

Abstract

British local authorities and their partners are increasingly developing new ways of working together with local communities. The nature of this co-working, however, is complex, multi-faceted and little understood. This article argues for greater clarity of thinking on the topic, by analysing this co-working as a form of political co-governance, and drawing attention in particular to issues of scale and democracy. Using evidence from a study of 43 local authority areas, 16 authorities are identified where co-governance is practised, following three main types of approach: service-influencing, service-delivering and parish council developing. It is concluded that strengthening political co-governance is essential for a healthy democracy.

Introduction

Co-governance is a term that has appeared recently in the literature (Johnson & Osborne, 2003) and its meaning is still developing. This article aims to clarify this meaning and evaluate its relevance for understanding current changes in local government. Essentially, it is argued that co-governance involves a mutual formation and representation of different collectivities but its particular importance perhaps lies in its political applications, where at least one of the collectivities (but not all) is a governmental one.

The changing nature of national government policy on co-governance is then briefly examined, with a view to establishing the UK's interpretation of co-governance and how it seeks to achieve it, if at all. Relevant literature is considered, with a view to tracing the growing emphasis on co-governance among local authorities and their partners.

The article is primarily concerned with co-governance between local authorities and local communities, that is, the capacity for local councillors, officers and residents to work together on a more or less equal basis. Arguably, such co-governance is important for a number of reasons: for enhancing democratic accountability; for community well-being;¹ and for fairer and more effective decision-making generally. The article assesses the validity of these reasons in the light of evidence from various studies.

In particular, the article draws upon the authors' own research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. This research suggests that local authorities and their partners are adopting a wide variety of approaches to co-governance. Many local authorities are interested in achieving 'joined-up' services on a neighbourhood scale, through forms of neighbourhood management and neighbourhood partnerships. There is also widespread willingness to deepen community engagement, particularly to improve service delivery. Joining up services and deepening community engagement, however, do not in themselves imply a commitment to developing co-governance. The latter requires devolving real power to communities, developing neighbourhood democracy, and ensuring a genuinely equal partnership with communities rather than one in which the local authority is the dominant partner. The research found few authorities that were so committed to developing co-governance.

The issue of scale figures prominently in the research. Three main approaches to co-governance by local authorities and their partners were identified, and all of these could be described as ways of increasing governance capacity on the 'lower' scale (typically a neighbourhood) combined with changing governance capacity on the 'higher' scale so as to encourage this. The article reviews the problems with each of these approaches and their potential for further development.

Making Sense of Co-governance

Governance can be understood, following Le Galès (1998: 496), as a double capacity, to shape collectivities (interests, groups, organisations) and to represent them in different arenas. Kooiman (2005) has distinguished three modes of governance: hierarchical governance, self-governance and co-governance. Hierarchical governance is 'top-down' governance in which a central 'governator' dominates the shaping and representing of a collectivity. Self-governance is 'bottom-up' governance in which a collectivity is able to shape and represent itself. Co-governance is then where a collectivity works co-operatively with other collectivities in a process of mutual shaping and mutual representation.

Co-governance can occur on any one scale, and can also occur across a plurality of scales. Where different collectivities are operating on the same scale, co-governance is relatively more straightforward in that their spheres of interaction largely overlap. Where they are operating on different scales, however (for example, a neighbourhood as distinct from a town or city), there is greater potential for hierarchical governance to displace co-governance, as the governance capacity of collectivities on the 'higher' scale is typically much greater than that of those on the 'lower' scale. Developing co-governance therefore crucially involves increasing capacity on the 'lower' scale in order to counteract this tendency to hierarchical governance.

Where a governmental body is one of the collectivities involved, we can talk of political governance. Traditionally, the relationship between state structures and citizens has been hierarchical (Somerville, 2005) and opposition to this hierarchy has tended to focus on demands for autonomy and self-governance. In contrast, moves towards co-governance suggest deepening democratisation of state and society (Fung & Wright, 2003), bringing state and citizens closer together.

Co-governance generally can take place in any arena in which a collectivity operates but political governance specifically involves arenas of three kinds: governmental arenas, in which decisions are made that carry the authority of the state; non-governmental arenas, in which self-organising citizens decide independently what to do or what needs to be done; and arenas of new kinds in which governmental and non-governmental actors meet to debate and possibly decide and act together. Governmental arenas tend to be characterised by hierarchical governance, non-governmental arenas by self-governance, and the new kinds of arenas by co-governance.

Relationships within and between arenas of these different kinds need to be specified more clearly. Each kind of arena contains both state and non-state actors,² but the relationship between these two sets of actors varies from one kind of arena to another. In governmental arenas, non-state actors may participate but only as citizens not as possessors of state authority. Conversely, in non-governmental arenas, state actors may participate (e.g. local councillors) but primarily as citizens

rather than as representatives of state power. In political co-governance arenas, however, state and non-state actors participate as representatives of their different collectivities, and the legitimacy of their representation derives from the (bureaucratic or democratic) organisation of their respective governmental and non-governmental constituencies. Ideally, they participate on an equal basis – otherwise, governance tends towards either hierarchy (where state actors predominate) or self-governance (where non-state actors predominate).³

New Labour and Co-governance

The New Labour Government is committed to ‘bridging the gap between citizens and local democracy’ (Taylor & Wilson, 2006: 3) and in achieving this government ministers have frequently affirmed the need for local people to be ‘in the driving seat’ (DETR, 2000: 6). Major programmes, such as the local government modernisation agenda (LGMA), the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR) and the civil renewal agenda, all aim to build the capacity of citizens and communities to engage with government policy (see, for example, Home Office, 2004). There is a strong theme of improving public services, with citizens being given more choice and opportunities for influencing service planning and delivery, even to the extent of taking responsibility for commissioning and delivering services themselves (see, for example, ODPM, 2005). More recently, the government has increased the emphasis on local authorities in particular working in partnership with other bodies, including community groups, and has promised to provide well-performing local authorities with ‘enabling measures’ (formerly known as ‘freedoms and flexibilities’) in return for engaging local citizens in decision-making.⁴ There is even some understanding that capacity on ‘lower’ scales needs to be increased in order to counteract the dominance of organisations operating on ‘higher’ scales – as in David Miliband's (2006) concept of ‘double devolution’.

None of this means, however, that the government as a whole has any clear concept of, or commitment to, political co-governance on any scale. The metaphor of citizens being in the driving seat, for example, is ambiguous. It seems to imply that citizens can be more powerful than government, which is clearly not the case. On the other hand, it could mean that citizens are to be recruited merely as chauffeurs for the vehicles of government policy. Only recently has the government begun to recognise the need for citizens to have effective democratic representation on a neighbourhood scale (see ODPM, 2005, 2006) – a recognition that has now borne fruit in the local government White Paper (DCLG, 2006). It remains the case, nevertheless, that the government lacks a vision of neighbourhood co-governance in which state actors on this scale work together with non-state actors on a democratic basis.

On a local authority scale, local strategic partnerships can look like co-governance arenas but the reality is that the interests of the different (state and non-state) partners are not necessarily well represented, their constituencies being ill-defined and the representatives themselves largely unelected (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2004). Representatives of local people or local communities are in a particularly weak position, because of their overall lack of resources, their lack of organisational clout (comprising many smaller organisations rather than fewer more powerful ones) and their status as unpaid volunteers (Russell, 2005: 39). So, even though these partnerships can be more inclusive (see, for example, Maguire & Truscott, 2006), they can hardly be said to enhance local

representative democracy,⁵ let alone move towards a position of equality between state and non-state participants.

Above all, the government has no conception of co-governance across scales (multiscalar co-governance) in which, arguably, organisations such as political parties and federated bodies of citizens have a role to play.⁶ To achieve such co-governance, community and citizen organisation typically needs to be supported and developed on a long-term basis, on a neighbourhood scale and on 'higher' scales such as the local authority and the region.

Developing Local Co-governance

Developing co-governance involves strengthening the governance capacity of the participating collectivities and increasing the equality and effectiveness of their collaboration. A major question here, particularly in the light of government vagueness and ambivalence about co-governance, is whether local authorities and their partners are able and willing to deliver co-governance. The answer, however, is not clear-cut.

In a review of recent public participation policy, Sullivan et al. (2004: 262) concluded that the capacity of local government to 'reflect the diversity of local needs and aspirations ... has lessened in importance when set against the need to deliver services to national standards throughout England'. However: 'localities have been able to exercise local flexibility in their response to this policy agenda through their emphasis on communities of identity and interest as well as place and through their development of sub-local representative forums to parallel participative innovations' (Sullivan et al., 2004: 262). In similar vein, Burwood (2006: 17) points out that, on the one hand, 'the emasculation of local government' over several decades has resulted in vicious circles of disengagement from local politics, poor political leadership and demoralisation of professionals. Even more recently, the return in 2004 of what the 2000 local government White Paper called 'crude and universal capping' of council tax rises runs 'entirely counter to any idea of local democratic renewal' (Brooks, 2006: 80). On the other hand, however, since 2000 local authorities have been given new powers to achieve economic and social well-being, powers of prudential borrowing (in the case of authorities with appropriate Comprehensive Performance Assessment ratings), new procurement structures, and relaxations of regulations on capital finance and land disposal (Burwood, 2006: 18).

Irrespective of capacity, therefore, delivering co-governance does not seem to be a high priority for many local authorities. Where it is, however, they may lack capacity, although opportunities may now be in place for them to develop it. In a 2003 survey of local authorities reported in Goss (2005: 8), partnership working and community engagement were both highlighted as significant capacity gaps. It is possible that, for a number of reasons, including lack of appropriately skilled and experienced staff in some authorities, the opportunities offered by the new powers are not being fully taken up by those authorities. Acquiring the necessary skills, particularly of leadership (see Goss, 2005), and developing the required civic infrastructure (Lowndes et al., 2006) and processes to make co-governance work, however, can take a long time. Whatever one's view on the capacity of local authorities as currently constituted to deliver co-governance, though, it is clear that there is no appetite for further local government reorganisation (see Burwood, 2006: 24).

With regard to the capacity of communities to participate in co-governance, there have been a number of developments. For example, community forums of some kind (understood as forms of

non-governmental arena, on different scales) now exist in over half of local authority areas (LGA, 2004), and evaluation of the government's community participation programmes has shown that, although less successful in engaging black and minority ethnic groups, they have made important progress in building community organisation and engagement in many areas (Taylor et al., 2005). These programmes have provided an arena for local authority/community debates, enabled more contact with service providers, and influenced local policies towards the voluntary sector. In particular, Community Empowerment Networks (CENs) have influenced how decisions are made in the Local Strategic Partnership and who makes them, shaped neighbourhood renewal strategy and influenced the spending of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. They have also increased diversity, bringing together networks of place and communities of interest, helping to highlight common interests and create linkages and pointing to ways of improving training and support (see Russell, 2005: 46–47). Further, it has been argued that the new power of well-being could be used by local bodies to hold to account and influence the activities both of local authorities and their partners (Randle, 2005: 41; Hilder, 2006). Despite all of this, however, community or citizen participation in governance does not appear to have significantly increased (see, for example, Wilks-Heeg & Clayton's, 2006, study of Burnley and Harrogate).

A further cause for concern for community groups has been the trend towards replacement of grant aid from state bodies by competition for state contracts (see, for example, Bassac, 2006). This move towards a contract culture runs counter to the development of co-governance, with community organisations being seen as contractors (a form of hierarchical governance) rather than as partners (see also Geddes, 2006). There is, in short, 'only limited evidence that the new participation mechanisms [introduced by government] are systematically increasing the extent to which communities actually influence public services' (Morris, 2006: ix).

Our Research

In our own research, we looked for evidence of co-governance structures and processes, primarily on a neighbourhood scale, though we were also interested in how co-governance worked across the neighbourhood and local authority scales. For a structure or process to count as co-governance, we required only that it involve decision-makers from a local authority (and possibly also its partners) working together, on a more or less equal basis, with communities or citizen organisations. The organisation of the community or citizen side of the co-governance partnership was often difficult to interpret, particularly in terms of whether it was capable of or suitable for playing a co-governance role.

On the basis of the literature and approximately 50 interviews in the autumn of 2005 with leading academics in the field, civil servants, consultants, and representatives of think-tanks, relevant national organisations (such as the Housing Corporation) and organisations representing local authorities, communities, and voluntary organisations, we identified 43 local authorities that were perceived as likely to be developing co-governance – that is, there were indications from the literature and interviews that politicians and officers from these authorities were working in equal partnership with communities or citizen organisations. The main part of our research then involved, first, a fishing and sifting exercise, to see which of the 43 authorities provided clear evidence of co-governance; and, second, an investigation into the nature of the co-governance arrangements in the 16 authorities where co-governance was found. In this part of the research, telephone interviews

were conducted in early 2006 with officers working for local authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) who had responsibility for advancing a co-governance agenda, or who at least were responsible for the council's strategy and for arrangements commonly associated with co-governance. Finally, we conducted case studies in mid-2006 in five of these 16 local authorities, to gain a deeper understanding of their approaches to co-governance. These involved site visits and interviews with senior councillors, council leaders, chief executives, LSP directors, senior officers and community representatives responsible for developing co-governance. A separate part of the research (not reported here) involved interviews with representatives of parish and town councils and relevant community organisations.

Arrangements Associated with Local Co-governance

The results of the sifting exercise are summarised in Table 1 (one authority is not included), which identifies not only 16 authorities where such evidence was found but also a number of types of arrangement that might be considered likely to be associated with co-governance.

Table 1. Arrangements associated with co-governance

The most common such arrangements are community forums (also known as neighbourhood or area forums/panels/networks). Community forums are typically understood as non-governmental arenas where citizens are free to organise and have their say. Table 1 shows that all authorities with co-governance had community forums, but just as many again had community forums without co-governance. This can be explained on the basis that community forums are necessary for co-governance but to be sufficient the results of their deliberations need to be taken forward into co-governance arenas.

Area committees, in contrast, are governmental arenas that can be useful but are not essential for co-governance. This is also clear from Table 1, which shows that five, but only five, authorities had co-governance arrangements without having area committees, while 18 had area committees without having co-governance.⁷

Local councils (parish or town councils) are governmental arenas on a neighbourhood scale (or at least a sub-municipal scale). Table 1 shows that, of the 22 authorities with local councils in their area, 12 had co-governance arrangements, suggesting the existence of a weak correlation between the two. The reason for this is probably that authorities with lower-tier councils in their areas are likely to be more open and more accustomed to working co-operatively with other democratically organised collectivities.

Neighbourhood management, understood as an arrangement where service delivery is organised on a neighbourhood scale, can play a key role in linking co-governance on that scale to the scale of the LSP (see below). Table 1 shows, however, that there is no correlation between neighbourhood management and co-governance, with only six authorities having both, nine having neighbourhood management without co-governance, and ten having co-governance in the absence of neighbourhood management. The most likely explanation for this is twofold: neighbourhood management is just one of many techniques that local authorities (as well as national government) can deploy to develop co-governance; and the most common purpose of neighbourhood

management is not to develop co-governance but to make the delivery of public services more co-ordinated.

Housing-led governance (mainly tenant management organisations) is another important arrangement because of its record in co-operative and democratic working. It is itself a form of community self-provision (where community groups take on significant responsibility for local authority services), but is listed separately as most of the non-housing community self-provision is on a relatively small scale, e.g. community gardens, open spaces, recreation grounds, caretaking, cleaning, etc. As in the case of neighbourhood management, Table 1 shows no correlation between community self-provision (whether housing or non-housing) and co-governance. This is perhaps unsurprising, however, as we found a number of authorities who viewed community self-provision solely as a means to improve services, not to enhance democratic decision-making. This is a significant finding in that it indicates a lack of connection between the non-governmental arena in which tenants exercise democratic control of their housing services and the governmental arena in which their local authority and its partners operate.

The only other common arrangement found that might be relevant for co-governance was devolved budgeting, understood here as involving substantial sums, and not to area committees. Once again, from Table 1, there is no correlation between devolved budgeting and co-governance: although seven authorities had both devolved budgeting and co-governance, seven others had devolved budgeting without co-governance and nine had co-governance without devolved budgeting. As with neighbourhood management, the explanation for this is that, first, devolved budgeting is only one technique among many for developing co-governance; and, second, some authorities were not devolving budgets to communities or assemblies of citizens but rather to neighbourhood managers or even individual councillors. We also found examples in a number of authorities of what was called 'participatory budgeting' (named after the Porto Alegre experiment in Brazil – see Gret and Sintomer, 2005), but in fact consisted of processes of competitive bidding to fund specific community projects. Such processes involve the creation of a new kind of arena in which the state sets the rules of play and brings citizens together for a short period of time to make decisions according to those rules. Although, strictly speaking, such an arrangement does count as co-governance, it is very specific, limited in duration and exists in the shadow of hierarchy on a municipal scale.

Much like national government, most local authorities appeared to have only a weak understanding of co-governance but there were many exceptions and also a widespread (though by no means universal) willingness to be held to account by their citizens and an acceptance that this was the direction in which their practice should be moving, with greater genuine co-operation between them and local communities. The diversity of views among councillors and officers cannot be overestimated but a strong impression was gained that the traditional Schumpeterian defence of the prerogative of elected representatives was in decline, with a growing acceptance that they were accountable to their constituents in a number of ways other than through the ballot box alone.

Local Authority Approaches to Co-governance

Looking more closely at the 16 local authorities where we found evidence of co-governance, we tried to identify patterns in the processes or structures involved. It was clear that the authorities were not following the advice of Sullivan and Howard (2005: 4) to determine underlying purposes

and principles for action first and then develop structures and processes to deliver those purposes. Rather, they started with what they had in terms of both community self-organisation and civic infrastructure and then saw how they could use these to bring community and council more closely together so that power can be shared on a more equal basis. Although they did not necessarily have a clear vision of what co-governance was, they were certainly moving in that direction. All of them referred to the importance of Local Area Agreements in facilitating the development of co-governance: for example, by allowing for greater freedom of manoeuvre and enabling a more holistic approach to funding this development (e.g. through the safer and stronger communities block).

All of these authorities focused primarily on developing governance capacity on a neighbourhood scale, in some cases as a foundation for building co-governance on the scale of their LSP. Their particular approach to co-governance then appeared to depend mainly on the nature of the governance arrangements that operated on a neighbourhood scale in their areas. On this basis, we found three main approaches, which we call 'parish/town council development', 'service-influencing' and 'service delivery'.

Parish/town council development

Authorities that were entirely 'parished', i.e. where every (or nearly every) part of their area was represented by a parish or town council, concentrated on developing the governance capacity of these local councils. The existence of a governmental arena on a neighbourhood scale acted as a base from which to build co-governance not only on this scale but also across scales (between neighbourhood and municipality). On a neighbourhood scale, local councils already and increasingly work with a variety of non-state actors in co-governance arrangements (see, for example, Jones et al., 2005). Across scales, co-governance operated in at least three different ways: some councillors sat on both local and principal councils,⁸ representing one council directly to another; officers from the principal council worked with local councils, individually and in clusters, to ensure more effective mutual representation of neighbourhood and municipal interests; and principal councillors and officers worked with representatives of local council associations, particularly on the approach to co-governance itself.⁹

Authorities following the parish/town council development approach (Buckinghamshire, Essex, Milton Keynes and New Forest) varied considerably. Buckinghamshire emphasised 'local community areas' where groups of parishes would work in partnership with the council and its partners on a range of issues, particularly public service delivery. In Essex, the focus was on transferring substantial resources to parish and town councils to meet the needs of their areas, with the distribution of these resources being decided by groups of parish clerks. In Milton Keynes, the parish councils already controlled substantial resources, so the focus was on enhancing this organically and linking it more closely with the local strategic partnership. Finally, in the New Forest, the emphasis was very much on community planning, undertaken by parish councils working together ('bridging') as well as with the district council (the council had produced a useful community planning guide to explain how this works). Although not included in our research, Wiltshire is another example of a council following this approach, using community planning and working in partnership with multi-tier (county, district and parish) council-led community planning boards (see Savage et al., 2006).

Parish/town council development has considerable potential (see, for example, Jones et al., 2005; Hilder, 2006), but it is important to have a clear strategy for achieving this, such as that expressed in Buckinghamshire's 'Getting Closer to Communities' programme. A major problem is the disparity between the scale on which parish councils commonly operate and the scale on which principal councils commonly organise their services. Buckinghamshire's solution to this problem was to identify an intermediate scale of 'local community area', in which those responsible for delivering public services could work in partnership with local communities as represented in local forums through clusters of parish councils. This was therefore an embryonic form of transcalar political co-governance.

Service-influencing

Authorities that already had well-developed and powerful forms of neighbourhood-based public and community representation (such as community forums and neighbourhood partnerships) focused on enabling these communities to influence more directly the decisions taken by the local authority and its partners. In these cases, the existence of a neighbourhood non-governmental arena functioned in a similar way to that of a governmental arena in the case of the 'parished' authorities. On a neighbourhood scale, this led to the non-state representative bodies working with state representatives such as neighbourhood managers and area committees. Across scales, co-governance had two main forms: one emphasised the role of neighbourhood managers, operating collectively on the local authority scale, and mediating the decisions and views of representative non-state neighbourhood bodies; the other stressed the role of community forums working with state bodies, with both being organised on a local authority scale as well as a neighbourhood scale.

Authorities following this service-influencing approach (Chester, Newham, Salford, Sheffield and Wolverhampton) varied according to the form and content of the joint working between state and non-state actors. With regard to form, in the case of Chester, Salford and Wolverhampton the emphasis was on the role of neighbourhood managers employed by the local authority or LSP working closely with resident-controlled representative bodies, possibly as part of a neighbourhood partnership. Newham and Sheffield were similar, but the emphasis was more on the role of resident-controlled community forums working with other bodies within the local/area partnership (for further detail on Sheffield, see Bacon, 2006). On content, the focus in Newham and Salford was on community planning, in Chester and Sheffield it was on area regeneration, and in Wolverhampton it was more on community empowerment and democratic renewal.

Service-influencing can be focused more on the neighbourhood scale (as in Wolverhampton) or on the local authority scale (as in Newham). In the former case, there is a need to identify clear mediation mechanisms, such as the neighbourhood managers' group at Wolverhampton, to ensure that co-governance on the neighbourhood scale is translated into co-governance on the scale of a LSP. In the latter case, it is necessary to devise mechanisms to ensure that the co-governance structures and processes developed on the scale of the local authority and LSP reflect the aggregation of co-governance activity on the neighbourhood scale. In Newham, this was achieved by setting up a borough-wide community board, led by the chairs of the neighbourhood-based community forums, outside the LSP board (though the chairs are also members of this board), with neighbourhood co-governance activity being processed through local action partnership boards, which report to the LSP board. Co-governance on the neighbourhood scale, therefore, rather than

being expressed in a direct relationship between community forums and local action partnership boards (which Newham would see as potentially divisive and running counter to its community cohesion objectives), is produced indirectly, through the community board and the LSP.

Service delivery

Finally, there were authorities that were particularly focused on area regeneration, working in partnership with their communities, and were concerned to encourage those communities to take responsibility for the governance of regeneration programmes. In these cases, the arrangements (typically, community boards¹⁰ or regeneration partnership boards) could look like forms of self-governance rather than co-governance because it was not always clear how they related to the local authority. The reality, however, is that these arrangements were set up by the local authority and its partners, not by communities acting for themselves. On a neighbourhood scale, the boards contained representation from both the local authority and the community. There was a lack of clarity, however, about the implications of co-governance on this scale for the possible development of co-governance on the local authority scale.

The authorities identified with the service delivery approach (Easington, Gloucester, Havant, Highlands and Portsmouth) all appeared to have developed this approach subsequent to particular area regeneration initiatives such as Single Regeneration Budget. They had neighbourhood partnerships (Gloucester) or regeneration partnerships (Easington and Highlands) or community boards (Havant and Portsmouth), and their focus was on area/neighbourhood regeneration (mostly urban but rural in the case of Highlands and coalfields in Easington).

The potential of the service delivery approach is well recognised in the literature (for recent reflections on this, see James, 2006; and Hatchett, 2006). In Portsmouth in particular, community boards were being put in charge of a wide range of decision-making processes. Where this approach leads in terms of co-governance, however, depends crucially on the strategies and dispositions of the boards, on the one hand, and the local authority and its partners on the other. Co-governance could remain on a neighbourhood scale only, leaving the boards to some extent disconnected from 'higher' scales of operations. They could continue to be supported by the local authority and/or to act as contractors to the local authority as client, but they might not be included in key decision-making processes of the authority or LSP. The boards themselves, however, might be more interested in self-governance than co-governance, and might look to alternative sources of income and power in order to sustain themselves and increase their influence. On the local authority side, there appear to be three possibilities: it might value a trans-scalar co-governance relationship with the boards; it might be comfortable about allowing them to develop independently, resulting in an erosion of co-governance on a neighbourhood scale in favour of forms of self-governance; or it might regard the boards as situated outside the realm of democratic governance altogether, with their legitimacy resting on their expertise rather than their representativeness of any particular collectivity.

Hybrid/less developed approaches

Two authorities on the list did not fit easily into any of the three approaches identified. Both Bradford and Stockport were found to contain elements of some of these approaches, but had not so far succeeded in developing clearly distinct approaches of their own. Bradford was developing

neighbourhood action plans through neighbourhood forums, which appeared to fit a service-influencing model. There was also interest in developing existing parish councils and creating new ones, as vehicles for the neighbourhood planning process. It was not clear, however, how the different kinds of co-governance activity in Bradford related to one another, and the extent of real joint working, between the council and its partners on the one hand and local communities on the other, seemed relatively undeveloped (see also White et al., 2006, on Bradford Trident New Deal for Communities – parallel developments through Bradford City Council and Bradford's LSP).

Stockport presented a different case altogether. The authority was the first to establish an area committee structure after the 1974 local government reorganisation and, in more recent years, it had experimented with a variety of neighbourhood governance arrangements, including town councils and neighbourhood regeneration partnerships. These governance bodies were now represented on a borough-wide forum, which worked in partnership with the LSP. However, Stockport was not committed to setting up any new town or parish councils (it has only one) and generally appeared to lack well-developed autonomous community organisations capable of participating in co-governance at neighbourhood level.

Conclusion

Co-governance is widely misunderstood because it is commonly assumed that governance can only be either hierarchical or self-governance: either the people are told what to do (or how to do it) or else they are left to decide matters for themselves. The alternative, however, is that groups of people decide what to do in co-operation with other groups of people. In a democracy, decisions made by the elected representatives of the people carry particular weight or authority, so political governance tends to be hierarchical. To prevent this, the people need to be organised independently, as a counterweight to state power. Political co-governance then occurs when representatives of these popular organisations outside the state enter into discussion, debate, negotiation and joint decision-making with representatives of the state.

The issue of scale is particularly important for co-governance. Multiscalar governance typically involves a hierarchy of scales, and therefore hierarchical governance. How, therefore, can it be transformed into a form of governance that is non-hierarchical? This article has shown that it is possible at least to take steps towards such transformation, by strengthening the governance capacity on 'lower' scales in relation to that on 'higher' scales. In relation to the two scales of neighbourhood and local authority, for example, neighbourhood governance capacity can be strengthened in a number of ways: by developing the capacity of neighbourhood governmental authorities, by developing the capacity of neighbourhood non-governmental popular organisation; by reforming local authority arrangements to make them more relevant and responsive to popular neighbourhood concerns; and by creating and encouraging new forms of neighbourhood organisation that can play a larger role in making decisions affecting the neighbourhood. None of these steps, of course, guarantees that co-governance across even these two scales is any closer. For that, horizontal co-ordination across neighbourhoods, as well as vertical co-ordination across the two scales, is necessary, and this article has suggested that new forms of federated association and interest mediation are required for this.

A major strategic decision that local authorities developing co-governance have to take is on the primary focus of their activities, e.g. neighbourhood or local authority scale, governmental or non-

governmental arenas, etc. This decision is likely to be strongly influenced by the needs of their particular context. For example, where, as in Newham, there are genuine concerns about serious conflict between different communities, it is understandable that emphasis will be placed on developing co-governance on the scale of the local authority. In areas such as Buckinghamshire and Essex, in contrast, there is probably plenty of scope for co-governance to be developed in individual neighbourhoods without having to be concerned about possible negative effects on a local authority scale. Co-governance remains poorly understood or encouraged by national government, and probably within local government generally as well, but a significant number of local authorities and their partners are already developing sophisticated co-governance structures, processes and cultures.

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Notes

1 As Burwood (2006: 25) says: 'Real and lasting change can only occur in communities where local people begin to take real responsibility for their own lives and neighbourhoods in genuine partnership with the public and private sectors.'

2 The category of state actors itself includes both elected representatives and state functionaries.

3 Other governance arenas are possible, of course, where neither state nor non-state actors participate as representatives of their different collectivities, but in other roles, e.g. as residents, tenants, service users or members of the public.

4 Local Area Agreements (LAAs) are currently viewed as an important opportunity to progress this agenda.

5 Except perhaps in those cases where local communities are better represented on the LSP through the new local authority-wide Community Empowerment Networks (see below).

6 As Sullivan et al. (2004: 264) point out, this situation is reflected in the literature: 'the literature is more or less silent on the interaction between multi-level governance and the autonomous action of community or "lay" activity'. The only political example we could find is Raynsford (2006: 113): a vision of 'powerful unitary authorities able to give effective leadership to their areas, supported by a network of diverse neighbourhood bodies through which people will be able to engage actively in local decision making'. This vision of local government in the lead, with communities playing a supporting role, is what Somerville (2005) has called 'steering localism'.

7 In all these cases, local councillors took all the decisions, usually with some input from local residents.

8 This is known as 'multi-hattedness'. In some cases, councillors wore three 'hats': as parish, district and county councillors.

9 These can be characterised as three modes of interest mediation: by councillors, by officers and by representatives of local council associations.

10 Community boards can be understood as resident-controlled boards responsible for delivering public services and managing public assets.

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