

Rural governance, community empowerment and the new institutionalism: A case study of the Isle of Wight

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Abstract

This article compares two different institutional models—state-sponsored rural partnerships and community-based development trusts—for engaging and empowering local communities in area-based regeneration, using the Isle of Wight as a case study. Following a critical review of the literature on community governance, we evaluate the effectiveness of community involvement in the Island's small towns through a comparison of the performance of the two development trusts in Cowes and Ryde, on the one hand, and that of the partnerships established under the Market Towns Initiative in Sandown, Shanklin and Ventnor, on the other. We conclude that both models reflect the structuring effect of central, regional and local state steering of the Island's regeneration policy community but also that a 'development trust effect' is observable in one location (Ryde), due to a capacity to stimulate new forms of community enterprise and to successfully alter political relationships within the local community. These findings support a 'new institutionalist' account of community empowerment which emphasises the importance of contextual variation and locally specific processes of institutionalisation rather than the determining effect of institutional design per se.

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1. Introduction

This article compares two different institutional models for engaging and empowering local communities in area-based regeneration programmes, using the Isle of Wight as a case study. The Island is a particularly appropriate site for empirical enquiry, as over the past decade or so it has hosted a number of state-sponsored rural partnerships (see Table 1 below) as well as two community-based development trusts. To that extent, it serves as something of a natural laboratory for testing the potential and limits of alternative models of community involvement in area-based rural regeneration.

In the partnership model, community involvement has been mandated from above (by central government or, in the case of Leader +, the European Union) but development trusts have been established in Cowes and Ryde as community-owned regeneration agencies and these, in principle, can be seen as providing scope for 'empowerment from below' through their capacity to stimulate new forms

of community enterprise and new forms of 'micro-politics' (Donnison, 1973).

The article draws on insights from the new institutionalism, and particularly organisational or sociological institutionalism, as a corrective to the dominant focus in the academic literature on the constraining effects on community empowerment of the discourse and practice of a particular form of 'top down' locality or regeneration management. In opposition to the descriptive style of traditional ('old') institutionalism, the new institutionalists operate through explicit (if diverse) theoretical frameworks; they concern themselves with informal as well as formal rules and procedures; they pay attention to the way in which institutions embody values and power relationships; and they seek to study not just the impact of institutions upon behaviour but the interaction between individual (and collective) actors and institutions (Lowndes, 2001, p. 1953). Whereas 'rational choice' institutionalists emphasise the importance of strategic action in driving institutional change, 'sociological' institutionalists argue that action is norm-driven, following a 'logic of appropriateness' rather than a 'logic of consequentiality'. Institutional change involves changes in the logic of

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Table 1
Regeneration programmes on the Isle of Wight

Programme	Nature	Lead central government department/agency	Lead regional agency	Extent of local (IOW) coverage
Rural Development Programme	Designed to help resolve problems of remoteness and disadvantage in Rural Priority Areas	Rural Development Commission (RDC)	South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) (from 1999)	The whole of the Island apart from Ryde and Newport was designated a Rural Priority Area 1994–2004
Single Regeneration Budget	Brings together a number of regeneration programmes from several government departments. SRB partnerships are expected to involve local businesses, the voluntary sector and local communities	Department of the Environment/Office of Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM)	SEEDA	Two Island-wide Rounds—SRB II and SRB V. Two area-based Rounds—SRB IV (Cowes/East Cowes) and SRB VI (Ryde) 1994–2006
Market Towns Initiative	Designed to revitalise market towns in rural England, and their surrounding countryside	Countryside Agency	SEEDA	Sandown, Shanklin, Ventnor, Brading and Wootton Bridge 2002–2005
Leader +	A European Union initiative designed to assist rural communities to improve access to local services and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of their area	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Government Office for the South East (GOSE)	Western and central parts of the Island 2002–2008
Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders	A pilot programme in which neighbourhood managers are accountable to boards of local residents for the regeneration of 35 deprived neighbourhoods in urban and rural areas	ODPM (now Department for Communities and Local Government)	GOSE	Newport (Pan estate) 2005–2012
Healthy Living Programme	Designed to improve the health of residents living in the most disadvantaged communities. Programme implementation was devolved to 350 healthy living centres across the UK	Department of Health/Big Lottery Fund		All Island 2001–2005
Sure Start	Designed to improve ‘early years’ services for children and parents. Programme implementation is through some 500 local partnerships	Department for Education and Skills	GOSE	Ryde 2004–2010

appropriateness, typically through an evolutionary process (March and Olsen, 1989).

In the first part of the article, we review the literature on community involvement in the governance of regeneration programmes, noting the dominant focus of work on rural and small town governance on ‘top down’ partnerships. We then introduce development trusts as an alternative institutional model of community-owned regeneration before proceeding, in the remainder of the paper, to present and discuss the findings of our Isle of Wight case study. Our data sources are based on evaluations of two of the Island’s main state-sponsored regeneration programmes—the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) Challenge Fund and Rural Development Programme (RDP)—conducted by the authors between 2003 and 2005, which included interviews with members and officers of the Island’s two development trusts: the Cowes-based North Medina Community Development Trust (NMCDDT) and the Ryde Development Trust (RDT). These interviews, and

the extensive set of primary documents made available to us, were supplemented by interviews with representatives of the Market Towns Initiative (MTI) partnerships in Sandown, Shanklin and Ventnor in the summer of 2005.¹

2. Community-based regeneration, governance and New Labour’s policy discourse

This section reviews the recent academic literature on community participation in urban and rural governance, with particular emphasis upon New Labour’s ‘localisation’ discourse. As we see it, this is composed of two dimensions: a dominant discourse of ‘partnership and empowerment’ (Atkinson, 1999) and a secondary discourse of community-based social entrepreneurship (Wallace, 2002).

¹MTI is a more recent government initiative to help towns in rural areas re-establish themselves as service centres to local residents, businesses and the wider community.

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