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The institutionalisation of collective actor capacity

Patsy Healey*

Over the past twenty years, there has been an explosion of case studies of governance processes examining policy formation, policy change and policy 'implementation'. Initially, the focus of the stories of these cases was on themes such as the inadequacy of the formalised rational planning model to account for the processes described, or the power of particular groups to define what had been assumed to be the 'public interest' which government agencies should pursue. More recently, drawing on policy discourse analysis, there has been a stronger emphasis on how policy change is brought about. A primary inspiration for sociological institutionalists has been the work of Maarten Hajer (1995) who described the processes of "discourse structuration" and its subsequent "institutionalisation". Following these ways of analysing governance processes, urban 'governance transformation' could be identified where a new discursive frame appears and diffuses to a range of arenas with sufficient effect to shift significantly the way resources are allocated and regulatory tools formulated and used. In a recent study on the power of ideas and practices generated in a partnership to diffuse more widely into established urban governance practices, colleagues and I found significant barriers to such diffusion (Healey *et al.* 2003). Our idea is that transformative initiatives which succeed in 'institutionalisation' need to have the capacity to 'travel' not just from one arena to another, but from one level of consciousness to

another. By this, I mean a translation from the level of conscious actor invention and mobilisation to that of routinisation as accepted practices, and beyond that to broadly accepted cultural norms and values.

To analyse this, we turned to a concept of "levels of power", first articulated by Lukes in 1974, and re-worked later by Giddens (1984) and Dyrberg (1997). At the level of specific episodes of experience, those actively involved may develop what they believe are new and relevant conceptions of issues, objectives and appropriate processes which guide their own practices. But it is hard to get these new conceptions and their implications to 'travel' to other arenas just through individual learning experiences. This is not just because there are other actors in other arenas seeking to resist such initiatives or to promote their own learning experiences. New concepts have to challenge and shift an array of already routinised governance processes, with their complex mixture of conscious and taken-for-granted modes of practice. New concepts have to 'jump' boundaries and 'break through' resistances, involving implicit and explicit struggles. For initiatives seeking to create a new concept and arena for territorially-focused collective action, this may involve a complexity of relations between different departments of local government, between administrators/officials and politicians, between politicians officials and citizens, between the state and all kinds of power elites and lobby groups, each with their own relation to allocative power, regulatory power and their own discursive frames. Sustaining and legitimising both governance processes

and specific episodes of governance are cultural assumptions about appropriate agendas and practices of governance held by different social groups in society generally. It is through these assumptions, as recognised by actors themselves and the 'media chorus' of critical commentary on their performance, and as evaluated in the formal procedures for challenging governance actions, that those involved in governance are held to account and their legitimacy judged. Shifts at this cultural level, promoted by longterm shifts in economic, socio-cultural and political relations, influence both those involved in particular episodes of governance and those involved in routine governance practices. These 'prepare the ground' for new ideas and discursive frames. These levels are not separate realities but mutually constitute moments of governance activity and the everyday life experience of 'doing government work'. The reasons for an analytical separation is that the levels move according to different temporalities and respond to different driving forces. The pressure for transformation may come from any of the levels. Episodes of innovation may create pressures to change governance processes more generally, but there may also be mobilisation efforts to initiate such changes elsewhere in governance systems. Shifts in cultural assumptions may put pressure for change on governance processes but provide resources for episodes of innovation. This conception of different experiential levels of governance firstly emphasises the complexity, the multiplicity of interacting and often counteracting movements promoting and

resisting change, the multiple timescales and the likely instability of urban governance transformation processes. Secondly, it stresses that significant transformation would have to affect the level of governance process at the least. To achieve this, initiatives would have to move from the level of an episode to the level of processes, and in some way find resonances with cultural assumptions to have any capacity to be seen as legitimate and to endure, that is, to 'institutionalise'.

Governance transformations: an analytical lens

Linking this conception of levels of governance with a Giddensian approach on relation between structure and agency proposes that episodes of governance are shaped by rules, resources and framing ideas, but they may also be creative of them, implicitly by interpretive work or explicitly by direct challenge. Rules, resources and framing ideas may be vigorously sustained by mobilising work at the level of governance processes. But these processes may also be open to pressures from broader cultural shifts and from the learning and mobilising taking place in specific episodes. At the level of cultural assumptions, the authority of rules, the justice of resource allocations and the validity of framing discourses is under challenge and reformulation, re-moulding the principles of legitimacy and accountability through which governance processes and episodes are judged. In this complex institutional terrain, building a new territorial arena of governance or a new mode of politics is likely to involve very challenging efforts in mobilisation, in discourse

formation and diffusion, and in aligning old practices with new discourses.

More generally, this work on institutional capacity-building emphasises that urban governance transformation which leads to the institutionalisation of a new territorial collective actor with significant authoritative and generative power needs to mobilise and build knowledge resources and relational resources (social networks) which not only help to consolidate power and legitimacy around the new arena but have the capacity to carry the new ideas, understandings and recognitions of opportunity and struggle through to a wide range of other arenas in the urban governance landscape where practices shape how resources flow and regulatory rules are exercised.

To illustrate this approach, the following example briefly describes an initiative arising from outside the range of formal government which has slowly been drawn into a more formalised relationship.

'From outside in, from inside out': the Ouseburn Trust case

Within the UK, the state in the form of national and local government bodies, is a very strong presence. This has meant that governance initiatives outside the state have had difficulties growing and surviving without finding a way to link to formal government in some way. The Ouseburn Valley is an area of the city between the city centre, poor neighbourhoods to the east, and an area of intensive riverside redevelopment initiated in the late 1980s. It is a typical 'in-between' part of the city, with old industrial buildings being used for various workshops, some ecological projects, and pubs which attracted a

distinctive clientele, all clustered down the sides of a steep valley, making it a curious and attractive physical locale.

The initiative which turned this 'in-between' place into an active 'place-for-itself' was sparked off by mobilisation 'against the state'. A group of local people, including someone from the local church, organised first to demand a voice in the development of the riverside area, so that the Ouseburn Valley area would not be cut off from the main riverside. Success in this mobilisation gained them the status to become active participants in the ongoing consultation process which developed around the riverside regeneration projects. This focus soon widened out to include people concerned with industrial heritage and environmental issues, neither of which were well-articulated policy issues in the City Council, where the focus had long been on 'housing' and 'jobs'. By 1996, these various networks around the Ouseburn area had become consolidated into a formalised Trust. They then widened out further to involve other community, business and local groups and the City Council, forming a Partnership which obtained modest funding from central government for development activities. This funding finished in 2002, and the Trust now survives with a more permanent link to the City Council, employing four City Council officers in the Ouseburn Resource Centre in the area, dealing with several development projects. The trajectory of this initiative started off through an activist campaign around neglected issues, developed a wider agenda in order to participate in government opportunities for consultation and funding, became more formalised,

and then was absorbed more closely into the City Council organisation, where its future has to jostle with many other commitments and organisational arenas, and will depend on both the commitment of a few activists and how well the initiative 'fits' the prevailing interests of local and national politicians and officials. To safeguard as much autonomy as possible, the Trust has set out to acquire some land and buildings. It has also built links to a range of national agencies. It has been a local pioneer for a fine-grained, ecologically-sensitive and consultative approach to project development, which is in line with much national thinking but challenges Council traditions. It thus provides an exemplar of a new way of doing things, but has had little wider impact on Council discourses and practices, except perhaps as a demonstration project of 'downscaling' governance activity and what a new mode of local, socially-driven entrepreneurial development might look like. This has been the fate of many other area-focused and project-oriented partnership and empowerment initiatives in the Newcastle area over the past twenty years, many initiated by central and local government themselves.

Governance on the move

The described example of governance activity, as others we have observed in and around Newcastle, seem to suggest the continuing power of the political and organisational practices of a local council to resist change and to undermine the innovative potential of experiments in new government forms. Yet the content of these pressures and the initiatives, conflicts and struggles they give rise to is

not the same as it was in the 1970s or even the neo-liberal 1980s. The context of power dynamics, funding, demands and expectations is different. The terrain of invention and struggle is different.

Our interpretation is that the level of governance processes in Newcastle is 'in movement', particularly since a change of leadership in the mid-1990s (Coaffee, Healey 2003).

What is unclear is the trajectory of this movement, and whether it will ever come to 'rest' in any kind of stable set of networks and coalitions, discourses and practices. Certainly, the council has been experimenting with its organisation in all kinds of ways, which at least provides an experience on which to draw if and when the various strands of initiative come together into a 'new way' of doing governance in the city. But inevitably, turning such innovations into 'mainstream' changes will and should involve struggle, as it would distribute power (over resources flows, regulatory practices and policy ideas) in new ways. What kind of trajectory will emerge remains very unclear, and still strongly dependent on a central-local government power dynamic. In this dynamic, some business interests and residents in some neighbourhoods may gain, but a new inclusive 'politics of space' which could provide a voice for people across the city in relation to the different needs, lifestyles and their different locales of living seems a long way off. The analytical tools summarised in this paper are put forward to help both in assessing these evolutions of 'governance on the move' and as aids to those actively involved in struggles for transformation.

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