**Evaluating the role of agency in community regeneration practice in Wales**

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Agency, community development, Wales

**Introduction**

The concept of community development is multi-faceted and can be interpreted through different lenses. For instance, a political economy model of community development may focus on wealth accumulation (Barseghyan and Coate, 2021) A comparatively early interpretation refers to community development as a process which focuses on developing the prerequisites for community based ‘economic and social progress’ (United Nations, 1955 (cited by Gilchrist, 2004)). Each place has its own history, legacy and institutions that contributes to the evolution of its development and is a lens which politics, sustainability and culture are viewed (Pike et al, 2006).

The primary purpose of this research project is to analyse the role of agency in community development in Wales. This analysis is expected to produce insights into the policy requirements to support community development organisations in their community regeneration work. The research project explores community development stakeholder views of agency. The creation of an effective interpretation of stakeholder views will contribute to greater stakeholder involvement in policy making designed to increase levels of agency amongst community stakeholders.

**Background**

The context for this research project is community development/regeneration activity in Wales. Welsh area-based initiative (ABI)/regeneration policy has its roots in the land reclamation schemes of the 1960s and 1970s (Welsh Government, 2016). However, land reclamation and property-based regeneration schemes are comparatively expensive. Adamson et al (2012) describe regeneration programmes in Wales as being expensive and charged with achieving an ‘uphill task’. Further, their economic and social knock-on effects may be limited (Gripaios, 2002). Welsh policy developed into property-based regeneration and subsequently in the late 1980s into education and training. Welsh ABI policy further evolved with the 2001 launch of the Communities First programme.

The concept of agency can be defined as ‘the power to originate action’ Bandura (2001) and the ‘capacity of people to order their world’ (Bhattacharyya, 2004). Power affects human agency in the efficacy of regional actors’ capability to influence regional development policy and practice (Nilsen et al, 2023). Similarly, Sen (2005) supports the need for people to have the capability to lead the lives they wish to lead, having a form of power over their own destiny. Aligned to the notion of community capability is community competence (Sites et al, 2007). To help build capacity, Hustedde and Ganowicz (2002) encourage community development practitioners to work with people to ‘create their own dreams, to learn new skills and knowledge’.

**Research approach**

The research has been constructed via a mixed method approach. Namely, semi-structured interviews have been undertaken and an online survey will be carried out. The interviews have been held with individuals performing leadership, management, operational delivery and volunteer roles at community development organisations. Other interviewees include community development organisation stakeholders such as service recipients, project funders, local and national government officers, and partner organisations. Data will also be collected via a survey instrument designed around the different forms of agency, social capital and social innovation identified within the literature. Multiple items included in the survey are associated with each of the different aspects of agency, social capital and social innovation.

**Findings/conclusions**

The outcomes of the research project to date are multi-faceted. For instance, outcomes include an interpretation of the role agency in community regeneration and its relationship with both social capital and social innovation. Finally, an outcome of the research is a series of policy implications for fostering agency amongst community development stakeholders.

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