

Some notes on the work of the Bradford Community Statistics Project (BCSP)

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This short report will argue two things – firstly that the task of demystifying social statistics is a form of community development – and secondly that the activity of community groups is being channelled by fitting a private sector management model of administration onto funded community projects.

Demystifying social statistics is community development.

BCSP was established as a partnership between Bradford Resource Centre and Bradford Council in the year 2000 and its work has been funded by the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund (see articles in *Radical Statistics* 74 by Ludi Simpson and Mike Quiggin).

BCSP aims to help community groups use official statistics and other information sources in order to get a better picture of conditions in their neighbourhood so that:

1. a case can be made to fund new or existing services and/or
2. groups can more effectively plan or target their activities and/or
3. a policy or development can be shown to have undesirable consequences and challenged and/or
4. an existing community initiative or campaigning aim can be better informed

We do this by adopting a community development approach to using information sources – empowering people by supporting them in finding out what information is available, evaluating and critiquing these information sources and identifying what further information they need.

There is an extensive literature on “community development” approaches but in a nutshell we mean:

- building confidence – activists who have the skills, informal knowledge and common sense to begin to identify and deal with a problem have the potential to deal with information and run a community service

- listening to the descriptions community activists give of the set of problems they are addressing and asking questions to pinpoint what information they need – a process akin to good reference librarianship
- facilitating networking – helping them find information in the context of providing a wider range of resources to a wide range of community groups - building on encounters at Bradford Resource Centre (a trade union and community resource centre that is the home for the community work of BCSP) e.g. someone comes in to use the photocopier and we get chatting and find out what they are doing and check out what information needs they may have and introduce them to members of other groups whose interests may overlap with their own.

We do this through:

- one to one statistics surgeries when people approach us specifically for help with finding and using information
- formal training courses –on communities, research and regeneration

We bring a range of information sources to the attention of groups including our own web site. Bradford Council's BCSP workers have developed a web site ("Maps and Stats") that allows users to outline their own geographic area and draw down statistics that apply to that area – thus permitting them to determine the boundaries of their community rather than using pre-set areas such as wards. The data sets that are made available are those that can be credibly attributed to post codes.

The funding game

We had expected to be called upon to help groups who had a variety of aims. However our experience is that the overwhelming majority of BCSP users want statistics to evidence a funding bid rather than to help their campaigning or organisational planning.

Furthermore the case they mostly need to make now is that the service they plan will contribute to predefined state regeneration strategies. So, they set out to demonstrate that their neighbourhood warrants targeting and that their envisaged service will deliver outputs that contribute to performance indicators set out in those strategies.

Use of information for campaign ends is a rarity. Interest in gaining a carefully textured picture of conditions in a neighbourhood is subordinated to the use of information in the drive for funding.

Groups come to be dominated by their enforced use of “soundbite” statistics to the detriment of a critical use of information. And their commitment to meeting strategy targets will often be at the expense of undertaking more useful work. BCSP is rarely used to help groups design and undertake their own research.

The Ugly Contest

Community groups are forced to take an unhealthy interest in the state’s “ugly contest”

By “ugly” we mean that community groups must make the case that their neighbourhood is ugly i.e. deprived – and that it is so ugly it needs to be chosen by the state (perhaps through a quango or partnership body) to receive extra assistance – in the form of funding for that group.

By contest we mean that community groups must make this case in competition with other groups i.e. they must prove that their neighbourhood is not just ugly but that it is uglier than other neighbourhoods and therefore that the state should target funding on them in preference to other community groups elsewhere.

Furthermore the group must prove that it is competent in a way defined by the state – that it can manage a service which will tackle and overcome the ugliness — and it proves it this competence by using management speak – in the first instance in the form of a business plan. Groups have to demonstrate that they have the skills to deal responsibly with funding by fitting the only acceptable model – the model of a successful capitalist firm. They must show that they have:

- a set of policies in place to describe the processes by which they will operate
- specific outputs that they will achieve - targets that are measurable so that they can be seen to have been achieved
- quality control systems in place so that they can demonstrate that they work within the framework of their policies and that they deliver their targets
- an exit strategy – so that their service will be sustainable.

So, what's the problem?

The problem is the infatuation by the state with management science

Let's concede immediately that:

- funding is important – funding resources community action and as not-for-profit trade unionists we are in favour of more and better funded jobs in the sector
- the state should prioritise resources for the most needy regions (but forcing neighbourhoods within these regions to compete is a disaster) and quantitative information will help in identifying these alongside broad social and political judgement
- community groups should demonstrate that their neighbourhoods are needy
- there should be state co-ordinated strategies to guide regeneration efforts.
- these strategies should include targets by which progress can begin to be measured
- groups should show that they are competent

But, the state should not use only quantitative information to guide its regeneration strategy, and these targets should not be the major determinant of funding flows to community groups. Groups should be encouraged to make their case in their own words – in particular they should be encouraged to present their own targets which need not be quantitative. Furthermore, the strategies should not rely on merely numbers to prove that progress has been made.

More weight should be given to the descriptions of local conditions given by community groups – these often rely heavily on anecdotal information. At present groups who do this find their funding bids fail relative to groups who demonstrate their ability to fish out official statistics applied to their neighbourhood.

Emulating a capitalist firm producing added value is not the only model of efficient and professional service delivery. For one thing, it

requires huge amounts of new administration work – for example by creating internal markets in public services or not-for profit services with profit centres that engage in monetary transactions with one another. The loss of public sector administrative traditions mean a loss of real quality and flexibility on the ground and a loss of detail knowledge of the volume of outputs on the ground

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