

## **Poverty, power and politics: considerations for engaging citizens in social marketing programmes**

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Social marketers' interest in participatory methods, understood as working with people to co-create social value propositions (e.g. Domegan & Hastings, 2012; Lefebvre, 2012), has been piqued. Whilst these methods offer thought-provoking new directions for our field, they have a longstanding association (e.g. Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 2000) with the ambition of community developers to overcome "poverty and disadvantage, knitting society together at the grass roots and deepening democracy", (DCLG, 2006, p.13). The approach that appears to have most in common with recent innovations in social marketing practice has been categorised by Hickey & Mohan (2005, p.242) as "populist" and is influenced by Non-Governmental Organisations, the World Bank Participation Learning Group and UN agencies (Rahman, 1995). This method emphasises the role of the 'target audience' (in social marketing parlance) as knowledgeable and capable and repositions agents as facilitators rather than as experts leading change from the top. In the context of a recent social marketing project led by the authors, this paper explores the implications for social marketers of a critique of participatory methods that is emerging in the development literature.

Ostensibly, participatory methods offer a promising way to empower "surplus" (Hickey & Mohan, 2005, p.239) or "at-risk" populations (Pechmann, et al., 2011, p.23). However, this premise is not uncontested; indeed criticism that participation has failed to achieve meaningful change has been mounting over the last decade (e.g. Cooke & Kothari, 2001). It has been suggested that mainstream participatory methods may be hampered by inattention to issues of power and politics (Hickey & Mohan, 2005) exacerbated by the problem that such methods may be underpinned by an unsophisticated understanding of the mechanism and constitution of power (e.g. Mosse, 1994; Kothari, 2001). These are important issues because of the prominence given to *empowerment* when advocating participation. Also criticised are an overemphasis on local concerns to the detriment of pervasive problems of inequality (Mohan & Stokke, 2000) and a conceptualisation of the relative functions of structure and agency that is inadequate (Cleverly, 1999). Further, it has been argued that mainstream participatory approaches are too voluntaristic in regarding any form

of participation as superior to non-participatory practices (Chambers, 1997) without considering the risk that those with disempowering agendas may adopt (or co-opt) initiatives that serve their purposes (Rahman, 1995). We contend that these considerations should be of grave concern to social marketers dipping their toes into the turbulent waters of participatory methodologies; the issue of co-option in particular adds an interesting dimension to the ongoing debate about the role of commercial organisations in social change initiatives. Would it be appropriate to give Diageo a role in empowering people to design ways to reduce drinking for instance?

The study that we draw upon in this paper sought to understand why adults in two communities in the UK engaged in risky drinking practices and to develop interventions to help them cut down. Our working assumption was that information and education was likely to be ineffective. Thus, we adopted methods from Participatory Action Research (Murray & Ozanne, 1991): prioritising learning with and for local people who were encouraged to take part in the inquiry at all stages (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008). We found that many people felt trapped by their responsibilities, their social and financial situation and in many cases physically trapped by their inability to move due to restrictive regulations governing allocation of social housing. Many people felt stuck in a rut, suffering mental health or mood problems or simply bored and de-motivated. Consequently, they felt physically, emotionally and socially isolated. When we presented our findings to local people they wanted us to add a word: powerless. These feelings explain why many people find themselves using alcohol to cope and are unwilling or believe themselves unable to cut down; painting a picture of disempowered, disenfranchised and disengaged citizens typical of a UK 'deprived community' (e.g. see Hanley, 2007).

Given the relatively short-term nature of many social marketing projects, of particular concern was Hickey & Mohan's (2005) caution against methodological individualism (Frances, 2001) that can arise from treating participation as a technical method of project work. Participatory methods should be, they counsel, a political methodology of empowerment (Carmen, 1996; Rahman, 1995) and as such must include an appreciation of the issues that impede participation for marginalised groups. In the case of our study, participation was hampered by a number of factors: cynicism or 'participation fatigue' created in part by the number of short-term projects that had been set up and then disappeared once funding had been withdrawn, exacerbated by the feeling that outsiders with their "5-a-day" messages didn't understand what it was like to live in the community. Distrust of authority in general

and an almost pathological fear of social services' involvement in their children's lives was a further barrier to participation. Underlying this, many local people were simply indifferent to our project and to us. Consequently, we had to work very hard to engage with a range of local people and even then should acknowledge that we would have needed to have spent several years working in the community before we could claim to have empowered more than a few people in a minor way.

An awareness of local power structures and politics was vital when considering issues like introductions to people in the community, use of facilities and other support. To achieve this, we worked alongside a number of strong personalities representing 'stakeholders' such as service providers, charities and local government. In many cases, they were open about their agendas but in others we found ourselves with privileged information that we knew was affecting decision-making. In one instance, a powerful stakeholder took a personal dislike to a representative of another project and attempted to use her considerable influence in favour of our work rather than theirs. In a wider analysis than is possible in this paper, these observations would be augmented with a consideration of pervasive issues of inequality and deprivation, not least the matter of public health funding and commissioning, which is becoming increasingly politicised in the UK. It is vital to consider the influence of these and other factors upon actors commissioning and participating in such initiatives.

In conclusion, we call for a great deal more research into and debate about the role for participatory methods for citizen engagement in social marketing initiatives. Based on our own experiences in the field, we can also make some practical suggestions for social marketers interested in designing participatory programmes: firstly, to be sensitive to the reasons why people may not wish to participate, acknowledging that it can take considerable time to build relationships and trust to overcome our status as 'outsiders' (Sixsmith et al., 2003). Secondly, to be receptive to power relations and politics, which can be complex and difficult to uncover, allied to a self-reflexivity to guard against myopic judgements derived from a "middle-class political and social agenda" (Lindridge, 2012, p. 75). Finally, social marketers should empower themselves to negotiate with commissioners for adequate time, as well as seek a commitment from commissioners that they will make long-term plans for the future of initiatives. To support this, evaluation should be multi-faceted and designed to reflect this long-term perspective upon change.

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