world (Brown and Isaacs 2001). It is considered to be a novel qualitative method that attempts to highlight and capture the lived and varied perceptions and experiences of people living within communities. It can be used to explore the health and social issues that really matter to community residents and unlock negative opinions and misperceptions by enabling groups to listen to differing views and find a more accurate and mutually satisfying agenda (Elliott 1999).

Sampling and recruitment

The target areas were identified on the basis of their ranking within the 2004 Index of Multiple Deprivation and position within the top 13% most deprived LSOAs in London.. Participation in the World Café events was self-selecting, based on methods to recruit from the whole community population. Between October 2007 and June 2008, a total of 40 community café events (two events per day) were held in 20 boroughs across London. Events typically involved about 46 people, although in some areas participant numbers were either considerably higher or lower. Cafés were marketed by leaflet and through local community organisations, and participation on the day was by self-selection.

The need to generate an informal atmosphere precluded systematic collection of demographic data from participants, but a series of observations were made in order broadly

²Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) are a national geography created by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for collecting, aggregating and reporting statistics. There are 32,482 LSOAs in England, each with an average population of 1,500 people. Well London interventions include the following areas (LSOAs in brackets): Barking and Dagenham (Heath); Brent (Kensal Green); Camden (Haverstock); Croydon (Broad Green); Ealing (South Acton); Enfield (Upper Edmonton); Greenwich (Woolwich Common); Hackney (Brownswood); Hammersmith and Fulham (White City); Haringey (Noel Park); Hounslow (Cranford); Kensington and Chelsea (Notting Barns); Islington (Canonbury); Lambeth (Larkhall); Lewisham (Bellingham); Newham (Canning Town North); Southwark (Nunhead); Tower Hamlets (Limehouse); Waltham Forest (Hoe Street); Westminster (Queen's Park).

to record the demographic profile of participants. Overall, there was over-representation of women, a significant number of accompanied young people, a good representation of older people, as well as a spread of ethnic groups.

Data collection

The cafés were free of charge and included a buffet meal, crèche facilities and numerous interactive exhibits. Venues were arranged with small tables, flowers, and music in order to attract residents and help them feel relaxed and willing to share their views with other residents and research staff. Participants sat around tables and discussions were facilitated to elicit the privileged knowledge of residents. Scribes were present at the table to record the discussion. Significant efforts were made by researchers to avoid directing discussions, although in some instances questions were asked to get participants to elaborate on a particular point or to encourage everyone at the table to contribute. When required, translators were provided to allow non-English speakers to express their views. Participants were also encouraged to write on tablecloths which provided another way to express and record opinions.

Data analysis

The data were analysed thematically in two stages. First, a pre-determined coding framework was applied to the textual data. This organised text within area into several categories according to its content: 'healthy eating', 'physical activity', 'mental well-being', 'arts and culture', 'open space', 'cross cutting themes' and 'miscellaneous'. New categories emerging during analysis included 'community building', 'safety', 'communication' and 'youth'. To ensure coherence and consistency, the coding was reviewed by a second researcher and any disagreements were discussed and data re-coded as necessary. Second, text coded under each theme was combined across all areas. The analysis of material related to the themes of 'community building', 'safety', and 'youth' forms the core of the next section exploring the barriers to community cohesion identified by Well London residents.

4 Barriers to community cohesion in Well London areas

Lack of community emerged as a strong theme across all areas. Many benefits of a strong community were identified by participants including reduction and control of youth gang membership; securing the interests of older people; and reducing racial tensions and mental health problems, particularly for older people. Across all areas a strong consensus over the key barriers faced in building communities emerged from the analysis of conversations. These are described below, in order of their importance for residents.

Young people

Participants expressed strong anxieties about young people in their communities. While conversations often reflected a view of young people as the hope for the future and a desire to find ways to support them, there was more emphasis on damaging fissures between older and younger generations and between parents and children. Negative views were often expressed about young people's behaviour, particularly their lack of respect towards elders and parents, vandalism, and involvement in street gangs: "*Some of the kids growing up in*

the estate cause all the problems. The police have been there many times but they can't do anything because the kids are under age. They just tell them off. In a number of areas participants' concerns about 'gang culture' were very strong. These concerns spanned all age groups, with many young people reflecting fear or direct experience of being the victims of gang related crime. For instance, gangs would disrupt access to local youth clubs for other young people, and in some cases, young people reported that they felt obliged to join a gang to secure their safety. As one young respondent put it "*Gangs start fights all the time, we have to choose a gang or we get attacked*".

A range of explanations were provided for young people's behaviour including boredom, lack of respect, and self-protection. The universal perception was that youth had 'nothing to do'. Conversations repeatedly emphasised a lack of activities and provision for youth, and where these did exist, a mismatch between the provision and the needs of both young men and women.

Moreover, the 'lack of respect' shown by young people towards their parents and the elderly was very evident in conversations between residents. A resident summarised the argument quite clearly: "*Youth today go to gangs because they want to feel connected. We need to strengthen family ties*". There were also examples of more structural explanations for youth's lack of participation in community activities. Participants from across Well London (WL) areas pointed out that young people find it difficult to afford services especially those for physical activities such as gyms and swimming pools.

Lack of safety

Crime and fear of crime emerged strongly in conversations in all areas as major barriers to the development of strong communities. Participants described their communities' experience of crime as ranging from anti-social behaviour to murder. While some conversations concluded that fear of crime was at higher levels than justified by the actual crime statistics, these fears, justified or not, were seen as a major barrier to the strengthening of communities, with people afraid to go out or to interact with each other. These fears were also very much tied into perceptions of local youth, as bored and disaffected and in consequence displaying anti-social behaviours which reduced cross generational understanding and solidarity.

In addition, the perceived lack of safety was often exasperated by the littering of local areas, with few residents taking responsibility for their area. Building community ownership and pride for the area was considered as essential for the improvement of safety. For instance, the community ownership of a community centre had been crucial in preventing damage to the building in an area characterised by high crime rates.

High levels of transience

Most participants described high levels of population churn which prevented community cohesion and led to fragmentation. As one participant from Ealing summarised "*it's unsettling, there is a lot of movement and transience and we don't know our neighbours anymore. This affects safety and security. We used to look out for one another*". In some areas, contradictory views were expressed in relation to the level of transience signalling that

the perception of residents varied widely even within very circumscribed geographical areas. The level of transience was often explained as due to 'changing times' as neighbourhoods became increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse and conversations about asylum seekers almost always reflected high levels of sensitivity to the need to respect them as people and to protect their rights. Transience and churn were felt to undermine community by disrupting both established relationships with acquaintances (weak ties) and those among family members (strong ties).

Racism

The tension between 'cultures' was evident in most communities. The term "Culture" was often used euphemistically in conversations as a way to allude to different ethnic or religious groups. Some conversations reflected the positive contributions which ethnic diversity might make to the development of community, while others highlighted racist incidents and behaviour in the area which contributed to ethnic segregation. Reports of racist attacks were strongest amongst Muslims: "*Things have been written on my door and my young daughter asked the other day 'what does paki mean'? I don't want to say anything. That will make her stop playing with the white kids*". Some participants noted that racial segregation was also fuelled by tensions between gangs from different ethnic groups that acted as a strong force to divide the community along ethnic lines. However, more positively, some participants reported that as they became more established in the area, racial incidents tended to decline.

Language barriers

A lack of English language skills was felt to be a significant barrier to achieving more cohesive communities in many areas, contributing to mutual suspicion, feelings of isolation and lack of interaction between different groups. This was particularly reflected in conversations in more ethnically mixed estates: "*the council have just packed people together; there are 20 nationalities all living in the same block. It's hard to communicate*". While this was viewed as a particular issue with newly arrived migrants, similar problems were also experienced in relation to more established Bangladeshi groups. As one participant from Hackney put it "*Immigrants are living in their own ghettos. They don't talk, don't associate with anybody. They should be sent on courses to encourage them to learn English. The older ones here use their children to translate. I do try to talk to them but sometimes I think why do I bother? Language barriers stop things*". Better language skills were felt to be important to increase access to the labour market. In some areas, ethnic minority women had particularly developed skills but could not find a job as their level of English was too poor.

Lack of activities and information about activities

Activities and events were seen as opportunities to get out of the house and interact with the local community, and the lack of these was considered an important barrier to community cohesion. Again, young people were seen as the group needing most attention. Conversely, in some areas residents were surprised to find out about activities that they did not know anything about. This suggests that an information gap exists and new information channels need to be set up to reach some residents. In addition, residents felt strongly about issues of affordability in accessing services.

Under-utilisation of community space

Participants across all areas felt that easily accessible and free community spaces were a key resource in promoting community cohesion and inter-cultural communication and it was widely felt that there was lack or under-utilisation of these. It was recognised that there was a strong need to overcome problems such as one ethnic or age group ‘colonising’ facilities to the exclusion of others, the high cost of hiring the space, restricted opening times, and a lack of information about where facilities were. For instance, one of the community centres and its library closed at three o’clock in the afternoon preventing schoolchildren from making use of the facility after school. This was not an isolated example and highlights the strong need for places that are appropriately run to allow people to come together.

Empowerment and community capacity

Community apathy and consultation fatigue led many people to avoid community consultation or engagement exercises. These exercises were generally seen as failing to take on board the needs of the community: “*no influence, no power in influencing the process*”. In some areas, participants called for efforts to build local capacity and devolve power to the community to make decisions about their neighbourhood. Volunteering was seen as important in creating the basis for the development of communities. However, evidence about the extent of volunteering was mixed. On the one hand, many residents wanted to become involved and ‘do something for the community’ but were unsure how to. On the other, many believed they were too ‘time poor’ to be able to offer any time for voluntary work. Comments from other areas pointed to the need to encourage volunteering for local organisations as a way to build capacity, save resources and promote community cohesion.

5 Implications of the research for policies on community cohesion

Here we compare the findings emerging from the analysis of residents’ views with the notions of community contained in New Labour policies discussed in the first part of this paper. In doing so, we seek to identify similarities and the differences between the priorities of residents from Well London areas and government policies in relation to community cohesion.

Young people

The preoccupation of residents with young people was particularly strong. Government policies to strengthen community cohesion seem to pay only scant attention to young people, yet the results from our survey show that young people are a central theme that deserves more attention. Interestingly, research from a recent government report (DCLG 2008) reinforces this preoccupation as it shows that the types of activities undertaken by those engaging in civic activism places young people’s services highest (at 24%) well above important themes such as crime (17%), education (15%) and health (12%). The issue of generational tension, particularly between parents and children, is supported by wider studies. Research commissioned by the Prince’s Trust (YouGov 2008) showed that only one out of three young people in deprived areas respect their parents. The same report also suggested that, as a result of this, young people respect their peers who often act as substitutes for their parents, and seek attention elsewhere often becoming involved in gangs.

This suggests that concerns about young people are widespread and central to residents' priorities. Moreover, evidence from the research indicates that these concerns are distributed across most ethnic groups and can perhaps be considered as a common bond across the whole of the community on which to build a sense of community, enhance interaction between different ethnic groups, and consider a long-term view of the regeneration of disadvantaged urban areas.

Safety

There is certainly some strong evidence from this research and beyond (DCLG 2008a) that people want to live in a neighbourhood where they are free from crime and the threat of crime. This and other research based on an analysis of the British Crime Survey (Docking 2003) revealed that residents tend to overestimate the extent of criminal activity.

Despite this, some of the responses from residents painted an extremely negative picture of some Well London (WL) neighbourhoods. In the worst cases, residents' descriptions resembled Murray's (1984) view of these areas as populated by an underclass which is characterised not by their poor condition but by their deplorable behaviour. Such behaviour includes committing crimes, and an unwillingness to take the jobs that are available to them. However, this picture does not represent the view in most of WL areas. These areas seem to be characterised by a population that struggles to find decently paid employment and is affected by a range of social problems rather than individuals rejecting societal values. This seems broadly in line with other evidence (SEU, 2004; Lupton 2003; Syrett and North 2008) that cast doubts upon the existence of an underclass.

Networks of support and reciprocity

Evidence from the WL cafés points to the tensions between ethnic groups. WL areas are made up of ethnic sub-communities that often find it difficult to interact. The literature shows that when networks are too tight, interaction across ethnic groups might be difficult (Etzioni 1994; PIU 2002; Amin 2002). Moreover, a recent study by Putnam (2007) on American towns and cities found that increasingly diverse communities lead to increased levels of distrust of neighbours. This suggests that building networks of reciprocity may be problematic. There are, however, other WL areas that have not experienced such tensions. This suggests that an approach based on a careful examination of the locally specific issues of each area is necessary. This implies that a local governance model based upon devolution of power downstream as close as possible to the geography of local communities needs to be pursued with energy.

Moreover, a considerable number of WL residents mentioned that they would like to network informally in their communities more, across ethnic, cultural and age groups. They saw this as beneficial for their well-being but did not know how to initiate communication. Similarly, Williams (2003) has shown that informal forms of community participation are much more widespread in the 10% most deprived wards in England and Wales which are predominantly urban.

There seems to be a strong difference between our findings and recent policies promoted by the government. On the one hand, residents favoured the creation of one-to-one relationships

(informal participation). On the other, government policies (DCLG 2006; Home Office 2004) focus strongly on fostering empowerment which implies greater participation in community organisations and local government bodies (formal participation). Whilst formal approaches followed by the government are not to be dismissed, these results suggest that an approach to stimulate informal approaches to community involvement should receive more attention. Furthermore, such informal networks are likely to fuel grassroots movements rather than top down forms of policy making. In attempting to build on this, Williams (2003) put forward ideas such as LETs (Local Exchange Trading Systems) and Timebanks to promote informal approaches to community involvement. A large postal survey conducted by Williams et al (2001) found that LETs had helped 76% of its members to develop a network of people on whom they could call upon for help.

The WL findings also suggest the need for a much greater commitment from the government towards the provision of free public spaces where people of all ages and ethnic groups can meet and interact. Such facilities need to be open for longer, including at weekends, and need to be run by the local community and resourced by the public sector. Most importantly, they need to be free or cheap as lack of affordability was one of the barriers expressed by residents to accessing services that might promote interaction and community cohesion. As Giddens (2000: 85) argues “*the degeneration of local communities is usually marked not only by general dilapidation, but by the disappearance of safe public spaces - streets, squares, parks and other areas where people can feel secure*”.

Empowerment and participation

The government encourages policies aimed at developing formal participation of the community in policy decision making. In some areas, residents wished for greater say in local public sector policies. It is apparent from WL findings that people wished for more power over decisions about resource allocation. Involvement was a requirement but power to allocate resources, the ultimate expression of involvement. Words such as ‘talking shops’ were often present in residents’ comments about their relationship with the public sector further stressing the scepticism of most residents towards policies that would prioritise their needs. As lessons from other studies show, engagement of communities is a key influence over the success of the project (Kährlik 2006).

Efforts have been made by the government to make community involvement a more central priority in policy making (DCLG 2008) but this does not tackle the problem of unbalanced distribution of power between sub-communities. Recent migrants, refugees and especially asylum seekers have little or no resources to set up an organisation that represents their voices (Syrett and Lyons 2007). If the government is serious about preventing riots, it needs to carefully consider the issue of distribution of power within neighbourhoods.

Shared norms and values

Overall, WL findings show that pursuing a strategy of building ‘shared norms and values’ is problematic. As noted, government policies on community cohesion largely fail to explain the characteristics underpinning ‘shared norms and values’ in contemporary disadvantaged urban communities. High levels of transience, language barriers in a context of super-

diversity, and racial tensions are three crucial elements that make these areas extremely precarious and a notion of shared norms and values difficult to achieve. Thus, the relevant conclusion is that “*it is important to see places as processes, fragile and temporary settlements, rather than finished sites, as fixed communities*” (Amin quoted in Cochrane 2007: 66).

However, despite these barriers, WL cafés participants - often from very different backgrounds - were excited to communicate and debate issues concerning their area and would often identify a range of shared elements. This suggests that most deprived neighbourhoods have considerable social strengths on which policy could build upon (Robson et al 2000). One of these would be to encourage the building of shared norms and values via the implementation of a range of inter-cultural projects. Residents felt that these would promote mutual understanding of cultures and values (see also Blake et al 2008). Whilst this seems to offer an important view that goes beyond ideas of multiculturalism but without the danger of assimilationism, forms of intervention aimed at helping specific ethnic groups still play an important role in supporting specific needs. For instance, honour based violence is specific to some cultures and therefore requires specific forms of intervention (Brandon and Hafez 2008).

Structural issues

It is also important to stress that structural issues of poverty, unemployment, low educational levels and bad housing policies play an important role in determining the opportunities for individuals in these areas. Lack of affordability limits access to facilities and services. This has a serious negative impact on the mental well-being of the residents which further impedes on chances to meet other people, interact and build networks of trust and reciprocity that underpin most policies on community cohesion. Moreover, bad housing policies have also a direct effect on the existence of communities by fostering tensions between long-term and newly arrived migrants in some areas (see also Bhavnani et al 2005).

6 Conclusions

Although government policies have concentrated resources in supporting and developing communities, the overall conclusion is that the idea of building strong and cohesive communities in areas of multiple deprivation can be problematic and uncertain. Doubts still remain as to what community really means in this socio-geographical context. In particular, the paper shows some key challenges that need to be faced in order to build and support ‘shared norms and values’ in neighbourhoods characterised by high population transience, racial tensions, and considerable language barriers. However, there seems to be considerable enthusiasm amongst residents in most WL areas which needs to be harnessed and supported. One way of doing this is to focus on policies that develop inter-cultural communication. Whilst encouraging such projects might be an important policy development, it is still important to balance this with projects that cater for specific ethnic needs.

Young people should be more central to New Labour policies towards communities. One of the key challenges faced by policy makers is to provide physical facilities that are more flexible and really target the needs of young people in the community. Alongside this, inter-

generational activities (e.g. non punitive peer parenting support), physical activity, creative art, especially dance and music, and vocational training appear to be important ways forward.

Much greater commitment from the government is needed in terms of developing informal participation between individuals, alongside the current predominant policy of building greater community involvement. As noted above, residents pointed to the importance of strengthening informal participation between individuals. LETS, timebanks, and other similar initiatives could be promoted and act as strong capacity building opportunities for individuals. In addition to this, our research revealed that public spaces, and community centres in particular, are not managed effectively. Free or cheaper community centres where people can meet and interact seem to be the exception. Underpinning this, there seems to be a problem of lack of resources. Anecdotal evidence suggests that capital funding was often allocated, a community infrastructure built but revenue funding declined over time due to reduced government funding streams. The building and running of public spaces need to be accompanied by the empowerment of the local community to run such spaces. This is somewhat difficult in some areas that lack a pool of volunteers, and informal involvement. In this context, it becomes even more crucial to build networks of trust within the neighbourhood.

Finally, a policy emphasis on 'community' characterised by empowerment, shared norms and values, participation, networks support and reciprocity tends to emphasise the importance of individuals in determining their own future. It is implicit in current government policies that a potential failure of community cohesion is to be blamed on individuals. However, as it has been recognised elsewhere (Cochrane 2007) and confirmed by the WL case study areas, there is a danger that current community cohesion policies will shy away from more structural problems of poor housing and poverty. It is important to bear in mind that a lack of community cohesion is not exclusively the fault of local residents, but in large part rooted in the neglect and unsuccessful intervention of both market and state.

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Table 1
Characteristics of strong communities and related counter-indicators

	Strong communities	Counter-indicators
Domain	Description	Description
Supporting networks and reciprocity	Individuals co-operate to support one another in formal and informal groups. An expectation that help would be given to or received from others when needed	racial tensions; high levels of transience; under-use or lack of community space; language barriers
Shared norms and values	People share common values and norms of behavior	Lack of shared values across the community; high levels of transience; racial and class differences
Empowerment	People feel they have a voice which is listened to; can themselves take action to initiate changes	Voice of residents is not listened to; consultation fatigue
Capacity to participate	People take part in social and community activities. Local events are adequately supported	lack of involvement in local activities; lack of information about activities; lack of volunteering; under-use or lack of community space
Safety	People feel safe in their neighbourhood and are not restricted in their use of public space by fear	Lack of safety; racial attacks; disorder and fear of crime

Source: based on Forrest and Kearns (2001)