Theorising the role of citizens in collaborative governance and policy-making: towards a framework for cross-national comparative work.

Howard, Jo, University of Bristol

This paper is concerned with the turn to collaborative governance and the changing role of citizens in policy making and public service design and delivery. While there is broad support for government to collaborate with non-governmental organisations, research to date has been ambivalent about the impact and potential of these developments. Governance theorists have spoken of governance as the 'ultimate in hands-off government' (Rhodes 1997, p.110), while governmentality theorists, following Foucault, argue that the non-governmental sector is constructed as a 'governable terrain' (Carmel and Harlock 2008). Yet state-civil society relations vary according to local political, cultural and socio-economic factors. The contribution of civil society to public services will thus also vary: as Boje (2009, p. 247) comments, ‘associative organizations and civic participation/ volunteering … are all embedded in the prevailing social and economic structure of a specific welfare system’.

This paper discusses the theoretical basis of the author’s PhD research into the role of citizens in policy development and decision-making in international comparative perspective: in the UK, Mexico and Nicaragua. It seeks to theorise the drivers and outcomes of collaboration between the state and citizen-led and non-governmental initiatives. Why should citizen involvement in policy development bring about better outcomes for the poor and socially excluded? What evidence is there in the literature that this is the case? What is the historical context of the current accommodation between the state and its citizens and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and how does this frame the terms and limits of collaborative governance? In Latin America, citizen participation is usually governed by laws and has been made a constitutional right. Does this make a difference?

The paper will review the literature on collaborative governance, coproduction and co-governance, drawing on Latin American literature as well as in the English language. Particular attention will be paid to existing studies which have analysed governance arrangements in cross-national comparative studies (especially between countries of the global north and south). The paper will critically examine existing frameworks for theorising the relationship between the state, its citizens and its ‘third sector’, and consider the extent to which these frameworks can be useful to examine collaborative governance arrangements in both Europe and Latin America.

The UK, Mexico and Nicaragua offer very different trajectories of state-civil society relations, but with similar shifts taking place in recent years from one side to the other of the political spectrum, but all maintaining a preoccupation with the role of civil society.

In the UK, the New Labour government (1997-2010) saw a surge of interest in partnership building and a formalisation of the relationship between the state and
the voluntary sector. Since 2010, the Coalition Government’s vision of the ‘Big Society’ has shifted this relationship away from the funded non-govermental sector, to place emphasis on the volunteering contribution of citizens and communities.

Across Latin America there is a rich diversity of experiments in involving non-governmental actors - citizens, grassroots movements, businesses, NGOs - in processes of participatory planning, budgeting and policy implementation (Pearce 2010). In Nicaragua and Mexico, citizen participation is now a constitutional right, and a range of forms of participatory governance has been introduced. In Mexico City, the arrival in power of the left-of-centre Partido Renovador Democrático in 1997 led to a change in the constitution and introduction of a law of citizen participation. In Nicaragua, citizen participation developed from the mass participation programmes of the 1980s, through the rise in the 1990s of cross-sector structures for municipal development planning, to the introduction in 2007 of the Citizen Power Committees (renamed as Citizen Power Cabinets, and recently renamed again as Family Cabinets) in every municipality, through which all citizen engagement is now channelled. The literature reviewed in this paper will help to develop a comparative cross-national framework for the analysis of the pro-poor outcomes of non-governmental participation in public services.

A number of themes will be examined:
• The contribution of third sector/citizen-led approaches to tackling poverty and social exclusion;
• The role of the state (as enabler, convener, provider etc);
• Enabling legal and regulatory frameworks;
• The conceptualisation of the citizen – as rights bearer, co-producer of public good, consumer of services, beneficiary of welfare programmes.
• The role of local councillors in the collaborative state: if citizens play a greater role in governance, what is the role and added value of the elected representative?

This paper addresses a topic which is of central importance in older and newer democracies, and across the global north/south divide. With the global economic crisis, in all contexts the challenges of addressing poverty and social exclusion have intensified, and it is increasingly important to share learning through cross-national work. Policy makers and academics in all contexts face the challenge of how to address increasing economic inequality, decreasing trust in the institutions of representative democracy, and increasing strain on public services.