

Managing Change
Or Coping With
Conflict? – Mapping
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A Local
Regeneration
Partnership

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Managing Change Or Coping With Conflict? – Mapping The Experience Of A Local Regeneration Partnership

John Diamond

■ ABSTRACT

Post May 1997 the conventional approaches to regeneration strategies in Britain have focused upon establishing local partnerships between – not only service providers and potential employers – but also local community-based groups. Neighbourhoods or ‘localities’ are now seen as the arenas within which coalitions of local interest groups meet to identify needs, to allocate resources and to engage with local communities. This paper will examine the assumptions behind such approaches and will explore the sites of conflict and the ways in which local managers attempt to reconcile differing aspirations and expectations. The paper draws upon a series of interviews with participants in regeneration initiatives in Manchester, and will suggest that regeneration managers occupy a significant place in arbitrating between different interest groups. In particular, the role of multi-agency working will be explored and the ways in which professionals (from a variety of occupations) seek to negotiate common terms of reference and understanding.

■ INTRODUCTION

The current focus on a neighbourhood approach to service delivery by New Labour encompasses two, (often contradictory), desires. Firstly, there is a concern to improve the co-ordination of local services between different public agencies and secondly, there is the stated intent to collaborate with local communities in identifying their needs. There is also a third set of aims which is to ensure that such interventions result in both local agencies and local

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communities being able to sustain the regeneration process after the ‘cash catalyst’ has been withdrawn.

In exploring the process involved in one regeneration partnership, this paper will suggest that the role of the regeneration manager is pivotal. In effect s/he acts as a significant gatekeeper, processing and prioritizing the needs of the regeneration agenda (defined centrally) in the local community and at the same time feeding back their needs to the regional/central points of contact and decision making.

Defining A Context

The election of New Labour in 1997 did not signify a ‘break’ with the past in terms of how regeneration initiatives were conceived. Indeed, the introduction of City Challenge and the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) in England and The Scottish and Welsh Development Agencies by the Conservative Government, represented an important shift in policy development and implementation.

Whilst New Labour have embarked on a series of policy reviews (HMSO 1998a; HMSO, 1998b; SEU, 2000) and have introduced the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme, there have also been a number of separate developments which have caused confusion for both practitioners and community groups. In particular, the fashion for establishing ‘zones’ for health, education and sport run the risk of accentuating difficulties in co-ordination and delivery rather than reducing them.

At the same time monies from the lottery (and Europe) are administered by separate bodies on a competitive basis and, therefore, run the risk of increasing differences between localities in need rather than narrowing them.

These are relatively minor issues looked at in the wider context within which regeneration is taking place at the present time. The form and content of particular regeneration initiatives are important (and will be explored below) but it is also useful to explore the continuing legacy(ies) of the late 1970s and 1980s, and to consider their impact on current policy.

The late 1970s and 1980s were a period of profound change in terms of local-central relations. In part, these changes have been characterized as period of ‘crisis’ for local government (Boddy and Fudge, 1984; Gyford, 1985). For some time (in the 1980s), conventional wisdom was that the primary actor in sustaining (and encouraging) this period of crisis was the Thatcher Government. In response to the legislative and political programme of the Conservative Government, Labour-run local authorities sought to develop alternative models of working. These included, (inter alia) developing service delivery (‘one stop shops’), emphasizing equal opportunities in recruitment and selection, local economic strategies to counter rising unemployment; greater participation by tenants in residents in the formulation of local policies through new consultation strategies and more explicit attempts to inform and to educate local residents

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through council newsletters and newspapers (Burns *et al.*, 1994; Hoggett and Hambleton, 1987; Lansley, *et al.*, 1989).

These approaches were described as 'going local' or seeking to develop 'local socialism' as a political alternative to the Conservative Government. They differed in form and content from local authority to local authority. But they shared one common feature. They took place during a period of profound economic and social change, to which local authority politicians and policy makers were not immune.

Local authorities sought to claim some local autonomy for their actions. In attempting to achieve a level of local discretion and 'independence' they embarked on a series of local policy initiatives, which were themselves, *dependant* upon sustaining levels of funding coming from central government.

At another level local authorities were (after 1985) coping with reduced funding and controls on raising revenue which meant they had to adjust to the new resources available to them. In part, this meant that they, too, looked for 'cuts' in services and 'efficiency' gains from their workforce.

Finally, many of this 'new urban left' shared a mistrust of white collar trade unions and the working practices of blue collar employees and attempted to effect reform in managerial practices. Some commentators have suggested that there was a clear dichotomy between the approach of the 'urban left' and conservative right in their analysis and understanding of the nature of local government (Burns *et al.*, 1994).

This paper suggests that such a dichotomy was less real than imagined in one important sense. The practitioners and advocates of the 'going local' approach posited a level of autonomy for the local state that was assumed rather than known. In other words, they did not have either the political or economic independence they claimed, nor did they have the cultural or ideological autonomy they assumed. As both Callinicos (1983) and Cockburn (1977) have suggested, at times of economic crisis the needs of the state prevail, with local government an agent of the state in the locality. Whilst individuals (and political groups) may seek either to create space for reform and change or to challenge the legitimacy or power of the state, they lack the political, ideological and economic power to be successful.

In part, of course, this is because the local state (at the level of the local authority) is charged with the administration and the supervision of key state agencies (education, housing and social services). These agencies are, *de jure*, there to ensure social conformity and social control. In periods of economic transformation it becomes even more necessary for them to exercise their role.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the area of community work or neighbourhood management. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, competing models of community work offered different conceptions of the local state. There were, essentially, two models – one which sought to achieve change

through partnership with the local state and the other which claimed a 'radical' approach which challenged the assumptions held by the local state. As Bryant and Bryant (1982) and Fisher (1984) suggest these different models offered quite different accounts of what was and what was not possible. In periods of economic growth it is possible for either of these approaches to sit alongside one another as the radical model looks for opportunities to exploit and to open up alternative 'views' of what is possible. In periods of economic crisis this opportunity becomes even more limited. Indeed, we can argue that in such periods it is the local state itself which will restrict the room for manoeuvre (Diamond and Nelson, 1993). The local state becomes a necessary part of the process of retrenchment, containment and control within localities. This is not to suggest that local politicians or local authority professionals necessarily act at the start in a deliberate way to marginalize or to oppose progress of community participation. But, their 'contradictory class location' (Callinicos, 1983) leads inevitably to such outcomes.

Indeed, one can go further and suggest that the nature of the 'going local' innovations of the 1980s contained within them two contradictory propositions. On the one hand, the advocates of decentralization or neighbourhood services wanted to improve service delivery by increasing delegated authority to neighbourhood management teams and on the other hand they wanted to increase public participation in the decision making process. At times of economic stability both of these propositions would have been difficult to achieve. In a period of profound economic crisis the latter was subsumed inevitably by the needs of the former.

Through the 1980s, a combination of different (but ultimately complementary) processes led to the emergence of a new managerialism within the public sector (Gaster, 1995; Hoggett, 1991; Leach *et al.*, 1994). Keen and Scase (1998) suggest that the components of this were a more customer focus to service delivery, performance management and organizational flexibility in terms of structures and decision making. We can see how the current generation of regeneration managers have been influenced by (and were themselves part of) this process of change. An important consequence has been the weakening of local political authority and accountability within local government. It is yet another process of change that has continued with the election of New Labour in 1997.

New Labour – A New Agenda?

The election of New Labour in 1997 did not significantly alter the nature and focus of the regeneration agenda which began in the early 1990s. The Blair Government did, however, introduce a number of constitutional reforms which, arguably, give the appearance of change. The devolution agenda (Scottish Parliament, Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland, an elected Mayor in London – with an Assembly and Regional Development Agencies to the English

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regions) do represent important changes in the functions and powers of government at sub national level. They have been accompanied by reforms at the local level too. The modernization of local government programme requires local authorities to reform its decision making process and opens the way for directly elected mayors at a City level. Irrespective of the models provided for, there will be a further erosion of the party system at local level and a changed (and arguably weakened) role for backbench or ward councillors.

The reforms of decision making (and, therefore, of local accountability) have been accompanied by a transfer of responsibility away from local authorities for service delivery. Stock transfers of public housing from local authority control to housing companies or housing trusts and the creation of Education Action Zones illustrate two important changes in the way local services are delivered and managed. These changes have resulted in a further weakening of local accountability and add to the democratic deficit at the local level.

New Labour have also continued with the notion of 'local partnerships' contained in City Challenge which was introduced by the last Conservative Government. As the Audit Commission (1998) itself has noted, the concept of 'partnership' needs to be carefully defined and understood by those who participate in it. But if we accept that as given, what is less clear is how the concept of partnership is understood and experienced by local community groups and organizations.

We can acknowledge the potential for difficulty when professionals sit around the table and negotiate with each other about what local priorities should be or the value of one particular professional discourse, there appears to be little awareness of the problems this poses for local groups.

As Mayo (1997) has so clearly noted:

'Elected representatives need education and training in community development, too, to enable them to maximize the opportunities and to see community development as a positive challenge, rather than a potential threat'.

The evidence to date (Carley *et al.*, 2000) suggests that partnership working is uneven and patchy and dependent upon quite deliberate attempts by key professionals to facilitate involvement by local groups.

In terms of developing a neighbourhood management strategy the role of the lead officer for regeneration becomes crucial.

The notion of 'partnership' also encompasses the desire to see effective inter (or multi) agency working. A recurring theme (from the 1960s onwards) has been the failure of services to co-ordinate their work or at least to co-operate where appropriate.

In both reports for the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU, 2000) and Urban Task Force (Rogers, 1999) the case was made for greater inter-agency working. Indeed, both reports illustrate the problems at a local level. Some of these

problems can be attributed to difference funding cycles/regimes, a lack of co-terminosity in boundaries, different performance requirements, and different professional working practices. They also point to a lack of adequate professional training, development and supervision.

However, it does not follow that changes to these 'problems' will, of themselves, facilitate greater community involvement or responsiveness from the service providers. Indeed, the opposite may be true. As a number of commentators on 'new managerialism' suggest (Gaster, 1995) the legacy of the 1980s reforms show that the newly empowered managers of front line services are skilled in the process of consultation and 'customer' awareness but have not been invited to examine the nature of the power-relationship between themselves and local communities. The central argument of this paper is that even if they were *actively* seeking to shift the balance of power away from a service led/white collar ethos, they would still be constrained by the external limits on their capacity to effect change. These externalities include the structural and organizational restriction as well as the political and ideological ways in which local communities are constructed. Essentially, local groups are depicted as either passive and antipathetic to change or hostile or unrepresentative of their localities.

The priority, therefore, remains the improvement of service delivery but as defined by the professional and/or political leadership at the centre. It is a policy of inclusion but on terms which have already been defined and set outside the community. The space to be innovative and more inclusive remains narrow and at the margins.

This perception is well illustrated in the follow up work to the 1998 Social Exclusion Report (HMSO, 1998a). In the Policy Action Team (PAT16) paper, *Learning Lessons* there is a strong emphasis on developing a new strategy of staff development for local professionals. Some of the proposals are interesting – ranging from secondments to improved training and supervision. The underlying analysis is one which concentrates on the failure of professional agencies and service providers to learn from each other or to effectively co-ordinate their initiatives. But when we examine the section on supporting community leadership, the emphasis is on promoting social entrepreneurs as a means of changing the culture within local estates and neighbourhoods. It is, in effect, a strategy of co-option and inclusion rather than one which might promote the opportunity for alternative perspectives on the needs of particular localities.

The model which is emerging from the policy papers over the last three years is that of 'empowering' key professionals to act as a local neighbourhood catalyst or 'supremo' (Power and Mumford, 1999). The perception is that in order to achieve more effective service delivery the solution lies in embedding change throughout the management systems and organizational structures rather than in either strengthening local accountability through political structures and/or neighbourhood and community-based organizations.

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Neighbourhood Supremo : An Ideal Type?

The Power and Mumford (1999) model referred to above provides a useful 'snapshot' of the thinking which is currently informing the work of the Government. It draws not only on the experience of past and current regeneration initiatives but also on the experience of the 'going local' experiments of the 1980s.

A problem identified by some neighbourhood managers in the 1980s (Diamond, 1999) was their lack of line managerial control over partner services and agencies. The new approach provides for a model of delegated management which offers the potential to achieve greater integration, co-ordination and focus on a defined geographical area. It claims to address the problems identified by the Social Exclusion Unit (1998; 2000) in which lines of managerial accountability are 'fuzzy' and result in a fragmented or disjointed approach to service delivery by individual agencies and local authority departments.

It provides for the effective 'contracting out' of service departments into a neighbourhood team to deliver a particular programme by committing themselves to a service level agreement with the neighbourhood 'supremo' and her/his local regeneration board.

This has the obvious advantage of attempting to reconcile the numerous organizational blocks to service delivery integration by providing a clear framework within which contributing partners operate and a timetable to which they, effectively, sign up. It may also address problems of competing geographical boundaries for initiatives on health, housing, education and leisure.

The model claims to meet the desire for 'joined up' thinking on the delivery of local or neighbourhood services. The local 'supremo' will, therefore, need to have a variety of skills including a high level of skill in negotiation, co-ordination and management of service delivery. The person appointed will need to be both a 'persuader' and an 'enforcer' in terms of ensuring that the co-ordination takes place and is provided for on the ground. It will be an example, perhaps, of creating a new generation of new managerialists who, by virtue of their role and power are, in effect, quasi chief executives in localities. Some of the past (and present) large-scale urban regeneration initiatives have described their lead officers in this way. But, this new model goes much further than this. To work effectively, there will need to be a change in the relationship between the local authority, in particular, and the regeneration agency established to effect the neighbourhood initiative.

A possible negative consequence of this changed relationship will be a weakening in the local political accountability of the local authority to the neighbourhood. Despite the establishment of a local board to act as a monitor and supervisor for the 'supremo', the local authority – at a political level – will have sub-contracted its responsibility for service delivery to an agency. This raises important issues not only for locally elected members but also for local communities.

In a regime which is centrally driven and which is also dependant for successful implementation on agreed programme outcomes, the scope for innovation – even for a ‘radical’ supremo – will be small. In the 1980s, decentralization initiatives (however conservative) worked within a clear political framework. They also had a clear focus, attempting to twin improved service delivery with enhancing local democratic practices.

In this reformed model of the ‘empowered’ neighbourhood supremo, it is likely that, whatever the policy aspiration on community involvement, the driver will be improved service delivery as defined externally by the funding and policy process.

As a number of commentators have argued (Arnstein, 1969; Barnes and Warren, 1999; Cullen and Iredale, 1998; Hastings *et al.*, 1996; Purdue *et al.*, 2000; Taylor, 1995) neighbourhood renewal is dependent upon both the improvement of services and of the active involvement of local residents. It remains the case that the radical model of community work will seek to contest the space opened up by these approaches. As resources flow into a particular area, it may be possible to support and to encourage local residents and community groups to question the assumption of the local state. Indeed, it may be possible to sustain a new generation of local activists who engage with, and question, the processes and policies adopted by local state agencies on areas such as education and housing. But, in a context which is driven by a ‘supremo’ whose points of reference are, essentially, external; the potential to effect change remains small.

A View From Within

A key element in this unequal balance of forces lies in the way power and authority are exercised at the local level. At its most fundamental, differences in power can be seen in class terms. The visible and tangible components of these differences are to be seen in language use, educational attainment, income and status. Often, they are underlined by differences in gender and race between neighbourhood professionals and local people. They are constantly re-inforced by the tendency of the local state to ‘parachute’ in their key professional staff who leave their neighbourhoods of work at the end of the working day, so that spatial segregation acts as an important factor in the implicit exercise of power. Even when working in localities, regeneration staff are separated from the locality by security barriers and CCTV ‘protecting’ their offices and car parks. The notion of a separate and unequal community is highlighted by the packaging which encompasses contemporary regeneration initiatives, whether it is in the language of marketing or the glossy brochure, which inevitably accompany regeneration programmes, or the army of dependant consultants which emerge to advise and to evaluate priorities and processes.

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In one neighbourhood regeneration area in Manchester, interviews with local professionals and local residents indicate some of the tensions and difficulties which surround such ambitious programmes. They confirm much of the existing research and, at the same time, provide us with one further insight into the delicate balancing act of meeting both external requirements and internal expectations. The material below is taken from an ongoing study of the roles of neighbourhood managers in a number regeneration initiatives in Manchester. Semi-structured interviews with key actors in three projects (one SRB initiative, one housing renewal area and the NDC in East Manchester), were conducted. The interviewees used included senior managers, local tenants and staff from participating agencies.

A key neighbourhood manager in one particular regeneration programme talked of pressures exerted upon them.

I have to please the Government office, the Chief Executive's and the politicians. At the same time I'm negotiating with service providers and the local residents. What I need is to show tangible results and that's difficult because it takes time. . . .

The key pressure points are the external areas. The role of this manager is to present the external world to the local community. It is *not* the other way around. As a result they do, inevitably, see the 'realities' of the local neighbourhood as they are defined externally. It has the result of translating what is needed into what is possible given resources and the time life of the project. In this sense the perceived or articulated needs of the local community are appropriated by the local state and re-presented to them as what the local state is willing to address.

Another senior neighbourhood manager talked of the 'difficulty in taking the community' with them:

'We do seek to explain. . . . but it is difficult. We are limited by time. If people don't understand or want to, what can we do. . . . we've done all we can'.

Practitioners will recognize the difficulties faced by this individual. There are tensions involved in seeking to engage with local residents. On the one hand, managers do have to take responsibility for the successful implementation of a specific project. On the other hand, the point at which engagement with the local community takes place is *after* the policy decisions have been taken and the priorities set.

In the interviews for this paper, the point was made by local people that what was presented to them 'had already been decided' and that they had 'little or no say in it'. In this context then, the local neighbourhood 'supremo' has little room for innovation (even if they wanted to). Their role is explicitly to 'sell' the package to the local community and to look at ways in which they can help with its implementation.

Here we can see one of the basic contradictions of this approach. The argument put by the SEU itself is that professional knowledge is not a substitute for listening and learning from local communities. Yet, in the drive to achieve physical change to housing and infrastructure or to reduce the PSBR, the central and local state ignore this basic advice and move into the need to effectively improve service efficiency and delivery.

But, for local community activists, the issues are often expressed by reference to a feeling that they are not heard or understood.

‘They came around and asked us what we thought but ignored it’.

‘When it started it was great. We were welcome to talk to anyone ... but recently it’s got so you can’t find anyone ...’.

‘I think they’ve forgotten about us’.

‘It’s really depressing. It’s getting as bad as it ever was’.

‘Since she’s left (refers to a key worker) I’ve not seen anyone’.

Some of these frustrations stem from the inevitable delays caused by local authority planning timetables, re-organization of key departments and the transfer of staff from one neighbourhood to another. Again, they could be addressed by appointing a local ‘supremo’ to meet with local people and to keep them informed. But, essentially their role will be reactive. It will be to respond to the local community’s questions and to keep them aware of progress on specific projects. Whilst this is necessary it is not sufficient if the aim is to effect greater community involvement.

In situations where the local state is looking for community representatives and encourages a few to become involved, the pressures which are put on individuals (acting in their own time for nothing) can become too much. Whilst some community ‘leaders’ resist the involvement of others, if there is no process to encourage people to become involved and to support them then the networks needed to sustain involvement become strained and fractured. At the same time, it clearly suits the local state to both deal with a few community ‘leaders’ and to deny them legitimacy when this is convenient.

Even in well supported community regeneration initiatives, networks are often established on the basis of key individuals working together (whether from the local agency or the local community). This model of working is, therefore, highly dependent upon the network staying together. Apart from the risk of staff turnover or community activists ‘dropping out’ it also ‘locks’ a few residents into the process and disempowers the active periphery.

These elements, which can hinder change, are separate from, but related to, the ways in which consultations and negotiation are conducted. As Henderson and Mayo (1998) put it, it is necessary to offer training and support not only to community activists in the language and processes of regeneration agencies, but also to key professionals too.

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As The Social Exclusion Unit notes, in order for inter-agency working to be effective there needs to be clarity and agreement before change is possible. But even the SEU Report ignores the reality of inter and intra agency conflicts, it recognizes one facet of the problem but does not explore the world as it exists for professionals, often working in isolation from their line managers and without proper forms of support or supervision. These could, of course, be addressed through establishing new layers of managerial accountability and control. Indeed, the 'neighbourhood supremacy' could be a critical factor in ensuring that this is the case. But, service departments and agencies are, often, working to different pressures of time and of accountability and finding the appropriate 'space' to work collectively is difficult (but, not impossible).

If the core set of problems is a managerial and an organizational one, then reforming the structure will help to facilitate greater integration and co-operation. If, however, the basic problem is one in which the needs of the programme(s) are in conflict with, or not understood by, the local community(ies) then a more fundamental set of reforms is required.

Embarking on a programme of 'public' consultation will not, of itself, resolve these tensions. During the course of interviewing participants in the three regeneration initiatives which have informed this paper, a recurring theme emerged which was a sense of 'disempowerment' experienced by all interviewees. Local residents expressed it most forcibly as indicated above. Front line staff complained of the proliferation of meetings and the more significant issue of 'achieving consensus' amongst participating agencies. A number of interviewees talked of the 'failure' to agree or of the need for greater investment (in time) in establishing positive working relationships. A few interviewees described the 'absence' of local political accountability and visibility. Indeed, this feature may well increase in the short term as local councillors seek to reinvent their role as the 'modernization' agenda continues.

Whilst we may acknowledge the 'frustration' of senior neighbourhood managers, that 'world' may not be shared by residents or staff. Senior managers do occupy significant roles in contemporary regeneration projects.

As one interviewee put it:

'You have to understand my position. I need to make sure my staff work effectively and implement what has been decided. We don't actually have the time to do everything. In an ideal world maybe. But I don't have the space or, to be honest, the motivation just now. I am more concerned with making sure we deliver what we are signed up to – or otherwise I will have Government Office on me and then I will have failed ...'

The structural and organizational location of these key managers lead them to individualize both success and failure. What is absent in their language (and to some extent their practice) is a collective sense of what is needed. They accept

(indeed embrace) the concept of partnership and are dependant upon agencies to deliver. We need to explore what changes are possible to redress the power relationships within regeneration initiatives and between regeneration project and their communities.

There are however, some minor changes in the process which could be developed and may create space for a more dynamic relationship between local state agencies and local communities. These could include direct funding to 'independent' facilitators and organizations to work with local groups (a return to the community development model of the 1960s and 1970s); the introduction of a development phase in regeneration programmes before the delivery phase starts to enable work with local activists; staff development for all agencies working with community groups which is facilitated by local groups; and the creation of supervisory boards with a majority of local people on to monitor the work of local agencies supported by 'independent' community facilitators.

These modest proposals are attempts to redress the inequalities of power at the local level. They may create opportunities for dialogue at the local level which leads to programmes directly relating to the needs of local communities. They do not, of themselves, address the structural inequalities which exist but may provide the political space for such a debate.

■ CONCLUSION

The need for substantial investment which addresses the social and physical infrastructure of many neighbourhoods in Britain is evident. The cycle of regeneration initiatives since the late 1960s has, with little material effect, returned to these concerns with depressing regularity. While the particular focus and form have differed over the years, the model adopted remains essentially the same. It is one in which intervention takes place when either the specific needs of capital are the key driver for change (for example London's Docklands) and there is a concern that the social crisis within estates is spilling over into a political crisis of law and order (for example the intervention into Manchester's Hulme and Moss Side estates).

The important change post 1997 has been the claim by New Labour that it is seeking to develop strategies of intervention over a much longer time frame. However, the similarities between these current developments and their antecedents lies in their analysis of what the core conditions are necessary for successful regeneration.

Essentially, the promotion of social entrepreneurship and 'capacity building' shifts responsibility from the state to individuals and their families on these estates. In developing these policies for the long term the state still hold to a model in which both the needs of the community and the solutions they adopt are externally determined. Moreover, they are defined and presented to local

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communities by those agencies who have been contributory factors in the failings of the state itself.

Finally, the particular organizational model which is being developed offers little possibility of engaging with local communities to develop a pluralist approach to problem definition or solution. In these circumstances then, the new cadre of neighbourhood supremos or managers are unlikely to have the professional or political independence to adopt a radically different approach.

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