

THE DISEMPOWERMENT OF EMPOWERMENT: HOW STAKEHOLDING CLOGS UP RURAL DECISION-MAKING.

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Abstract

In the context of a growth in both participatory democracy and responsible participation, rural decision-making in England has become increasingly complex over the past 30 years, fuelled by national policies relating to regionalism, citizenship and relocalisation. A survey of 'agents of rural governance' (ARGs) in the county of Gloucestershire, England, charts their recent growth, reasons for formation and perceived jurisdiction as well as examining complexities of decision-making relating to partnerships, networks and finance. The survey suggests that policies designed to 'empower' rural people can be seen to have clogged up rural decision-making processes sufficiently to have, effectively, disempowered many of them. The paper identifies and exemplifies six different types of 'clogging up' that impact upon rural decision-making: crowding, knotting, clouding, meandering, subverting and impoverishing. Whilst governmental proposals have been introduced in an attempt to rationalise this decision-making complexity, particularly through the Haskins Review and the English National Rural Strategy, other policy strands have conspired to make such decision-making essentially *laissez faire*.

1. Governance, participatory democracy and responsible participation

There is a wide body of literature from a number of different disciplines that charts the growth in governance in western societies, and the related concept of governmentality (Foucault, 1978). There is some agreement that notions of governance have developed from the late 1960s through a disaffection with (and spiralling cost of) welfarist governments and their intendant bureaucracies (Fung and Wright, 2003). Kooiman (2003) suggests that governance is a mix of all kinds of governing efforts, at all levels, by all manner of socio-political actors, where the state becomes a co-ordinator and

partner rather than just an intervener. Political structures here become interactive and diverse and the causes of their coming into being are often not fully known. He suggests that governance can be any set of shared responsibilities between the state, the private sector (the market) and the third (voluntary) sector. Interactions, and the structures in which they take place, are critical to the operation of governance.

Studies of urban governance in particular (Paddison *et al*, (2008), Imrie and Raco (2003), for example) have developed a dualistic schematisation of these 'governing efforts'.¹ Although slightly different terminologies exist, for the purposes of this paper 'participatory democracy' concerns empowering citizens through community involvement outside of the 'top down' state and 'responsible participation' is seen more as the 'price to pay' for governments granting the social rights of citizenship (Lemke, 2000). These two positions reflect the varying emphasis given to participation in governance as a right or an obligation (Fischer, 1993), and between social justice on the one hand and (individual) liberty on the other (Barnes *et al*, 2007).

These two governance classifications have much in common structurally, but they disagree on the core 'welfarist government' problem. With participatory democracy the problem is characterised as a loss of government capacity arising from globalisation and the fragmentation of public services. This leads to exclusion from representative government and a loss of trust. These shortcomings should be addressed through a widening range of voices – communities of place and interest (Young, 2000) – often being spawned at the local level (Philips, 1993). These movements are commonly associated with 'deliberative democracy', 'modernising local government' and 'democratic renewal', although each term does allow for subtle differences in the

¹ Studies of urban governance are more common than those that are set in a rural context, which was one of the motivations for this research. Whilst urban-rural comparisons of decision-making complexity are beyond the scope of this paper, much of the urban literature focuses on *shifts* in governing responsibilities (for example from state housing to third sector housing provision) whilst interest in rural governance has a definable element that is interest in *new* forms of governance (parish planning, transition towns, local asset development and so on) not least because of the new opportunities afforded by the English Rural White Papers of 1995 and 2000.

characterisation of governance. Key in this approach is getting more (hitherto marginalised) people to take part in 'public' decisions.

Responsible participation on the other hand (and associated, but again subtly different, notions such as contractualism and civic conservatism), characterises citizenship as a duty rather than an opportunity, to solve problems of the welfare state whilst not diminishing personal liberty. Market-based approaches to welfare are prescribed to enable citizens to secure as much of it as they need. Participation reduces dependency and improves social conduct (Jayasuriya, 2002). Responsible participation requires welfare recipients to engage in the active management of their lives by joining in mutual partnership with the service provider. Here, an emphasis is placed on a culture of 'self-care' (Lemke, 2001) which can extend responsible participation into the Foucaultian notion of 'responsibilisation' which focuses more explicitly on the responsibilities of individuals (to themselves as well as communities) where power resides within knowledge as well as within the individual and within institutions (Foucault, 1997). The importance of knowledge in this context, specifically in relation to the knowledge required for effective rural governance, is considered in the conclusions to this paper.

A number of critical writings have debated the pros and cons of each of these approaches in some depth (Mouffe, (1992), Dean (1999), Rose (1999)). It is not the purpose of this paper to explore these distinctions in detail, but rather to identify their existence empirically as 'governing efforts' in an English rural decision-making context. Nevertheless a brief précis of these pros and cons serves as a useful context for empirical exploration. Positively, both approaches exert an 'authentic normative force' (Muers, 2004) on public decisions and, as Etzioni (1968) has argued, each provides the freedom to pursue different forms of social life within a coherent social order. They allow for appropriate outcomes specific to communities at a local level, where they might be inappropriate for whole societies. Dignity and strong social bonds can emerge from such processes.

On the negative side, both approaches have been criticised for favouring the strongest and excluding groups with few resources and low status (Imrie and Raco, 2003): societal 'freedoms' naturally lead to more unequal societies (Gordon, 1986). Not everyone wants to participate anyway (Young, 2000). It also has been questioned as to whether community associations actually represent the diversity of local populations or interests (Taylor, 2003). Both also can be considered to be a process that brings communities into conformity with state objectives (they must comply with public service principles), incorporating communities into the state (Cochrane, 2003, Maloney *et al* (2000)). Here, things such as poverty and injustice are hidden behind a narrative of community empowerment and individual responsibility (Foucault, 1997). Structural inequalities are ignored and welfare dependence is described in terms of personal weakness. There is much doubt that the best way for poor communities to progress is to become knowledgeable and informed citizens as a means of making decisions to overcome whatever personal problems they might have (Imrie and Raco, 2003).

In the English context in practice, these approaches are collectively well described by Rhode's 'differentiated polity': a move from the Westminster Model of government (strong cabinet government, parliamentary sovereignty) to governance where centralisation exists with fragmentation and interdependence and the constraints on executive power undermine and fragment policy. A panoply of bodies, over which the centre has imperfect control, is now involved in public decision-making.

The power of what Rhodes (1997) terms *policy networks* becomes a defining characteristic of this differentiated polity. Within these networks, some groups are more powerful than others and some networks are more powerful than others. Different decision-making bodies within different policy networks deploy their resources (whether constitutional, organisational, financial, political or informational) to maximise influence over outcomes through different forms of negotiation: persuasion, coercion, bargaining

and power games. They do this whilst at the same time trying to avoid becoming dependent on the other 'players'. Despite this, networks influence rather than determine policy outcomes and also reflect the status and power of interest groups in a broad policy area.

2. Changing governance in rural England

Changes in these governing efforts have impacted significantly on rural decision-making. Smart and Wright's (1983) study of *decision making in rural areas* in England of the 1970s, was commissioned as a result of a concern that the problems affecting rural areas were at least partly due to the structure of government itself. As Lapping (2006) notes, a certain commonality of such rural problems could be noted internationally at least across Europe, the Americas and Australasia, where low rural wages, limited access to affordable housing and poor rural service provision had endured at least since the 1950s in many rural areas. A number of authors (Cloke and Little (1990), Marsden *et al* (1993)) have charted the resource-centric nature of an institutionalised rural planning in these countries, and the primacy of agricultural policy, as contributing to the problems endured by rural communities. The dominance (by dint of policy) of a single agricultural sector in many rural areas succeeded in suppressing rural wages (through a lack of employment competition), and land use planning policies that restricted development to 'protect' the countryside, succeeded in limiting housing supply, making it affordable only by the 'urban' population. Rural governing structures have been dominated by 'resource' agencies with an attendant occlusion of more 'community' based ones (Curry and Owen (2009)).

The Smart and Wright (1983) study evaluated the impact of rural policies and how well they were understood by rural residents in the late 1970s. They classified those involved in rural decision-making as follows. *State bodies* comprised national government departments and local authorities (particularly for agriculture and forestry). *State*

development agencies comprised the Nature Conservancy Council (responsible for what is now termed biodiversity), the Countryside Commission (amenity and enjoyment), the Rural Development Commission (economic and social well-being) and the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas. *Regional statutory authorities* were area health authorities, water authorities, regional arts councils and the like. *Voluntary bodies* were mentioned, but only one was named: the rural community council (concerned with rural poverty and rural welfare). In one of their area reports – West Dorset – the research was able to identify 27 agencies directly or indirectly involved in rural decision-making. Their interrelationships were considered to be a significant inhibitor to effective rural decision-making because of their “extreme complexity” (Smart and Wright, 1982, page 17).

In the late 2000s, the development of a range of different ‘governing efforts’ has made rural decision-making considerably more complex than this. As Hunt and Wickham (1994) and Lemke (2000) all point out, whilst both participatory democracy and responsible participation reduce the size of bureaucratic government, the overall size and cost of government may well increase. This paper reports on a study conducted in 2007, into the nature and function of what are termed here, agents of rural governance (ARGs) in the county of Gloucestershire, in the South West Region of England. Some 175 of these were identified in the study although this figure cannot be definitive or exhaustive because ARGs were found constantly to form, disband and reform. Part of the purpose of the study was to examine Smart and Wright’s “extreme complexity” of rural decision-making in a contemporary context, and assess the extent to which such complexity actually constitutes a problem by ‘clogging up’ the decision-making process.

The proliferation of ARGs in the late 2000s in England has not escaped the attention of government. The Haskins Review (2003) sought to rationalise both the basis of rural delivery and of rural funding and specific proposals to this end were contained in the subsequent Department of the Environment and Rural Affairs’ (Defra) Rural Strategy of 2004 (Defra, 2004), which set out the Government’s general rural policy priorities. For

rural decision-making, Regional Rural Priority Boards, chaired by the English Government Offices for the Regions (GORs), would co-ordinate the delivery of rural policies and services and stakeholders would have an 'empowering' voice through Regional Rural Affairs Forums (Donaldson *et al*, 2006).

But a number of other features of the 2004 English Rural Strategy would ensure the continuing growth of ARGs. Local Area Agreements (local authority level priorities agreed by central government) encouraged additional local partnerships and networks. Social enterprises were to be encouraged, to develop community capacity, and a healthy civic society was to have the development of the voluntary, community and parish sectors at its core. The emergent Rural Social and Community Programme, a new funding stream in England for capacity building in the voluntary sector, would orchestrate the enhancement of this community involvement. The net effect of the Rural Strategy has been to increase the number of people involved in rural decision-making and the complexity of rural administration. Certainly, the survey reported below identifies a growth in social enterprises and community groups in the South West Region of England, but it suggests that the most significant recent growth in ARGs has been in partnerships and networks, formed in some way to manage the complexity of decision-making, and representation within it.

Specifically for the South West Region of England, a study by the Countryside and Community Research Unit (2005) noted that *partnership* ARGs themselves found that they were useful but had a tendency to proliferate. They also were not necessarily representative of anyone and lacked any strategic synthesis: there was duplication and a lack of integration. In studying South West *network* ARGs, Roger Tym and Partners (2005) concluded that they were recent, had no powers or budgets to enforce anything and occluded the ultimate responsibility for decision-making. Many groups had an input into each other and the time commitment simply involved in attending meetings was considerable. In addition, the array of groups was confusing:

"Added to this is the question of knowing the extent of regional groups, particularly where there appear to be several groups concerned with the same topic or where there are subgroups feeding into a regional group. It can be difficult to understand the different remits of these groups and subgroups or consider the potential for any further coordination or rationalisation of regional working."

(Roger Tym and Partners, 2005, page 20, paragraph 3.19)

The precepts of the English Rural Strategy 2004 had thus encouraged a *laissez faire* approach to rural decision-making: ARGs can come into being and disappear more or less as they wish and collectively, they concern themselves with topics of public policy interest with unsystematic priority (Roger Tym and Partners, 2005). There can be little public policy control over whether they exist or not, irrespective of the wishes of the Haskins Review.

This paper now briefly reviews some of the underlying policy shifts since the late 1970s that have been instrumental in modifying Kooiman's (2003) 'governing efforts' specifically for rural decision-making, before proposing a revision to the typology of decision-making bodies proposed by Smart and Wright (1983). Some empirical findings are then reported into a study of the characteristics and operation of these ARGs in Gloucestershire, England, which indicates that the profusion of ARGs, having largely grown in the context of a governance of 'empowerment', actually disempower decision-makers by clogging up the process of decision-making. An anatomy of different aspects of 'clogging up' is then presented and these are related back to the conceptual models of both participatory democracy and responsible participation, in the conclusions.

3. Underlying policy shifts impacting on rural areas

A range of policy domains has influenced the nature of governing efforts in rural areas. Early moves towards *regionalism* were designed to shore up the Westminster Model but actually had the opposite effect (Mawson and Spencer, 1995). The introduction of Government Offices for the Regions (GORs) in 1994 (under a Conservative administration), whilst intending to centralise regional pressures (largely from Europe), spawned a regional way of thinking within the civil service (Burch *et al*, 2003). The introduction of the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and the Regional Assemblies (RAs) in 1999 (under a New Labour administration) added to the GORs to provide and entirely unelected regional administration which some have said has done more to create regional bureaucracy than regional clarity (Ayers and Pearce, 2004).

Of rural significance, the core staff of the RDAs was formed by dismantling the Rural Development Commission and putting the majority of its staff into the RDAs, the rest being made up of staff from English Partnerships, the government's regeneration agency. RDAs thus began with a 'rural way of thinking' amongst many of their staff. Within this context, RDAs were tasked to improve rural economic performance and the accessibility of rural services. Means for doing this would impact on the formation of ARGs. Voluntary and community groups were to be empowered through the formation, by RDAs, of networks and partnerships. By 2002, RDAs had been given the responsibility to increase subsidiarity and encourage more local policy decision-making (Harding 2004). Regional strategies, too, were required to have an explicit rural dimension, developed through inclusive and extensive consultation: the active involvement of rural communities. All of these exhortations invited wider participation in the making of rural decisions.

It was a requirement of the European Structural Funds from the early 1990s, too, that they be administered at the regional level and through a partnership framework. For

Objective 5b funding (the Development of Rural Regions) regional rural associations and networks were formed from the bottom up (often predating the GORs), comprising local authorities, private bodies and the voluntary sector. These were largely self-selecting groups and operated in an opaque way (Burch *et al* 2003). A number of sub-national offices, too, opened in Brussels during the 1990s with more than a passing interest in rural affairs not least because of continuing reforms to the Common Agricultural Policy. Other groups also were formed to ensure congruence between Objective 5b funding and the rural components of regional strategies but their representativeness was not always clear (Tomaney (2002). Further rural regional associations formed more or less because everyone else was doing so. In the voluntary sector, for example, the regional network of the rural community councils, the South West Acre Network (SWAN), was formed in 1998, and Regional Voluntary Sector Networks (RSVNs) also were set up: the South West Forum, for example, in 1999. As Burch *et al* (2003) suggest, administrative decentralisation in England has provided a 'political opportunity space' for the growth of a whole range of interest groups, and EU policy has provided them with a rationale for filling that space.

The growth of ARGs also has been influenced by a second policy domain: *citizenship*. Much has been written in the English context about the development of the 'active citizen' of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative administration between 1979 and 1992 (Parker, 2002) and the 'consumer citizen' and Citizen's Charter of John Major's Conservative administration between 1992 and 1997 (Faulks 1998). The 'New Labour' administration's 'third way' agenda from 1997, too, would confer rights on citizens only in exchange for certain responsibilities. The state would, it has been argued (Giddens, 1998), act in an enabling role and people, as citizens, would make an active contribution to civil society in an autonomous way, including greater involvement in decisions about their future.

For rural areas these agendas were manifest in a 1995 Conservative Rural White Paper (DoE, 1995), which suggested that rural decision-making should be more responsive to local circumstances because local people and local initiative were the key to the quality of rural life. The state would help communities to help themselves because rural communities had strong traditions of independence and self-help (Lowe, 1996). This would serve the citizenship agenda whilst reducing Exchequer cost. The 'New Labour' Rural White Paper of 2000 (DETR, 2000) contained the same messages. It provided specific funding streams to empower local rural communities to be actively involved in decision-making for their own development. Indeed in the same year the Local Government Act, 2000, gave local authorities a *duty* to prepare Community Development Plans and Community Strategies as part of their social inclusion obligations. By July 2008, the English Communities White Paper (DCLG, 2008) was offering further empowerment to parish and other local councils and encouraging more of them to be formed as part of a process of strengthening local decision-making.

Citizenship agendas have thus become institutionalised into rural decision-making. Local rural communities have taken on the responsibility for many planning functions of the State. They also have become involved in the development of local social enterprises, local environmental groups and local social action (Christopolous, 2006). As all of these localised functions grew, the structure of the ARGs, both within and beyond the state, became more complex. The boundaries of responsibility for both social and economic issues and between state and non-state action in the rural context were becoming blurred (Goodwin, 1998).

A third policy domain influencing the growth of ARGs lies in what might be termed rural *relocalisation*. The growth in very local rural networks has been charted in both economic and political contexts. In economic terms many English rural areas have seen a move away from processes of exogenous development towards more endogenous models with a central concern for local capacity building, local enterprise, local diversification and the

harnessing of local resources (Marsden *et al*, 2004). Endogenous models are considered to celebrate local distinctiveness and difference. This can move the goals of actors away from maximising economic gains, towards enriching social relationships through becoming more participative in the way in which local communities are run and local decisions made (Bryden and Hart, 2004). Coherent communities with inclusive and active involvement of their populations are likely to also be the most successful economically (Agarawal *et al*, 2004). A growth in endogenous development in this way requires the development of close and local decision-making networks both internal to the community and external to it and this multiplies the number of interrelationships that need to become involved in rural decisions, be they political, social, or economic.

Politically, relocalisation has led to the growth in networks for the making of community decisions. These allow the sharing of resources, information and identities and tend to be strongest and most proliferate where they are founded on strong and pre-existing local political structures and where there is a high degree of trust between the local population, the public sector and the local business community (Arnason *et al*, 2005). At this local scale, however, McAreavey (2006) notes that groups tend to be elite (educated and with available time), and 'cronies' of the chair often are invited to join in an undemocratic way, with others discouraged from joining. Decision-making also can be populated by the 'usual suspects' who keep reappearing on different groups across the community. Because they are on a number of groups they tend to assume a larger mandate than others.

Strategic policy agendas in England in the areas of regionalism, citizenship and relocalisation thus provide examples of the way in which general policies have served, wittingly or not, to increase the complexity of rural decision-making. Empowerment through regional and local subsidiarity has gone hand in hand with the construction of an intricate (and sometimes opaque) fabric within which rural decisions are made.

4. An empirical investigation into the nature of contemporary rural decision-making

Having examined some of the principal causes of the proliferation of ARGs since the Smart and Wright (1983) study, consideration is now given to identifying some of the characteristics of contemporary ARGs through a study in the County of Gloucestershire in the South West Region of England. A first stage in making some sense here of what Jessop (1995) has termed the 'tangled hierarchies' (of ARGs), is through the development of a taxonomy that modifies the Smart and Wright (1983) four point classification (noted above) to more adequately reflect ARGs in the late 2000s. Such taxonomies can be constructed in a number of different ways (for example, simply by adding to Smart and Wright's fourfold classification, or by looking at the genesis of different ARGs) but four qualifying characteristics are proposed by the author in this study, adapting and extending a profile offered by Burns and Taylor (1998). These are defended as being the most appropriate characteristics, below.

The first is to consider the *jurisdiction* of ARGs. This is relevant because Rhodes' (1997) 'differentiated polity' has changed the way in which ARGs represent the public, a specific constituency of the public (community) or indeed no particularly defined constituency at all. The empowerment of individual rural communities in the two Rural White Papers in 1995 and 2000 (DoE, 1995, DETR, 2000) has both changed who makes decisions and on whose behalf they are made. The jurisdiction of rural decisions has become both more regional and more local and through the growth in rural networks, it is often not entirely clear which constituencies come under the influence of rural decisions. Lines of accountability become obscured as a result.

The second characteristic is *democracy*. The growth in ARGs in England is characterised by a democratic deficit, as governance structures move from election to appointment and volunteering (Sullivan 2002). Fewer rural decisions are made by elected members

and more are made by a combination of representative but non-elected members, self-selecting non-representative members and executive staff. The lack of a democratic mandate has come both at the regional level where none of the GOs, RDAs or RAs is elected and the local level, where as Cherrett (1999) asserts, a plethora of self-styled stakeholder groups has grown with an interest in making decisions over a wide range of rural issues, but with no representative authority.

A third characteristic of ARGs that has changed considerably in the past 30 years is their *constitution*. There are no set rules as to how rural stakeholder groups are organised and their structures are collectively diverse. Many individual groups join networks and partnerships where neither the constitution or *modus operandi* are clear (Roger Tym and Partners (2005) and as stakeholding becomes more localised, too, rural decisions tend to be made more through the power of individuals and the strength of personalities, rather than any constitutional norms (McAreevey, 2006).

Finally, although distinct from the factors discussed in the previous section that have caused a growth in ARGs, *funding* arrangements have changed considerably for most ARGs over the past 30 years. For public body ARGs there have been recent significant financial cutbacks in Defra and its rural agencies (Lowe and Ward, 2007) and a revolution in the funding of local authorities through the New Public Management approach and particularly the development of Compulsory Competitive Tendering. Most significantly for ARGs in general, however, has been the growth of what has been termed the bid or contract culture. This has been seen to cause an increased complexity of contracts, impoverished funding levels and mission drift (Alcock *et al*, 2004). Using these four characteristics, a nine-fold taxonomy of ARGs is proposed in figure 1.

Figure 1 near here

This taxonomy has been used to classify ARGs in Gloucestershire. Each was identified through a review of a number of documents (for example, Roger Tym and Partners, 2005, Royal Society of Arts, 2004), directories (for example, RUFUS, 2006) and web searches. The allocation to classes in the taxonomy was undertaken through an assessment of the characteristics of each organisation obtained from their websites or other documentary evidence. At the margins it was impossible to allocate all agents definitively since some descriptions were ambiguous or unclear, or at the extreme, were not articulated at all. In general terms, too, organisations can move from one category to another in a dynamic way and form and disband.

As a result, the list of ARGs in Gloucestershire can never be definitive or, strictly, defined as a population. Despite this, a total of 175 ARGs that have some influence over rural decision-making in the county were identified, of whom 62 (35%) responded to a questionnaire survey about their operation, conducted in 2007 to explore a number of aspects of change that might have occurred since the Smart and Wright study of the late 1970s. This response rate was achieved with an initial questionnaire, a follow up letter and subsequently a follow up telephone call, each two weeks apart. The questionnaire as a whole was concerned to identify a number of issues relating to rural decision-making such as processes and structures, access to knowledge, financial arrangements, monitoring and evaluation and the planning and policy context for decisions. Only those elements concerned with organisational interrelationships are considered here.

The distribution of responses across the taxonomy is set out in figure 2. Clearly, those who responded to this survey were self-selecting and therefore cannot be considered to provide a representative sample of the population of ARGs.

Figure 2 near here

In terms of the growth of ARGs, of the 57 responding to this issue, 38 had been formed since 1990. The decade in which they were formed is indicated in figure 3.

Figure 3 near here

There is a particular increase in formation in the wake of the incoming New Labour Administration of 1997 (figure 4). Here, new community groups are represented but a majority are partnerships and networks, where only two of the responding bodies had been formed prior to this time. These are considered more specifically in this survey, below. Across all of the ARGs that responded to the survey, there is a close bi-modal association between their date of formation and their geographical distribution: the more recently formed groups had a regional or local role rather than a sub-regional or national one.

Figure 4 near here

The reasons for the formation of these ARGs, at whatever date, were varied. Most articulated their principal functions as their reasons for formation. State bodies and state trusts noted their statutory basis as part of the democratic process of delivering public services. None of the state adjunct bodies mentioned legislative or democratic reasons but, rather, came into being either to manage a specific issue or to co-ordinate a 'voice'. All of the voluntary not for profit bodies claimed to have been formed for exactly the same reasons: to pursue a particular issue or represent a group of bodies in doing so, either as an implementation group or a lobbying group.

Community groups and social economy groups had been formed to develop community empowerment on the ground. They were concerned to develop community projects that would in some way empower local people, achieve some form of developmental target and mobilise voluntary effort. Mutual aid groups had similar, but narrower, reasons for

coming into being. Partnerships and networks were principally formed to co-ordinate the activities of specific groups of organisations.

Assessing these reasons for formation against the time line, there is an identifiable pattern that reflects the development of Rhodes' (1997) differentiated polity. Early formers reflect the democratic process of public service provision (with some notable exceptions of longstanding voluntary organisations) subsequently supplemented by non-elected state adjunct bodies concerned with specific subsets of provision. More recent ARG formations were triggered by localised empowerment, and the most recent groups appear to have developed out of a felt need to co-ordinate activity in an increasingly complex context of decision-making.

Specifically in relation to these partnerships and networks developed for the purposes of co-ordination, most ARGs in the survey (66%) agreed fully that there were more of them in existence in 2007 than in 1997. Rather fewer (47%) considered themselves definitely to be one, or a member of one. Some 41% found them to be clearly useful in the work that they did and 34% invariably made the work of the partnerships with which they were involved a priority for their organisation. Rather fewer (21%) felt that they were fully aware of the different partnerships and networks that existed within the region that were of relevance to their work, and only 7% felt that such networks fully and effectively represented the needs of their organisation. Thus there appears to be a loose gradation of view as partnerships and networks have an increasing potential impact on an ARG. Most are aware of a growth in their existence, but few feel that they represent their needs fully.

Some 22 of the 61 responses to the questionnaire as a whole offered commentary on this issue of partnerships and networks. Four of these could be considered to be neutral. For example, a voluntary, not for profit ARG suggested:

"we take a pragmatic view to which partnerships we work with." (ARG E22)

A further two were clearly positive. For example one state ARG noted:

"we are putting more emphasis on partnerships now and on investing in making them work effectively" (ARG I2)

The largest group of responses, nine, could be considered to be positive but with reservations. Two themes were dominant here: that they were generally a good idea but were time-consuming and, secondly, whilst valuable, they were not necessarily representative of the views of all. Typifying the former view, a partnership ARG suggested:

"partnerships are a very useful way of working in rural development but experience has led us to believe that it can often be quite time consuming and sometimes there can be too many bodies/organisations involved." (ARG B1)

A voluntary, not for profit ARG suggested the following in respect of representing their view:

"Partnerships are good but strong lead partners can be indifferent to the needs and aspirations of organisations such as ours which causes a lot of frustration." (ARG E7)

Of the seven negative responses, the issues of time and resource constraints were articulated again, for example, by a voluntary, not for profit ARG:

"On a regional basis there is a massive management overhead in terms of time and cost to participate. There is a need to refine and cull to find those that make a difference" (ARG E25)

Orientation and relevance again formed a second group of comments: a mutual aid ARG:

"It is difficult to find the way through the maze". (ARG A10)

A third group in the negative comments was simply a lack of awareness of the partnerships and networks that exist. A community sector ARG noted:

"As you can see, we are not aware of these networks." (ARG F19)

The survey also explored the jurisdiction of ARGs. Interestingly, whilst some 30 responding bodies felt that they had a mandate to represent community interests beyond just their membership, some 31 did not and yet nearly all of the bodies took part in public domain decision-making of some sort beyond just their membership. Of those that felt that they did have a mandate only half of these (nearly all state bodies, state quangos and trusts and state development agencies) felt that their jurisdiction covered the public at large and this jurisdiction was conferred by statute. The other 15 felt their jurisdiction extended only to a subset of the public or to their membership. Generally, the jurisdiction of these bodies had been conferred by the membership constituency of the group or had been assumed, sometimes as a result of a public meeting. In some cases this jurisdiction had been formalised into a constitution.

The issue of finance also was addressed in the questionnaire. Some 80% of responding ARGs felt that sources of funding for their organisation were becoming increasingly complex and 65% felt that funding was noticeably harder to find than it had been 10 years prior to the survey. More than half also felt that funding, once won, tended to be for shorter periods than it had been 10 years earlier and that it took longer to apply for and negotiate. The five positive comments about finance within ARGs had two themes. The first was the way in which membership fees were able to support the organisation

and the second was the importance of Lottery funding in assisting community, voluntary and social economy groups.

There were rather more, 21, negative comments relating to finance. These had five themes, consistent with the research findings reported above. The complexity of bidding was by far the most common, as articulated by a mutual aid group:

"We have given up trying to get funding from some sources due to the complexities of the bid process" (ARG A4)

But also it was considered that capital funding was easier to obtain than revenue funding, that the conditions of funding often led to mission drift and that funding was too short term. A voluntary not for profit body suggested:

"Funding is relatively short-term making planning difficult" (ARG E35)

Also for finance, securing funding was simply too time consuming as expressed by a partnership:

"Often it costs far more to get public funding in terms of time than is sensible when considering amount attained in the end" (ARG B45)

Overall, whilst some applauded particular effective ARGs, there was a dominant feeling of complexity and uncertainty within rural decision-making born of bureaucratic procedures, constant change and impermanence. Some just expressed a degree of bemusement. A community sector ARG suggested:

"I don't know enough about who decides policy, how and what they are!" (ARG F12)

And a mutual-aid ARG:

"The reality is rather more muddled and depends on the workload and attitude of individuals." (ARG A5)

5. An anatomy of 'clogging up.'

This survey provides evidence that the "extreme complexity" of rural decision-making observed by Smart and Wright (1983) in the late 1970s is even more complex in the late 2000s as a result of policies for regionalism, citizenship and relocalisation, in the context of the increased range of Kooiman's (2003) 'governing efforts'. Further, just as Smart and Wright found this complexity to be a significant inhibitor to effective rural decision-making, there is evidence that current practices can actually 'clog up' rural decision-making processes. The aspiration to empower rural people, or make them responsible, has created structures that effectively disempower them. The remainder of this paper makes use of results of the empirical survey reported here and other sources, to explore the nature of this clogging up. It is proposed by the author here that the clogging up of rural decision-making has six principal elements.

Crowding is simply where there are too many ARGs involved to be able to make effective decisions. One of the characteristics of the bottom 5 ARGs in figure 1 is that to a large degree they are self-generating and can come into existence (and disappear) of their own volition. Whilst several authors have offered commentary on many aspects of crowding (Benson (1975), Burch *et al*, (2003), Sullivan, (2002)), it is also of concern to English Government. The DCLG (2008) has noted the proliferation of regional and sub-regional 'stakeholder' bodies, considering them difficult to identify, lacking in clear leadership and indeterminate in objectives.

Knotting is where the interrelationships between ARGs (and their respective objectives) are, complex, overlapping or confused. These interrelationships take place in what Gunasekara (2006) has termed evocatively, a 'spaghetti and meatballs' structure of decision-making. Thus, as Roger Tym and Partners (2005) have noted for the South West, it is often difficult either to separate out the roles of certain ARGs or to see clearly how they interrelate. At the time of writing, for example, the National Rural Knowledge Exchange in the South West was concerned to identify rural knowledge needs, but so too was the Rural Enterprise Gateway. The Regional Infrastructure for Social Enterprise, too, had overlapping functions with the South West Acre Network.

The National Audit Office (2003) also notes knotting (without using the term) in the context of an ambiguity of priorities at the regional level, particularly amongst large partnerships. Stoker (1998) also observes the phenomenon (whilst not terming it 'knotting') in terms of understanding the differences between representative and non-representative bodies. This complexity has led to a widespread lack of engagement in regional governance even amongst local authorities (Robinson, 2004) and is particularly acute in the voluntary and community sectors (Aston Business School, 2001). In terms of knotting, too, an NCVO (2005) study showed that stakeholders felt there was a confusing array of points of entry into the rural decision-making structure – at the district, county and sub-regional as well as regional levels. These often were not well coordinated, and had much overlap. Finally in respect of knotting, McAreavey (2006) notes that at the level of micro-politics, political and administrative conventions begin to break down and decision-making becomes ineffective because nobody is clear about the protocols of behaviour.

Clouding is where the functions of ARGs are implicit to such a degree that their operation is not transparent. Decision-making becomes more hidden, tacit and indeterminate (Polanyi, 1998). Sullivan (2002) suggests that clouding (without using the term) is an inevitable consequence of the proliferation of actors in the decision-making process.

Thompson (1987), too, notes that such clouding means that it becomes difficult to identify any individuals', part in collective decisions and as a result, decisions can become unaccountable. McAreavey (2006) has reported that this tends to be common at the level of rural micro-politics where, for example, decisions about agenda setting and the constituency of partnerships can be covert as well as overt and often are not documented. The power of individuals, here, tends to dominate over the power of groups, and the potential to create élites to work (often unwittingly) against democratic participation increases (Stevenson 2003). The NCVO (2005) survey, too, has noted that meetings of ARGs tend to be populated by those who are willing to give up their time, rather than those who are the most appropriate for the function required. This can undermine trust, which in turn runs the risk of undermining partnership:

"A lot of success at the regional level is who you know and who your contacts are"
(NCVO, 2005, page 12).

Meandering is where an ARG has no clearly stated purpose at all in its role in the decision-making process. At the extreme in the survey, some ARGs had no identifiable purpose as individual entities and it was therefore not clear where they were positioned in the decision-making process. Meandering becomes more prevalent, however, when the interrelationships of ARGs are considered. The NCVO (2005), for example, found in their survey that it often was not clear whether people on various regional bodies were there in a representative capacity or not, or whether they even perceived themselves as being so. Indeed, Ayers and Pearce, (2004) have suggested that many people are not sure what they are supposed to do on partnership bodies. These uncertainties extend to a lack of clarity as to who is supposed to implement what and where the money for implementation is to be found (McAreavey, 2006).

It was the case in the empirical study too, that partnerships between organisations often commanded a residual priority amongst their membership, because the parent

organisations to whom the members of the partnership belong, always commanded a higher priority. In part this is due to employer loyalty, but also to the fact that, with limited resources, highest priority functions invariably are internal to the organisation funding them. Benson (1975) also noted in many cases in his research, that partnerships were seen to deflect member bodies from their own objectives. In networks, stronger organisations tended to construct the objects of the network for their own ends as others had their objectives displaced. In this context partnerships can be conservative, slow and lacking in direction as they seek to build consensus (Haughton *et al*, 1997).

Subverting is where unelected bodies develop agendas for their own ends or for ends that are not consensual. In a sense this can be an extreme form of 'clouding', where motivations for particular actions become deliberate and covert. This kind of behaviour is consistent with a Bourdieuan (1991), notion of empowerment, which he considers can be constructed as a base of personal power in a local community. This opens opportunities for individuals to control networks to their own ends, potentially limiting the wider benefits to the local population. As a result, not all ARGs are equally effective. Some are inclusive and some are exclusive, some have a tradition of co-operation and others not. They also can have uneven attributes in respect of gender, class, age, ethnicity, income, education and access to education (Arnason, *et al*, 2005). They can develop disruptive and manipulative strategies to secure their own ends in particular decision-making contexts (Benson, 1975). Empowerment also can be used to keep outsiders out of local space. At the extreme, can become 'exclusionary localism' (Castree, 2004).

North (2005) suggests here that decision-making systems tend to fail where institutional matrices do not provide incentives for more effective behaviour. This tends to happen where existing organisations have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo (existing organisational structures and institutions). This often leads to a persistence of the wrong policies, inappropriately targeted spending, a lack of accountability and at the

extreme, corruption. Dominant stakeholders in the policy-making process try and contain 'their' issues within their control and interest. Less powerful stakeholders will try to expand the issues and gain the attention of those outside the group (such as the wider public) (Parsons, 1995). As Thompson *et al* (1993) note, informal networks essentially are beyond institutional control and there is little sanction over people who are members of a partnership in a voluntary capacity as there is a dependency for any activity, on good will.

Impoverishing, finally, is where there is not enough money in the system for people (certain or all) to participate properly or where decision making is dominated by those who can afford to take part rather than those who have a view. Again, the NCVO (2005) notes that there invariably is no payment for attending meetings within the regional infrastructure, travel limits participation, and all other involvement is voluntary. The more time spent at meetings is a direct loss to time spent doing other things for small voluntary organisations. It was noted by voluntary bodies in the NCVO (2005) study that people from government didn't go to meetings in their spare time, but others have to. In his regard, meetings could be more purposeful, less frequent and shorter. Many smaller organisations suggested that the costs of getting involved regionally outweighed the benefits, so they didn't bother.

Cherrett (1998) even suggests that funding impoverishment provides a principal reason for the formation of partnerships in the first place. They form to qualify for funding rather than any new found spirit of co-operation. In this context they might be ephemeral and last only as long as the funding lasts (Westholm, 1999). The Carnegie Trust (2006), too, notes that a number ARGs have abandoned participation in networks and partnerships because they do not have the funds to keep attending them.

6. Conclusions

One overarching characteristic of this anatomy of 'clogging up' is that many of its elements come into being as a result of a lack of knowledge about the overall operation of the decision-making system. An ability to manipulate this system will be strongly influenced by a knowledge of how the system operates. This knowledge in turn, is central to the operation of Foucaultian (1978) notions of power, and the assimilation of an improved knowledge will naturally lead to more effective 'governing efforts' (Dean, 1999). Indeed, Habermas (1984) makes a case that the knowledge and reasoning necessary to address complex social issues is better procured through the deliberation of participatory democracy than through scientific knowledge because it can accommodate different value systems and viewpoints. Pennington (2003) suggests, in contrast to deliberative democracy, that 'responsibilisation' would articulate knowledge through the market place which has the advantage of accommodating tacit as well as articulated knowledge. Either model, however, is likely to purvey knowledge for complex social decisions in a way superior to scientific knowledge.

A limitation to an improved operation of the system of 'governing efforts' analysed in this paper through improved social knowledge, however, is its cost. Whilst the time and money costs of assimilating such knowledge can be a limiting factor of itself as discussed under 'impoverishment' above, it is the transactions costs associated with such knowledge that offer the ultimate limitation to its effectiveness (North, 2005). And with natural limits placed on knowledge as a result of its cost, it is postulated that a greater reliance is placed on trust: trusting others to have the knowledge that is lacking and to use it wisely, substitutes for knowledge itself (Möllering, 2001). Under this postulation, 'clogging' can be triggered by a lack of trust as well as a lack of knowledge.

A second influence over this 'clogging up' is the sheer size of governance. In this context, Foucault (1997) again suggests that the neo-liberal tradition of 'limiting' government through different forms of community participation is a fallacy as

'governmentality' is actually a continuum from political government to many forms of personal self-regulation (Lemke,2001). Whilst neo-liberals seek to 'reduce' the size of the state, what actually happens is the opposite: traditional functions are broadly retained in the central state, albeit in a slimmed down form, but empowered specialised non-state apparatuses also grow up that develop indirect and unaccountable techniques for controlling individuals whilst at the same time not being fully responsible for them. 'State efforts' reduce whilst overall 'governing efforts' (Kooiman, 2003) increase to fill Burch et al's (2003) 'political opportunity space'.

Because of these characteristics of 'clogging up', Smart and Wright's (1983) proposals for resolving the "extreme complexity" of rural decision-making that they observed in the late 1970s would have little impact in the late 2000s. They were prescriptive in calling for a strengthening of parish councils (democratic and locally representative) and for the use of rural community councils as a single conduit for voluntary groups. District councils, they said, should take the lead in rural community development, and agricultural and rural policy should be fully integrated at the national level. Certainly, these proposals have some resonance with the aspirations of the Haskins Review (2003) to rationalise the basis of rural delivery. But the *laissez faire* approach to rural decision-making that has emerged over the past 30 years through many aspects of Kooiman's (2003) 'governing efforts' will ensure that such a prescriptive approach will not come to pass.

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Figure 1 – Characteristics of the agents of rural governance

Democracy*	Jurisdiction*	AGENTS-OF-RURAL-GOVERNANCE*	Constitution*	Funding*
Representative + elected¶	Serving the public¶	STATE-BODIES*	Exec. + elected board¶	State¶
Representative non-elected¶		STATE-QUANGOS and TRUSTS*	Executive and non-elected boards¶	State and private¶
Non-Representative, self-selecting¶	Serving a stakeholding citizenry¶	STATE-DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES*		
		STATE-ADJUNCT-BODIES*		
		VOLUNTARY-NOT-FOR-PROFIT*		
		COMMUNITY-SECTOR*		
Within membership¶	Serving its constituency¶	SOCIAL-ECONOMY-GROUPS*	Membership¶	Internal¶
		PARTNERSHIPS/NETWORKS*		
		MUTUAL-AID-GROUPS*		

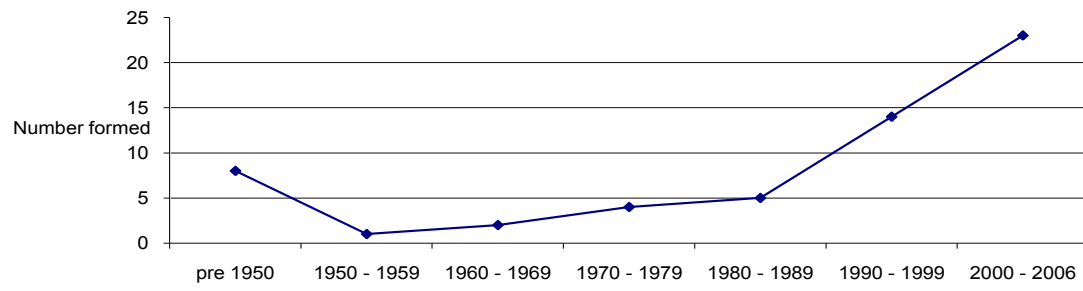
The first four agents in the taxonomy offered below may be considered to be state bodies in some way, and the next three have been termed by Giddens (1998), civic bodies. Partnerships and Mutual Aid groups make up the remainder of the list.

1. *State Bodies* (European government, national government departments, government offices for the regions, local authorities, parish councils). With the exception of parish councils, these tend to be large bureaucracies with statutory functions, largely accountable to publicly elected members.
2. *State Quangos and Trusts* (NHS, housing associations, non-departmental public bodies, Natural England, Commission for Rural Communities), regional assemblies). These invariably are highly regulated. They are distinguished from the state by their decision-making. Staff are responsible to a committee but this committee invariably is not appointed by the state directly.
3. *State Development Agencies* (business links, RDAs, county development organisations). These too are highly regulated and make decisions through non-elected and non-appointed people. They are distinct from state trusts and bodies in that their functions are singularly concerned with economic development.
4. *State Adjunct Bodies* (the Rural Affairs Forums, Regional Observatories, Sustainable Farming and Food Groups, Rural Affairs Forums) differ from state trusts and state development agencies in that they serve a specific stakeholding community rather than the public at large, and their non-executive members tend to be self-selecting rather than representative.
5. *Voluntary, Not for Profit Bodies* (RCCs, charities, support organisations). These are legally constituted but are less regulated than state bodies. They tend to be monitored only for the boundaries of their activity (what they may or may not do) and financial propriety in respect of their donors. Non-charitable non-profit distributing organisations (for example, campaigning bodies) simply have to be registered as such. These may or may not have committees elected by members.
6. *Community Sector* (village hall committees, neighbourhood watch, tenants' associations). Community sector bodies are formally constituted, but unlike the voluntary sector, they do not employ paid staff. They would normally be responsible to a committee elected by its membership. Some organisations might sit between the community and mutual aid sectors: not formally constituted but nevertheless, formally organised.
7. *Social Economy Groups* (community land trusts, community finance organisations, mutual co-operative organisations). These groups are concerned with production and wealth creation, but usually can be distinguished from commercial organisations because of the importance of the 'not for profit' motivation in their operation and a concern for the distribution of wealth.
8. *Partnerships or Networks* (many different types). Partly because of this complex set of agents of governance, a set of networks and partnerships has grown up to allow them to relate one to another. Cherrett (1999) suggests that partnerships and networks have come into being simply to allow the increasingly complex set of agents of governance to relate to one another. He groups such partnerships into six types: economic regeneration; social exclusion and disadvantage; agriculture and land-based activities; recreation and tourism; conservation; sustainable development.
9. *Mutual Aid Groups* (reading clubs, childcare groups, economic exchange groups, car sharing, neighbourhood watch). There are no formal conventions here but there may be informal ones. Beyond this there may be just networks of friends and beyond that, self-help.

Figure 2 – response rates ARGs by type

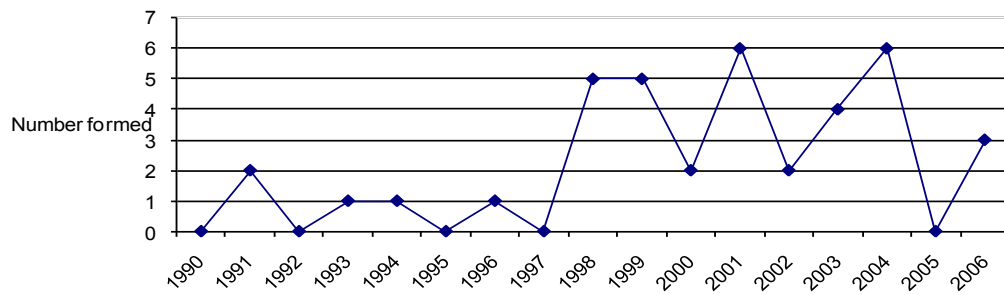
	'population'	sample	% response
State Bodies	13	6	46
State Quangos and Trusts	9	5	56
State Development Agencies	3	0	0
State Adjunct Bodies	21	7	33
Voluntary not for profit	41	16	39
Community Sector	19	7	33
Social Economy Groups	9	5	56
Partnerships/Networks	50	11	22
Mutual Aid Groups	10	4	40
	175	61	35%

Figure 3 – Dates of formation of ARGs in Gloucestershire responding to the survey



Total number, n = 57. Final data relate to 7 years of the new millennium only

Figure 4 – Dates of formation of ARGs responding to the survey, between 1990 and 2006



Total number, n = 38