STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION GROUPS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABILITY

Dr Bronia C Hall

University of Lincoln

Faculty of Business and Law
University of Lincoln
Brayford Pool
Lincoln
LN6 7TS
United Kingdom

Email: bhall@lincoln.ac.uk

This paper draws heavily on fieldwork undertaken for a recently completed PhD. The material has been selected and edited but at the heart of the discussion are concerns relating to power and powerlessness in participative forms of stakeholder groups.

CONTEXT OF STUDY

Rights of access to the countryside for leisure have been the subject of ongoing disputes in England throughout the twentieth century. Demands for the 'right to roam' were acknowledged through the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW 2000) which provided for open access to heath, moor, mountain and registered common land. However legislating for public access to privately owned land inevitably affected the rights of landowners and also created concerns regarding their responsibilities to the public. During House of Commons debates relating to CROW 2000 the rights of land owners and managers were repeatedly acknowledged by the Minister (Hansard, cols 21, 22, 25 & 27, 1999). The resulting legislation incorporated a broad range of issues that divided into the main areas of:

- Part I Access to open country – including registered common land.
- Part II Rights of way – aimed at modernising the law.
- Part III Sites of Special Scientific Interest – aimed at providing greater protection and strengthening wildlife protection.
- Part IV Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Conservation Boards – set up for better management.
- Part V Local Access Forums - advisory bodies established by local highway authorities or, where relevant, national park authorities.

During the announcement by the Minister, the Local Access Forums were identified as a means of minimising the compulsory aspect of the law:

I have made it absolutely clear that we want minimum compulsion to be used. I favour the local access forums, which will be fully representative of all

interests. The countryside agencies will issue guidelines. The policy is one not of compulsion but of maximising consensus. (Hansard, col 25, 1999)

Public participation is now largely viewed as a necessary component in policy-making and planning for tourism as it encourages 'democratic empowerment' and also improves the resulting 'tourism product' (Bramwell & Lane, 2000:2). Local Access Forums are viewed as stakeholder groups that are a manifestation of the concept of inclusivity within sustainability. However research focusing on stakeholder groups has indicated that power inequalities occur (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Jamal & Getz, 1999). Bickerstaff and Walker have stated that "power relations, outcomes and democratic practice" (2005:2126) must be better understood so that the issues in participation may become comprehensible. Furthermore authors have specifically called for research that examines the "power-based aspect of partnerships and collaborations" (Jamal & Getz, 1999:305).

METHODOLOGY

This research focused upon the acquisition of deeper understanding of the effects of power upon and within the stakeholder participatory process, from the perspective of participants. In order to obtain this understanding the method of obtaining data applied an inductive approach that derived from ethnographic methods, although without complete immersion into the environment being studied. However ethnography focuses on the perceptions of participants from their own viewpoints and that aspect is relevant to this research. Stake has stated that "naturalistic, ethnographic, phenomenological case workers seek to see what is ordinary in happenings, in settings, in expressions of value" (2000:445). A single case study would have provided data that was not capable of being generalisable, whereas the study of several cases offered findings that may be supportive of expectations in similar settings. Consequently the approach most appropriate to the aims of this study was to combine ethnographic methods with the study of multiple cases in order to provide both depth and breadth to the data gathering. By using multiple cases it was not possible to be a "complete participant" (Nason & Golding, 1998:236), but the

notion of focusing upon "the manner in which people interact and collaborate" (Nason & Golding, 1998:241) guided the process of accumulating data.

Observation has been considered to consist of "processes which form part of other 'methods' too" (Nason & Golding, 1998:235) rather than a separate method to be used discretely. This approach fits with the requirements of studies that examine changes occurring over a longitudinal time frame. Meetings of Local Access Forums created through CROW 2000 are open to the public so attending selected open meetings would offer a perspective on the process without specifically affecting the relationships between the observer and observed. It was anticipated that this would lead to conversations that would enable identification of key actors who would later be asked to take part in semi structured interviews.

A longitudinal study of four Local Access Forums (LAFs) was carried out beginning in July 2004 and continuing until July 2006. The LAFs were situated across England in areas that depended upon rural tourism economically to different levels. Case studies A and B each had 19 members of the LAFs, Case study C had 22 members and Case study D had 18 members. All meetings were attended by at least one officer (but usually two) from the authority being advised. The cases were researched simultaneously in the time frame, permitting observation of their various responses to similar issues as they arose. Twenty meetings of these LAFs were observed over the period and semi-structured interviews were carried out with members of the forums, chairpersons, access officers and members of the public in attendance in addition to government officers and representatives of organizations affected by the legislation. Twenty eight in-depth interviews were arranged with members of forums and five with access officers. Interview topics were loosely derived from understanding the expectations of the process by participants and the extent to which they were satisfied or disappointed. Observation notes of meetings included records of which members did not actively participate in the discussions, as well as those who did (For fuller details of this study see Hall, 2009).

In this research there was a decision not to fragment discourse or conversation but instead to focus on the themes and concerns, drawing on a 'storytelling' or 'narrative' view of data. It is acknowledged that other researchers may choose to focus on the way that stories are presented but this research applied an approach that "does not assume objectivity, but, instead, privileges positionality and subjectivity." (Riessman, 2000). It follows that the most appropriate way of discovering and understanding what was important to participants was to allow them opportunities in which to express themselves and to represent that as faithfully as possible. Lawrence, Hardy and Phillips (2002) studied interorganizational collaboration through qualitative research into a non-governmental organization that was engaged in a number of collaborative exercises. Data analysis was an iterative process that required constant comparison between summaries, theory and data until the patterns emerged clearly. This research followed a similar style of analysis. Reading the growing body of data concurrently with the literature surrounding existing research indicated directions that might be relevant at different stages.

FRAMEWORK OF DEPOTENTIA

Specifically authors have noted that the subject of power has not received sufficient attention in the areas of collaboration and stakeholder participation, and have stated that "the subject of power requires a framework sensitive to … multidimensionality" (Everett & Jamal, 2004:58). Most frequently the theoretical frameworks associated with power and collaboration are those focusing upon resource-dependency or political-economy. Hardy and Phillips considered three aspects of power in their study of power in interorganizational domains (1998). These are "formal authority, the control of critical resources and discursive legitimacy" (Hardy & Phillips, 1998:219). All of these aspects may be visible and formally bestowed and consequently observable.

There are difficulties attached to conceptualising a single view of 'what power is' as there is no agreement on what considerations should be included or excluded in arriving at a single view (Lukes, 1986:4). Aspects of power classified by Dahl include "influence,

authority, persuasion, dissuasion, inducement, coercion, compulsion, force ..." (Dahl, 1986:40). Goldman (1986:157) remarked that despite the large number of efforts to analyse power, it remains difficult to understand and difficult to investigate empirically. However Scheyvens has developed an analytical framework that focuses on notions of empowerment and disempowerment in relation to communities and ecotourism (1999). This indicates that certain features of empowerment and disempowerment within stakeholder groups are discernible. Though in an environment where stakeholders are not from traditionally disempowered backgrounds (such as landowners affected by CROW 2000), the importance of empowerment was not suggested until early reading of the data indicated that members were experiencing 'powerlessness'. This perception was reinforced in the government commissioned study carried out by Short et al (2005) across all LAFs:

Feeling of Powerlessness
> 7.32   Partly related to the strategic vs. site-specific role is a matter, raised by many LAFs, concerning a feeling of powerlessness. This feeling arose as a result of:
>
> •   uncertainty over the role they have to play;
> •   perceived lack of opportunities, so far, to affect access management;
> •   perceived lack of resources (staff resources to run the LAF and financial resources to implement work – especially actions proposed within the emerging RoWIP);
> •   a preponderance of agenda items that are too remote from the local situation (for example, the third most frequent agenda item across the country was discussion of government consultation papers, yet many felt that they had little influence over such matters. (Short et al, 2005:50)

Several members from Case study A made comments that referred to the issues raised in the report and provided data that explicitly referred to the LAF's perceived lack of purpose:

> We have not yet established the point of the LAF so we haven't even reached consensus on that yet. But we do have consensus that we do not know our purpose yet.

> I joined because I wanted to make a difference but a huge amount of damage is being done to volunteers' goodwill.

It does not have a budget. Face facts. It is a discussion group that meets quarterly and <u>might</u> help. Thereby it makes government feel good because they consulted user groups. User interests feel good because they had a part to play – so everyone's happy!

The expressed frustration within the membership of Case study A led to considerations of 'invisible' power, as there were no overt indications that members were being pressured. The role of the Local Access Forum and its lack of purpose were major matters of deliberation at two meetings early in the study and an action plan was constructed to address this. However during the period of data collection the members were apparently helpless in correcting their ineffectiveness despite their efforts towards finding a role that they could fill.   A training day was held in order to assist with the development of relationships between members, although not all members attended.   The indications were that the stakeholders were dissatisfied with the process and were unable to rectify the situation, even though they were apparently free to do so. There was no single aspect of power that could be examined for its effect on the LAF and so it was necessary to look at the widest possible sources of power upon this forum if the sources of the perceived powerlessness were to be identified.

Since visible sources of power had not provided insight into the helplessness experienced by Case study A, less visible sources of power were appropriate considerations. Bachrach and Baratz introduced concepts such as non decision-making (1962:396) and restricting decision-making to "relatively 'safe' issues" (1962:394) - which directly relates to "the ability to 'set the agenda'" (Heyward, 2007:48).   Hall describes non decisions as a way of suppressing demands for change (2003:105) in the context of community decision-making. An example that he offers is that electors may be presented with a limited number of options in relation to development proposals, but that they are unable to broaden available alternatives or reject the proposals completely (Hall, 2003:105).   However there is an inherent difficulty in studying the concept of issues "organized into politics while others are organized out" (Schattschneider cited in

Bachrach & Baratz, 1962:396) as it involves speculation regarding intent, rather than measurable data.

Lukes's three-dimensional view of power focuses on the ability to persuade the less powerful to conspire in their own domination by adopting the interests of the powerful as their own (Heyward, 2007). This view has been discussed in detail by a number of authors and has been found to concentrate on the exercise of power that is specifically 'power over' others (Morriss, 2006). Lukes has considered the use of the Latin words 'Potentia' and 'Potestas' by Spinoza when distinguishing between 'power to' and 'power over' as separate variations of the concept of power (Lukes, 2005:73). Since 'Potentia' is translated as having the power "'to exist and act'" (Lukes, 2005:73) it appears that 'power to' has greater relevance to the concept of empowerment applicable to groups involving communities and stakeholders than 'power over'. Self determination is implicit in having the power "'to exist and act'" (Lukes, 2005:73) and the concept of empowerment is directly connected to self determination (Scheyvens, 1999). Morriss supports the application of 'power to' as a route to evaluating society and calls for the distinction to be made between the concepts of 'power to' and 'power over' when undertaking study (2006).

Lukes's three–dimensional view of power is summarised as a:

Critique of behavioural focus

Focus on

    a) decision-making and control over political agenda (not necessarily through decisions)

    b) issues and potential issues

    c) observable (overt or covert), and latent conflict

    d) subjective and real interests. (Lukes, 2005:29)

As with the concepts discussed by Bachrach and Baratz the difficulty of researching this view of power is that it also requires study of "what does not happen" (Hall, 2003:106). However it is possible to reverse the lens on the subject and study non empowerment (or

depotentia) as 'what does happen'. This offers commonality between aspects of 'non' power that is not available to the study of power.

The manifestations of power that are present in LAFs as stakeholder groups include authority, resources, control of the selection process, discursive legitimacy, control of the agenda (or organizing out problems), personality, non decisions (or non implementation) and the requirement for consensus. Although some of these manifestations may derive from formal sources, such as national government, others are informal and less visible as in non decision-making. Deferral of decisions or non implementation may be effective routes to undoing the official work of a LAF but are unlikely to be formally recorded. This illustrates the difficulty attached to connecting the 'causal' chain in such areas of power where they are not always visible. However the analysis of data through the methods indicated led to the development of a framework that permitted the inclusion of a number of manifestations of power.

Sources of Depotentia – Externally imposed

External impositions upon the process took place separately at the levels of national government and local authority (or national park authority). National government laid down the basic structure of LAFs that identified which interests must be represented. In addition national government also required consensual decision-making but only provided vague guidance regarding the role of LAFs. Also at national government level, circulars were regularly distributed to LAFs requiring consideration, discussion and response. This affected the structure of agendas and imposed time restraints on items placed upon the agenda by the LAF. External influences upon agenda-setting were commented upon by one participant who remarked:

> So much time is spent on replying to government circulars – unnecessary and ridiculous; for example on heather burning - we have to say something.

A further external source of depotentia was that national government did not make available any additional funds that would enable improvements to access decided upon by LAFs.

At the level of national government depotentia is externally imposed upon the LAFs through the aspects of decision-making and control of the agenda as identified in Lukes's three-dimensional view of power. However the structure of LAFs is also affected through the requirement for consensus and the initial identification of interest areas to be represented. Hall has discussed the importance of the political framework in which limitations are placed upon decision-making processes and recommends that these structures should also be included in studies of community decision-making (Hall, 2003:106). This presents an additional aspect to those drawn from Lukes's three-dimensional view of power.

At local authority level externally imposed depotentia occurs through prioritisation of funding. Where the maintenance of access routes is carried out by highways departments, recreational access effectively competes with metalled roads and highways for priority. Local authorities are consequently partly responsible for financial resources. Members of LAFs have remarked that where they have reached a decision their advice has not been taken although this seems not to occur in an overt manner:

> We see things slide away after we have raised them.

> Some decisions we have reached I felt have been changed afterwards and I wonder if some people influence the officers.

After including national government circulars, agenda-setting remains within the control of the local authority in all of the cases studied. The majority of the agenda items consisted of information dissemination by the access officers, with occasional questions from members. An officer in Case study D stated simply that:

> The local authority sets the agenda and presents the meetings.

Furthermore the local authority interprets and implements the requirements of the legislation with regard to member selection. This means that at this level external depotentia can occur through the authority's view of what constitutes a 'balance of interests'. Alternatively individuals may be selected if their views conform to those of the officers or authority. However there may also be a lack of volunteers representing an interest area, leading to additional imbalance in the membership structure. Case studies B and D both experienced a shortage of applicants to join the LAFs during the period of observation.

Researchers have noted that whichever level of government is responsible, the presence of the political will to carry through a course of action must be present, for its success (Hall & Jenkins, 1995:81). Short et al (2005) referred to the lack of 'will' locally amongst officers responsible for LAFs. It was stated that there had been "some officer resistance to the establishment of LAFs in places" (Short et al, 2005:36). However lack of enthusiasm for the task, on the part of officers, also affected the likely outcomes from the process:

> In some areas it seems that the side effect of the statutory basis for forming LAFs is a response by the AA to undertake the 'bare minimum'. This 'tick box' approach impacts on the effectiveness of the LAF as it is rarely incorporated into the existing structure nor is the existing structure adapted to receive it. (Short et al, 2005:45)

The 'bare minimum' referred to was observed partly through a lack of continuity in the access officers attending meetings in Cases A, B and D. Those specifically responsible for organising the LAFs attended approximately half of meetings observed, and their places were taken by assistants at the remaining meetings. In addition the numbers of meetings held by these LAFs were limited to four each year and members considered this affected their ability to function:

> It is difficult to develop a momentum when we only meet every 2/3 months, and to get to know the other members better could improve effectiveness. The distance travelled to meetings reduces the time available for social efforts.

> The LAF does not meet often enough for topics to get fully aired.

Sources of Depotentia – Internally perpetuated

Members perpetuated their own depotentia partly through dependence upon the authority and acceptance of the format and topics raised by the authority. One member commented that:

> I am not hugely proactive because I am unsure what to be proactive about.

However members were not necessarily aware of their remit as a LAF and one participant commented that:

> I have never put anything on the agenda and I thought I could not. I can only put stuff in AOB (Any Other Business).

It was also observed that members commonly deferred decision-making and it was noted by a participant that:

> We picked the problem up, talked about it for half an hour, put it down and then moved on. That is what we tend to do.

In addition some members rarely participated in discussions and this was recognised by a member who stated:

> I am interested in how many people do not contribute at all.

This lack of engagement was also a source of conflict between members in Case study B as some members considered those who did not wish to actively participate should vacate their position, and that application for membership of such a forum should indicate intent to participate. Other sources of conflict between members related to their individual interest areas and the perceived competition for limited facilities. In Case studies A and B members expressed their opinions and revealed unwillingness to share access to the countryside:

> A lot of ramblers think the LAF should be all for walkers.

> Now there is talk of opening river ways and woods – I disagree totally with it because it is crossing peoples' land. Opening woods means where is the wildlife going to go?

> There is confrontation at all levels of access.

> The Chair says our remit is to achieve consensus and I find it excessively on the side of consensus and against raising of contentious issues and the effect is to produce bland conclusions. There are some issues of principle concerned so how can you be bound by consensus?

The acceptance of the format laid down by national and local government meant that LAFs were effectively permitting their anodyne roles to be perpetuated although they recognised the loss of enthusiasm that had occurred amongst members:

> Issues are not that different across the country so why do we need each LAF to discuss the same issues? Some good people may drift away because they feel time is wasting if they are not able to contribute.

> I get the impression we are rubber stamping and if we are, I might let someone else do it – a few on the LAF think that.

This data has indicated that external sources of depotentia may be imposed by both national and local government - such as the structure of LAFs, control of agenda-setting and funding. However members also perpetuate their depotentia through lack of engagement with each other and the process, partly as a result of the presence of conflict within the LAFs.

Consequently an overall framework has emerged that includes the following headings under which sources of depotentia have been analysed. These may be appropriate to external and internal sources of depotentia and they are:

   a) decision-making (and outcomes)
   b) control over agenda (not necessarily through decisions)
   c) observable (overt or covert), and latent conflict
   d) structure

CONCLUSION

The central argument here is that stakeholder participation in UK public policy domains like tourism, is constrained by externally imposed and internally perpetuated sources of depotentia. The key sources or loci of depotentia reside within the selection of

stakeholders, the capacity to organize issues in or out of the agenda, non decision-making and the competitive urge where it is present in interest groups or the organizers. Depotentia is a product of the organizers' lack of 'will' to engage with the process as well as stakeholders' non decision-making. The main reasons stakeholders perpetuate their depotentia lie in their lack of contact with each other and their inability to support interest areas that do not reflect their own interests. Their unwillingness to form cohesive, 'dense' networks is partly related to their perception of other interests as threats to their own. The policy implications are that forming stakeholder groups requires greater attention to the selection process. This requirement is due to the lack of homogeneity within interest areas that results in stakeholders being unwilling to support minority interests, thus ensuring they remain isolated rather than included in the process. Furthermore if the organizers are unwilling to enable the empowerment of the stakeholder group, the exercise is likely to add to disillusionment with participatory processes.

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