Why do Tenants and Residents Associations Collaborate With Their Local Authority?

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This paper will report on my recent research findings that illustrate some important issues around why the management of participation and collaboration is both demanding and difficult in a complex local political and social context. It focuses on insights gained from a case study of collaboration involving 80 tenants and residents associations (representing neighbourhoods of between 100 and 3,500 households across a city of 513,000 inhabitants), the local authority and its housing and tenants’ participation staff and elected representatives. Different people’s experiences and perspectives on collaboration were obtained using semi-structured interviews, the observation of activities at various meetings and the collection of relevant papers, reports and minutes.

The paper elaborates on a gap in knowledge about how collaborative relations and the meaning of citizenship have changed as a result of new legislation and altered local government structures. It tries to establish why tenants and residents associations collaborate with their local authority and investigates how the different institutional structures and practices of government and its agencies impact on collaboration. At the same time it shows how those structures and practices are the medium and outcome of the actions of individuals. Tenants and residents activists, local authority staff and elected representatives use different strategies to gain power and influence in collaboration acting as advocates, lobbying others, forming alliances, allegiances and coalitions and working with brokers, intermediaries and individuals who are sympathetic to their cause.

The findings show that collaborative relations between tenants and residents associations and their local authority are in a state of dynamic flux where values, beliefs and ideas about participation and citizenship are continually debated and contested. There are issues raised about the distribution of resources and power amongst collaborating organizations, the management of uncertainty and conflict in collaboration and whose values and views matter or are dominant. I argue that it is necessary to integrate different theories in order to improve our understanding of collaboration and what it means for different participants. I refer, in particular, to the work of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and ‘mimetic isomorphism’ where an organization imitates another successful organization in an attempt to reduce uncertainty in its environment. Giddens (1979) and his ‘structuration theory’ where he argues that individuals are purposive actors affected by and affecting structures. Huxham (1996) and her notion of ‘task oriented’ instrumental collaboration’ to get things done’ versus values and institution changing ideological collaboration. And, finally, Zeitz (1980) and his work on the dialectical relationship that exists between institutional structures and the actions of individuals.

The paper will be of interest and relevance to anyone who is trying to grapple with the complexity of collaboration, issues to do with resources, power and legitimacy in collaboration and what participation and citizenship means for the different organizations and individuals who are involved in collaboration at the neighbourhood level.

References


