Enabling and Empowering Older People as Independent and Active Citizens: The Rhetoric and the Reality

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In the United Kingdom (UK) there is evidence that shows how health and social care policy has been shifting more from a 'needs-determined' to a 'people-centred' approach in developing services for people aged over fifty. In 2006, the Department of Health (DH) sponsored the Partnerships for Older People Projects that focused on providing integrated person centred service responses for older people. However, the projects tended to emphasise the need to 'prevent or delay the need for higher intensity or institutionalised care' rather than the need to fully address broader well-being agendas (Windle et al 2007).

In this paper the research problem addressed concerns the extent to which central government policy objectives have been achieved (or not) through local authorities and the voluntary sector working together to identify and tackle issues that limit older people’s ability to get the most out of life. These objectives include rooting out age discrimination, ensuring that older people can get actively engaged in influencing decisions that affect their lives like planning and public transport, have access to opportunities for learning, leisure and volunteering activity and are more able to enjoy good health in later life (Audit Commission 2008). Progress to date suggests there is an ongoing need to 'tackle stereotypes and myths that prevent older people being fully engaged in the community' (Audit Commission 2008, p.8). In such circumstances, a research question arose concerning: the extent to which there needs to be more focus on the study of societies as well as individuals to provide the in-depth knowledge and insights required to find solutions to problems impacting on the welfare of older people. These problems include how to make later life a time of opportunity by making it easier to be active and have fun, identifying the positive links between social and civic participation and the benefits for people aged fifty and over in society.

Theory on partnership and collaborative working (Huxham and Vangen 2005) is used to highlight the tension between instrumental partnership and collaborative working to get practical things done and ideological collaboration that is about challenging a dominant culture, values and beliefs as well as established or accepted ways of working. DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) theory on organizational isomorphism shows the ways that voluntary sector partner organizations can face coercive pressure through government expectations, legislation and funding practice that cause them to operate in certain ways to meet central government policy objectives at the expense of genuinely empowering older people and meeting their real priorities. These partner organizations can also face mimetic pressure that causes them to become more like each other as they compete to obtain central government legitimacy and funds. Then Lukes (1974) three dimensional view of power is used to elaborate on who it is that actually has control over important agenda setting processes and how non-decision making can occur in situations where some issues are kept out of the political arena that mean some ideas on service provision and delivery do not enter into people’s imaginations in the first place.

The research findings emerged following work carried out by the Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV) at the University of Birmingham on behalf of the LinkAge Plus National Evaluation Team, the Local Government Centre, Warwick University Business School and the Department for Work and Pensions. The research focused on the problem of ageing populations and role of the local authority and voluntary organizations in enabling and empowering older people as active citizens. The LinkAge Plus programme is designed to provide a comprehensive approach for accessible joined-up services for older people and put older people at the centre of policy making and service delivery. Through LinkAge Plus, central and local government are combining their efforts with voluntary and community sector
organisations to design, develop and deliver services that meet the needs of older people today. During 2008 and 2009 eight partnership pilots, working across a range of urban and rural areas have been developing locally relevant services.

Some of the findings from the research suggest that with regard to society and older people the emphasis should be on changing the language that is often used to describe them as a problem and that outcomes depend on local arrangements between partner organisations. However, action is also required to deal with an imbalance in policymaking that can still promote individualistic rather than collective approaches to dealing with age related issues and the involvement of voluntary sector organizations in the provision of services for older people. Meanwhile, local authorities have an important leadership role in the delivery of targeted services and interventions to help older people in partnership with relevant voluntary and community sector organizations. Scope exists for more coordinated working between private, public, voluntary and community sector organizations to plan and deliver a range of services for older people. There should also be an emphasis on empowering older people so that they can make informed decisions concerning their finances, health, work and home circumstances.

References


