

# Connecting Localism and Community Empowerment

Research Review and Critical Synthesis  
for the AHRC Connected Community  
Programme



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# Executive Summary

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The *Connecting Localism and Community Empowerment* project sought to assess the merits of the assumption that localisms brings about community empowerment through a review of the existing academic and policy literatures.

The key findings from the review point towards a lack of clarity and coherence in the literature in the usage and interpretations of the terms 'localism' and 'community empowerment'. They are often defined by implication or tacitly assumed to have an accepted definition. Whilst greater localism is generally claimed to increase community empowerment, there are substantive grounds for questioning this claim, which arise from critically analysing these concepts and how they interact. These grounds highlight conditions which need to be fulfilled if localism is to realise its potential to enhance community empowerment. To understand these conditions we analysed four international case studies. We also considered two assessments of the New Labour government's localist policies in the UK.

The case studies indicate that localism in its variants such as local government reform, decentralisation, devolution and participatory governance can be instrumental in bringing about different degrees of community empowerment, but only under certain conditions. The dominant model for community empowerment is based on *increasing citizen participation in the practices of local government*, rather than on independent community action. The case studies highlight four conditions under which this form of localism has a positive bearing on government efforts to increase community empowerment. These include localist initiatives that:

1. are actively pursued by different tiers of government as *policy priorities* in contrast to using community empowerment and localism as tokenistic additions to a centrally-driven and controlled policy;
2. involve a move away from the mere rhetoric of localism to active devolution of power to different scales of local government;
3. are supported by complementary legal and statutory frameworks to accompany the devolution of power; and
4. promote and encourage active forms of civil society to organise and engage by supporting community leadership and grass roots movements.

Moreover, our evidence indicates that both 'localism' and 'community empowerment' are ideas characterized by inherent tensions in relation to concepts such as scale, community, democracy and citizenship which the review had also critically analysed. Localism and community empowerment should not be understood in terms of isolated islands of either particular local areas or particular empowered community groups. Instead, our review has highlighted the need for policy-focussed research on the fundamentally connected nature of the communities that are involved, and the importance of engaging with this interconnected nature as part of both free civil society and governance if they are to be truly empowered. Our review suggests the following directions for future research:

- Examining the conceptual underpinnings of the terms 'localism' and 'community empowerment', together with research that uncovers the historical trajectory of the term 'localism' in policy and academic literature.
- Analysing the implications of diverse uses of the term 'community' and the scales of its practice and presence in relation to empowerment by addressing the linkages between the local, national and global through notions of social capital, wider networks and political relationships.
- Investigating the nature and constitution of the neighbourhood as the spatial expression of the local which captures to an extent the locus of many communities and is a functional site for policy targets.
- Exploring how the interplay between localist politics and wider collective movements interacts with community empowerment discourses and issues of diversity and identity within local interactions.
- Identifying the mechanisms through which the role of the state in relation to community empowerment is being changed for instance, in light of the 'Big Society' agenda (including the Localism Bill) in England and the Community Empowerment Bill in Scotland.

Lastly, all these research recommendations could go into addressing the bigger question about the conditions of citizenship and governance under which distinctive localist politics can flourish in the current political and economic context.

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# Connecting Localism and Community empowerment: research review and critical synthesis

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## 1 Introduction

The Coalition government formed in Britain in May 2010 has made localism a core part of its political programme. The Coalition Agreement promised ‘a fundamental shift of power from Westminster to people’ and said that the new government would ‘promote decentralisation and democratic engagement’ and ‘end the era of top-down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals’ (Cabinet Office, 2010:11). In June 2010, Eric Pickles, Minister for Communities and Local Government, declared that his priorities were localism, localism and localism. In December 2010, the government introduced the Decentralisation and Localism Bill, as a key component of the government’s flagship ‘Big Society’ policy, with the assumption that localism and decentralisation have a positive effect on community empowerment. International examples of localist attempts aimed at empowering communities also share this assumption. The *Connecting Localism and Community Empowerment* project sought to assess the merits of this assumption through a review of the existing academic and policy literatures. This paper summarises the findings of the literature review and is divided into four parts.

The first and second part will look at the various definitions, forms and drivers of localism and community empowerment respectively. It will also provide a historical overview of the trajectory of localist thinking in UK government policy. The third part will be devoted to presenting evidence in the form of international and UK case study examples highlighting the links between community empowerment and localism.

Part four critically summarises the findings from the review. It will argue that although the balance of opinion in the academic and policy literature indicates that localism, in its different variants, is broadly linked to community empowerment, its adoption in governance is also beset with a number of conceptual and practical challenges. These include: differing understandings of the meaning of the terms ‘localism’ and ‘community empowerment’, problems with conceptualisation of the ‘local scale’ and

'community', the localism of social capital thesis and debates around the changing nature of citizenship in relation to community empowerment. Finally the paper will conclude by identifying future research directions and priorities in light of these arguments.

## **2 Defining Localism: its history, drivers and various forms in the UK**

This section will begin with a brief overview of the history of localism in British Politics. The different forms in which localism shapes government policy will then be identified. We will also discuss the main ideas that act as drivers of localist thinking and highlight the case for and against localism.

### **2.1 A historical overview of localism in British Politics**

Localism in British politics has seen many forms and in its current avatar it is being debated as the *Decentralisation and Localism Bill* in the UK parliament. According to Davis (2009:405) localism of a kind can be traced back to Aristotle who argued that intermediary groups are essential to the exercise of liberty and freedom in a state, failing which there can be no opposition to tyranny. Alexis de Tocqueville is quoted by some writers (Powell 2004, Cruickshank 1999) as having inspired calls for localism through his advocacy for the presence of intermediate groups such as municipal institutions. A desire for localism is also evident in the early foundations of British conservatism of Edmund Burke 'who extolled the small platoons as the pillars of the state' and the term 'civil society', much in vogue in localism literature, can be traced back to the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Crick, 2002:497).

Far from being *new*, localism in various forms has been a long-standing standing feature of public policy debate in Britain. It was apparent in the growth of strong municipal government in cities such as Birmingham in the Nineteenth Century, the radical politics of Poplarism in the 1920s and the 'local socialism' of the new urban left in the 1980s.

Duncan and Goodwin (1988) cite the 1830s as the period marking the beginnings of local electoral government, the role of which has since been marked by tensions over central-local relations. They quote Poplarism in the 1920s as one example that highlights the contentious relationship between local government and central control. Poplarism was a municipal social movement which saw local councillors in the borough of Poplar in London protest against the unequal nature of tax burden for rich

and poor across London and caused the cabinet to discuss the disenfranchisement of those on poor relief (Duncan and Goodwin, 1988:2). Scholars disagree on the period which is seen as marking the beginning of the centralising trend in Britain. Some (Palmowski 2002) argue that the social reforms under Lloyd George brought local political concerns under central government control and by the 1940s local government had lost control of a lot of its functions including poor relief and responsibility for gas and electricity. However, Gerry White (2005:2) in his paper on the decline of local democracy lists the period between 1930 and the middle of 1948 as the 'Indian Summer of local democracy when the functional remit of local councils at the local level was vastly wider than now'. He argues that the trend towards centralisation began with two policy initiatives: nationalisation and the establishment of the welfare state from 1945-50 and the privatisation drives from 1979-97 under Margret Thatcher. However, it is important to note that the 1960-70s also saw debates and reforms over central-local relations such as the Radcliffe-Maud commission in 1969 which called for a new structure and map for local government in England.

Most commentators identify trends towards centralisation linked to the development of the national welfare state over the course of the twentieth century, and then to the restrictions placed on local authorities by the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher (1979-90) and John Major (1990-97). Central authority was also a feature of the first New Labour government (1997-2001). A renewed emphasis on localism gradually re-emerged during the 2000s, leading to proposals for 'double devolution' from central government to local government and then from local government to neighbourhoods and households. This so-called 'new localism' (Stoker, 2004; Davis 2008; Davis, 2009) influenced White Papers on local government (*Strong and Prosperous Communities*, 2006) and community empowerment (*Communities in Control*, 2008) and prefigured many of the coalition government's proposals as set out in the *Localism and Decentralisation Bill* (2010).

## **2.2 Definitions and drivers of Localism**

Despite its popularity, localism as a term is difficult to define, not least because much of the literature tends to use related terms such as decentralisation, local government and local democracy. There is also very little literature on 'localism' *per se* (Powell,2004).It is also useful to note that the call for decentralisation of power

and an appreciation of local needs and concerns has long informed the agenda of activists working in the field of international development and environment conservation in the global South. Notable among are the role of local people against deforestation in the Kumaon region of India under the Chipko (embrace the tree) movement and its call for eco-feminism (See Mies & Shiva 1993; Agarwal 1992). The World Bank, once an advocate of structural adjustments programmes offering top down governance, has also recognised the power of the local in emphasising fiscal decentralisation and local government reform. Its Social Fund Programmes (See [www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/index.htm](http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/index.htm)) identify local needs and encourages NGO intervention in poverty alleviation. Localism also finds favour in postcolonial approaches to development and indigenous people's struggle for identity and representation (Radcliffe and Laurie 2006, McEwen 2005). It is promoted as a way of life (Jenkins,2004) and a solution to the problem of mass produced super market controlled 'food chains' in its interpretations by the advocates of slow(Pietrykowski,2004) and alternative food movements(Dupuis and Goodman,2005).

Thus, localism varies in its shape, form and scope in informing different agendas for public and social policy. As is often common with widely researched topics, there is a lack of consensus and consistency among writers with regards to defining localism. According to Mohan and Stokke (2000:250) localism can be viewed as constituting a 'dynamic and fluid discourse that holds up the promise of reordering of public space and revitalisation of 'the local' in terms of accountability and choice'. Rhodes (cited in Powell 2004 ) observes that the period since 1979 has seen a range of theories related to localism- e.g. conventional public administration, intergovernmental theory, public choice and local state theory, but the list of normative criteria contained within localism is very long, including local autonomy, individual liberty, territorial justice , responsive and responsible government. Thus, we consider the concept of localism alongside related (and similarly contested) terms such as local government (Jones & Stewart 1983, Cochrane 1993) and subsidiarity. decentralisation (Smith, 1985), local democracy (Burns et al, 1994) and local autonomy (Pratchett, 2004),

### *Localism and local government*



Page (1991) explores the link between localism and local government by distinguishing between a legal and political localism. Legal localism is linked to 'the scope for action by the local authority in its freedom to run and shape public services...[with] powers that are shaped by formal legal provisions' while political localism 'has to do with ensuring that local interests are represented at the national level'(Page 1991:6). In other words, the former refers to the formal allocation of powers to local authorities, the latter to place-based political action. This distinction between the legal and political basis of localism has been linked to local government by Goldsmith (1996) to offer a classification of European local government by dividing Europe into North and South blocs. According to him the northern group (including Britain, the Netherlands and Scandinavia) have a form of legal localism in which there is a general belief in the value of local government and decentralization. Here, although history and custom play a part in the weight given to institutions linked to elected local government, more value is placed on the formal constitutional basis of local government or on legal localism in Page's sense. In the Southern Bloc (Belgium, France, Spain, Italy and Greece) the political localism takes precedence where territorial representation is linked to strong values of communitarianism. Thus, the different basis of localism, legal or political give rise to different ways in which local government is mobilised to represent local interests at a national level.

The European Union's subsidiarity principle is also worth noting here. Enshrined as a founding principle of the EU in the Lisbon Treaty, it is the legal tenet underpinning localism aimed at regulating the exercise of powers in the EU. The subsidiarity principle is 'based on the idea that decisions must be taken as closely as possible to the citizen: the Union should not undertake action (except on matters for which it alone is responsible) unless EU action is more effective than action taken at national, regional or local level' (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Condition, *Eurofound*). Subsidiarity expresses a preference for governance at the most local level and by extension for localism.

### *Decentralisation and local democracy*

Decentralisation can be argued to be the functional and instrumental expression of a wider agenda of localism driven public policy. It can find expression in different forms such as administrative decentralisation (delegation of administrative duties to

different levels of governments), political decentralisation (involving transfer of powers from centre to local levels of government with the ultimate aim of devolution), fiscal decentralisation (dispersion of previously concentrated powers of taxation and revenue generation to other levels of government) and market decentralisation (involving privatization and market deregulation by shifting responsibility for government functions from the public to the private sector) (World Bank [http://www.ciesin.org/decentralization/English/General/Different\\_forms.html](http://www.ciesin.org/decentralization/English/General/Different_forms.html)). In relation to localism, decentralisation and localism can be seen to have a cause and effect relation where the ideological motivation for favouring the local over other scales(localism) finds instrumental expression via an adoption of the different forms of decentralisations. This is evident in the work of Burns et al (1994:6-7) on the politics of decentralisation which follows the experiences of authorities which have pioneered decentralisation in local democracy. They point out that decentralisation with respect to local government can be seen to have two meanings: a first which refers to a physical dispersion of operations to local offices (administrative decentralisation) and a second meaning which refers to devolution (democratic decentralisation) of a greater degree of decision making authority to lower levels of administration or government. These two meanings can also be extended to understanding the role of localism in local government. They argue that neighbourhood decentralisation can help revive local democracy and can release the potential of decentralisation as a vehicle for empowering people.

#### *Local autonomy, local democracy and new localism*

Pratchett (2005) argues that there exists a conflation between the terms 'autonomy' and 'democracy' especially with reference to localism and promotion of local democracy. Such a conflation limits our ability to understand central–local government relations and its ongoing problems. At a policy level, a failure to distinguish effectively between the two terms leads to confused policy aims and outcomes. He identifies three particular approaches that focus explicitly on local autonomy, its limitations and its potential and have direct relevance to the study of local democracy. These involve defining local autonomy:

- as *freedom from* higher authorities.
- by the effects of local governance and its *freedom to* achieve particular outcomes.

- as the reflection of local identity – the ability of communities to reflect their own sense of place and meaning within localities (Pratchett,2000:369-371).

Referring to 'new localism', he argues that New Labour's 'new localism' involved a degree of local autonomy, but not the full freedom from central authority implied by the term 'autonomy'. Moreover, the discourse in which 'new localism' is played out remains centrally defined and controlled and as such it lacks the appropriate freedom from higher authorities in facilitating the expression of local identity and altering power relations between the centre and localities (Pratchett, 2005:369-371).

### *Localism and its drivers*

The drivers for localism according to Mohan and Stokke (2000:248) can be traced back to two different strands of development thinking - *Revisionist Neo-Liberalism and Post-Marxist*.

Revisionist Neo-Liberalism is marked by 'a shift within neoliberal development strategy from a singular emphasis on market deregulation to an additional emphasis on institutional reforms and social development' (Mohan and Stokke, 2000:248) as initiated by state bodies and institutions. According to this strand in localism thinking, civil society can be empowered by the state to emerge as an effective arena for supporting good governance. It promotes a 'top down' strategy for institutional and local government reforms by encouraging partnerships between state agencies and civil society representatives. The locus of civil society activity is seen as existing at the 'local level' and hence the drive towards decentralisation via community participation and consultation are seen as key aspects of neoliberalism driven localism. Crucially, in this drive for localism, localities are frequently represented as sites in which 'the apparent opposites of enterprise and community, of efficiency and welfare, of economic means and local ends' might be reconciled' (Brenner & Theodore, 2002:341-342). In contrast to the neoliberal view, post-Marxism favours a 'bottom-up' social mobilisation in society which is based on 'conscientious and collective identity formation around common experience' and is best achieved by a drive towards valourising the local, both in terms of its specific knowledge base and expertise it has to offer but also as a site for collective action arising out of a shared experience of economic or/and political marginalisation (Mohan and Stokke, 2000:249).

What these two drives towards localism share in common is a realisation of the limits of the power and role of the state in ensuring social equality and welfare when faced with market globalisation and the footloose nature of capital. The state on its own is deemed insufficient to support economic and political development but needs local actors and interventions in delivering its duties. Thus, localism becomes the mechanism via which 'post-development' in the global South and 'good governance' in the global North can be materialised. It is important to note that the drives towards localism are powered by both Right and Left conceptualisation of democracy and development. They find a renewed momentum in times when global financial systems are beset with an economic crisis as has been the case in the aftermath of the economic recession that followed the 2007 sub-prime mortgage crisis. With governments finances in debt and ensuing public spending cuts 'the local' begins to get projected as the site of intervention which can help ease the impact of low economic growth. It can be seen as being evident in the current UK coalition governments calls for 'building the big society' and in the proposals of the 'Decentralisation and the Localism Bill' or in the US where the 'Tea Party movement' calls for scaling down 'big government', all of which coincide with huge cuts in public services funding. One simplistic assumption that has triggered this move towards all things local is a view that it is the events and practices at 'the global' scale that have trapped nations in a cycle of boom and bust and it is only with a return to strengthening 'the local' that more equitable state-society relations can be fostered. However, as this paper goes on to argue that 'the local' and 'the global' are contested categories and they are relational rather than discrete scales.

In such a scenario the camp is split between those who argue for localism as a mechanism for delivering a more equitable and democratic governance and those who see the solution in a strong centre driven public policy. In the UK, most leading commentators favour, to a greater or lesser extent, the case of enhanced localism. Jenkins (2004:17) calls for not a gradual but 'spectacular ...Big Bang in localism ...[which should involve] a 'bonfire of targets', a mass transfer of power from the centre to locality'. While Stoker (2004) has been in favour of a 'new localism' which involves networked community governance with a view to devolving power to front line local authority staff responsible for public service delivery. The Power Inquiry also identifies a 'democratic malaise' afflicting modern Britain where 'the dilution of

the powers of local government has had a major impact on engagement with formal democracy. The loss of power of local government, most notably to central government, but also to other bodies not directly accountable to local citizens, has inevitably damaged popular engagement' (Power Inquiry, 2006:153). There are others who demand wider reforms to both government and body politic (Sorabji: 2006) via a new constitutional settlement in the form of a federal UK (Copus, 2006:14) for strengthening local government.

In contrast to these calls for localism, David Walker (2002) writes 'in praise of centralism'. He argues that a strong central government is required to inspect, regulate and curtail markets and movements of capital in the absence of which localities would descend into wasteful sub-national competition for investments and tax revenues. He also contends that a strong centre serves the cause of equity 'by pooling risk and transferring spending from better off to needy' (Walker, 2002:19).

However, the current weight of opinion is in favour of enhanced localism in governance. Although the recent recommendations in the *Localism Bill* have renewed debates on localist thinking in British politics, it was also part of the New Labour public policy agenda. In the following section we review the various forms that localism, as a public policy discourse, has undergone in Britain from the 1990s onwards.

### **2.3 Forms of Localism in British policy discourse**

In order to understand the drive towards localism it is important to note the different forms that localism as a mantra for governance has taken in policy literature. In the current coalition government's view, it is the magic potion which will cure and reverse the toxic New Labour legacy of a centralised welfare driven state. It is this sentiment perhaps which encouraged Eric Pickles, Minister for Communities and Local Government to proclaim 'I have 3 very clear priorities: localism, and we'll weave that into everything we do from parks to finance to policy. My second priority is localism, and my third is... localism', Eric Pickles, Minister for Communities and Local Government, June 2010.

A review on civic renewal conducted by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO, 2008:14) identifies some 16 concepts and components of localism in government policy literature during the New Labour era among which

*Modernising local government*, *New Localism* and *Double devolution* were the key themes. The current government did away with the language of new localism and double devolution but introduced ‘the big society’ agenda as marking its vision for a decentralised state. We can identify the following main forms in which localism has been promoted in British policy discourse since New Labour first came to power:

- Modernising Local Government
- New Localism
- Double Devolution
- Place Shaping
- The ‘Big society’ and the Decentralisation and Localism Bill

### ***2.31 Modernising local government***

When New Labour came to power in 1997, it made the reform of local government one of its key priorities. Implicitly managerialist, the modernising local government project also contained localist themes. As Mel Usher in a welcome reception of the 2001 White paper for local government (2002:8) concluded ‘Localities, localness and local – and by definition local government - seem to be back in favour’. According to Laffin (2008:2), from 1997 onwards there were four successive stages to the Local Government Modernisation Agenda (LGMA) which have involved over twenty plus policies. They have included performance management regimes such as ‘Best Value’ and ‘Comprehensive Performance Assessment’. New council constitutions were also put into place which required authorities to replace their executive led committee-based decision making structures with an elected mayor or a leader-and-cabinet style executive. The local government modernisation agenda also included Local Public Service Agreements between central government and individual local authorities, requirements to establish ‘joined-up’ local strategic partnerships (LSPs) and a new approach to local coordination in Local Area Agreements.

New labour also started a process of devolution of decision making powers in the delivery of local service to local government and communities through the *Total Place* initiative (<http://www.localleadership.gov.uk/totalplace/about/>).

The concept of networked community government is one form in which localism had informed New Labour’s attempts at reforming local government and is worth discussing in some detail here. The Local Governance Research Programme under

the leadership of Gerry Stoker and Rod Rhodes has been the main promoter of local government reform as an advocate of networked governance. Stoker, who was an informal advisor during the first term of the Labour government, has put forward the idea of networked community governance. He defines networked community governance as having an overarching goal of 'steering a community to meet the full range of its needs' and where 'the most powerful and effective role of elected local government is that of network coordinator' (Stoker, 2011:17). He contrasts it with the traditional public administration (TPA) perspective of the 1950s and 1960s and the New Public Management (NPM) wave of the 1970s and argues that networked community governance (from the 1990s) has moved the focus of local government away from 'narrow efficiency to public value, which is defined as the achievement of favoured outcomes by the use of public resources in the most effective manner available' (17). The influence of this idea can be seen in the Blair (1998) and Lyons Report (2007) which promoted the role for elected local government as a community governor.

Since the publication of the White Paper *Modernising Government* in 1999 there has been a significant literature on the subject (Pratchett 2000, Lowndes 2002, Stewart 2003, Fielding 2003, Stoker 2002, 2011) where scholars argue that though an admirable attempt at reforming local government, New Labour's modernisation agenda did not in practice reflect a reduction in centralisation or indeed brought about any enhancement of local government autonomy. The 'watchword of the day earned autonomy' appeared to bring about slower centralization instead of the devolution of power it promised (Davis, 2009:412). Lowndes (2002:135) in her assessment of the 2001 White paper on *Strong Leadership* reflects 'The government's stated intention to establish relationships with individual authorities ...sees the local bloc fast disintegrating'. Stoker himself, once a sympathiser of New Labour's local government reforms now admits to being sceptical of the viability of the community governance framework and has doubts about the sustainability of elected local government if its role is seen as merely that of a community network co-ordinator. In a stock taking piece on the future of community governance he identifies a fatal flaw in the community governance vision which is a lack of awareness of the very limited amount of hard power in terms of coercion and material incentive that local government can exercise'(Stoker 2011,28-29). He

argues that even 'the soft powers of diplomacy, communication and bargaining are not enough for a form of governance such as networked community governance which although appealing as an intellectual idea is difficult to embed in popular *culture*' (Stoker, 2011, 28). For local government systems to be sustainable and for their soft powers to be effective, he argues, they need substantial amounts of hard power.

### **2.32 New Localism**

The concept of new localism can be traced back to the 'new urban politics' of the late 1990's where urban localities began to feel the brunt of the economic globalisation. As Clarke (1993:2) notes 'the hypermobility of capital pits community against community in competition for private investment ... [leaving] local actors with little room for manoeuvring'. The economic restructuring brought about by neoliberal policies saw the rise of the 'entrepreneurial city' which is expected to 'groom itself' and its localities (McCulloch, 2004) in order to make itself attractive to footloose capital investment.

In the UK, the concept of new localism began life under the New Local Government Network (under Gerry Stoker) in relation to 'third way' thinking. The drive towards new localism can be seen as a result of the recognition, on behalf of the New Labour government, of the limited success of the post 1997 local government modernisation agenda. It was marred by control freakery, audit culture and state paternalism so much so that Ruth Kelly in her forward to the 2006 White Paper conceded, that in spite of its localist rhetoric New Labour had continued the centralizing trend.

Writing about centre-local relationships in a NLGN pamphlet Corry and Stoker (2004:3) offer *new localism* as an alternative to the 'steering centralism' approach that characterised New Labour's first term in power. It was defined as;

..a strategy aimed at devolving powers and resources away from central control and towards front-line managers, local democratic structures and local consumers and communities, within an agreed framework of national minimum standards and policy priorities. (Stoker, 2004:117)

Stoker advocates(2004:118-119) new localism as a just response to the complexity of modern governance and one which allows for dimensions of trust, empathy and social capital to be developed in aid of civic engagement. He puts forwards the following ideas as representing the institutional expressions of new localism:



- More directly elected single purpose bodies
- A string neighbourhood government and
- The rise of strategic local government

He is keen to clarify that localism does not *imply* 'a simple romantic faith in the abilities of communities to come up with local solutions for the common good' and it is to address this concern that the prefix *new* is used, which signals that although recognising local concerns and priorities new localism is set in a 'context of national framework setting and funding and is at large associated with multi level governance' (Stoker 2004:122). Coaffee and Johnson (2005:167) note the impact of New Localist thinking on Government policy has been in the following ways:

- through strategy devolution – joining up different tiers of government
- by setting up alternative service management frameworks
- in promoting democratic renewal - reform local authorities as community leaders
- via area decentralisation
- by encouraging local authorities to decentralise service delivery and
- by enhancing and empowering community voice within decision making processes

These sentiments were echoed in a speech on Active Citizenship delivered by Alan Milburn in 2004:

I believe we have reached the high watermark of post 1997 centrally driven target based approach. Reforms to enhance choice, diversify supply and devolve control are all taking hold as the government moves from a centralised command and control model to what has been called new localism. In this next period accountability needs to move downward and outwards to consumers and community. Empowering them is the best way to make change happen.

Thus, new localism was *new* in the sense that it marked a break away from the mainly managerialist local government reforms to recognising and prioritising the role of community empowerment and local involvement as a major policy target. Flagship 'new localist' policies included efforts by local authorities to improve consultation, participation and engagement of service users and residents, for example, through: Best Value via consultation as part of service reviews; New Council Constitutions, through Area Based decision-making structures; regeneration initiatives, through New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood management;

and tenant participation through Tenement Management Organisations (Aspden and Birch, 2005:7). However, in spite of its recent introduction in policy debates new localism remained a fluid concept and was soon taken over by a new vocabulary of 'double devolution' and 'place shaping'.

### *2.33 Double Devolution*

Double Devolution as a term was first coined by Geoff Mulgan and Fran Bury of the Young foundation in their 2006 publication (<http://www.youngfoundation.org/publications/books/double-devolution-may-2006>) which argued that relinquishing powers from the centre to the local is crucial to the renewal of local government. It was taken up in government by David Miliband who, during his brief tenure as Secretary of State at the Department for Community and Local Government (DCLG) stated planned local government reforms need to involve a 'double devolution of power from Whitehall to town hall, and from the town hall to citizens and local communities..[which offers] a major opportunity to rebalance the relationship between the state and the third sector.' Gordon Brown (cited in Hilder 2006:239) also stated that via devolution the government would 'seek to strengthen community power and voice in local neighbourhoods through community panels and reinvigorated parish councils'. The desire for community empowerment via double devolution also found a cross party consensus where David Cameron as leader of opposition in his Chamberlin lecture at Birmingham proclaimed 'Empowering more local democracy is an idea whose time has come' (cited in Hilder 2006:239)

The Local Government White Paper can be seen as echoing the double devolution sentiment of passing on power not just to the local authorities but to local people. Published in 2006 it was about 'building responsive services and empowered communities' (DCLG 2006:7). It offered communities new powers in the form of 'A Community Calls for Action' where local communities can call their local councillor to demand an answer to their questions. It also included government plans to simplifying the process for setting up tenant management organisations and updating the role of the Local Government Ombudsmen in tackling complains. The role of local government was presented as that of 'a strategic leader and place shaper' (DCLG 2006:10). The paper reinforced the requirement of local authorities to prepare a Sustainable Community Strategy which sets out the strategic vision for an area. It widened the scope of the Local Area Agreement to include partners and

communities. The White Paper also proposed a reform of the Best Value framework by the introduction of the 'new Best Value duty to ensure participation' of local citizens and communities. It also required councils to take appropriate steps to 'inform, consult, involve and devolve' (DCLG 2006: 31-32).

Reviewing the White Paper for IPPR Paul Hilder (2006:241) notes 'it achieves real advances in some areas, and leaves space for the package to be filled out over the next year. The heart of the community empowerment package in the White Paper is a subtle but powerful reorientation of local government around the needs and priorities of citizens and communities'. In contrast, Jonathan Davis's review (2008:17) was less optimistic and argues that the proposals the White paper puts forward are only 'cautiously devolutionary' and in the paper does 'nothing to dispel the impression that New Labour remains [as ever] guilty of 'elite contempt' for local government'.

### *2.34 Place Shaping*

Sir Michael Lyon's inquiry into Local Government funding (Lyons 2007) put forward 'place shaping' as the strategic role for local government. He defines it as – the creative use of powers and influence to promote the general well-being of a community and its citizens. It includes the following components:

- building and shaping local identity;
- representing the community;
- regulating harmful and disruptive behaviours;
- maintaining the cohesiveness of the community and supporting debate within it,
- ensuring smaller voices are heard;
- helping to resolve disagreements;
- working to make the local economy more successful while being sensitive to pressures on the environment;
- understanding local needs and preferences and making sure that the right services are provided to local people; and
- working with other bodies to response to complex challenges such as natural disasters and other emergencies (Lyons,2007:3).

In the report, Lyons' made specific recommendations for the devolution and release of constraints on the funding of councils. These recommendations were:

- the re-evaluation of property values to current market prices;
- an abolition of council tax capping; and

- enabling local authorities to charge a 'tourist tax'.

In the 'medium term', these proposals also included:

- assigning a proportion of income tax to local government; and
- a re-localization of the business tax rate (Lyons 2007, 349-350).

Despite a positive reaction from the Department of Communities and Local Government, it is notable that the government did not take up any of these major financial reforms.

### ***2.35 The Big Society and the Decentralisation and Localism Bill***

The new Coalition Government formed in May 2010 in the UK has developed their own model of localism led governance in what it describes as its 'Big Society' initiative committing to a greater community role in making decisions about public sector expenditure. The DCLG (2011) states Localism as the *ethos*, Decentralisation as the *mechanism* and Big Society as the *outcome* of its current policy framework (<http://www.pas.gov.uk/pas/aio/1002573>). Under the government's localism agenda, Local Enterprise Partnerships LEP's will replace the eight Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) outside Greater London in England, via the Public Bodies (Reform) Bill and are expected to be implemented in April 2012. LEP's are defined as 'joint local authority-business bodies brought forward by local authorities to promote local economic development' (Bentley 2010:535)

The *Decentralisation and Localism Bill* which is being currently debated in the Parliament also contains, among others, four specific recommendations (available at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1793908.pdf>) about community empowerment:

*Community right to challenge*: which would enable voluntary and community organisations or groups, parish councils and public sector employees delivering a service to express an interest in running a local authority service.

*Community right to bid*: which provides an opportunity for local community groups to bid to buy buildings or lands which are listed, by the local authority, as assets of community value.

*Proposal for Local referendums*: which will give citizens, councillors and councils the power to instigate a local referendum on any local issue. Although these referendum will be non-binding, local authorities and other public authorities will be required to take the outcomes into account in decision making.

*Proposal to give citizens the right to veto excessive council tax rises:* which would imply that any local, police or fire authority and larger parishes setting an increase above a threshold proposed by the Secretary of State and approved by the House of Commons would trigger a referendum of all registered electors in their area.

In addition to the proposals of the *Localism Bill*, the government also proposes to make available by 2013 'community budgets' which will allow communities to combine different sources of public money to create pooled budgets to tackle difficult cross-cutting issues within an area. The Deputy Prime Minister has also announced that the Department for Communities and Local Government will introduce a Local Government Finance Bill that will give councils the freedom to borrow against business rates, known as Tax Increment Financing, and to retain business rates. (<http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/newsroom/1933560>)

Bentley et al (2010) in their assessment of the government's move from RDA's to LEP's see the Tory government led localist drive as profoundly anti-regionalist and centralist. Alcock (2010), in a review for the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC), sums up some of the main concerns around the coalition government's version of localism and the 'big society'. He argues that big society is a political slogan and that civil society can provide a more enduring focus for the government's policy agenda. He notes that there is no evidence to support the coalition government's assumption and belief that public welfare provisions have 'crowded out' the voluntary sector. In light of austerity measures, he asks, 'where will the well trained and publicly supported 'army' of community development workers [to assist the big society initiative] come from? (2010:384). Moreover, he asserts that greater marketisation of service delivery especially for the third sector may result in time in market failure. Also, the unity of the sector which has been promoted over the last decade might be adversely affected in time of market completion (2010:385-86).

The jury is still out on the effectiveness of this approach towards localism led reform with critics variously labelling the big society as a sham (Hasan, 2010), as an attack on the freedom and work of charitable organisations (Goulding, 2011) and as a positive idea at risk from caricature (Channen and Millar: 2010).

It becomes apparent from the above discussion that the various policy discourses of localism in Britain present community empowerment as their central goal. Whether it is by modernising local government, devolution, 'place shaping' or more recently via 'the big society' empowering local communities has emerged as the enduring focus for public policy. Community empowerment, much like localism finds favour among both sides of the political spectrum and has contested definitions and rationales which we discuss in the sections below.

### 3 Defining Community Empowerment: its forms and drivers

This section will look at the various definitions of community empowerment and will discuss its different forms with reference to debates on the nature of *power*, *individual and community empowerment* and the conception of *empowerment as participation*.

#### 3.1 Definitions and drivers of empowerment

Empowerment is a contested concept and has different socio-cultural and political contexts. It has become a 'trendy catchword' which is embraced, much like localism, by both sides of the political spectrum- liberal and conservative. It can trace its origin to discourses around community action in the late 1960s and 1970s (Dominelli, 2000:1) and the debate surrounding it parallels the evolution of the participatory development paradigm (Jupp et al 2010:28).

The empowerment concept itself eludes clear definitions. As Page and Czuba have written (cited in Jupp et al: 2010:28);

our recent literature review of articles indicating a focus on empowerment... resulted in no clear definition of the concept across disciplinary lines...As a result, many have come to view 'empowerment' as nothing more than the most recently popular buzzword to be thrown in to make sure old programme get new funding..the term is still assumed rather than defined' and has been embraced by a diverse range of institutions from the World Bank to Oxfam to radical NGO's.

Some examples of definitions of empowerment from international agencies such as *The World Bank* and *Oxfam* stress:

Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.( World Bank Sourcebook on Empowerment 2002:11)

[Empowerment is] not something that is done to people but a process leading to increased self-awareness, ability to organise, control over resources and assertion of rights/self-determination. ([http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/learning/pastoralism/downloads/cbe\\_workshop.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/learning/pastoralism/downloads/cbe_workshop.pdf))

For the current UK coalition government:

Community Empowerment is about people and government working together to make life better. It is about more people being able to influence decisions about their communities and being supported with effective action on local issues. The Government is committed to empowering communities to build a Big Society they want to give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want. (<http://www.serep.org.uk/resources/Toolkit%20%20A%20guide%20to%20supporting%20councillors%20to%20empower%20their%20communities.pdf>)

In academic literature on empowerment, it is broadly defined as the ability of a person or a group to effect change. As is evident from the following sample of definitions:

Empowerment is a continuous process that enables people to understand, upgrade and use their capacity to better control and gain power over their own lives. It provides people with choices and the ability to choose, as well as to gain more control over resources they need to improve their condition. (Schuftan, 1996:260)

Empowerment may be conceptualised, then, as the ability of community organisations to reward or punish community targets, control what gets talked about in public debate, and shape how residents and public officials think about their community. (Speer and Hughey, 1995:732)

Empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviours to matters of social policy and social change. It is thought to be a process by which individuals gain mastery over their own lives and democratic participation in the life of their community (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988:726)

Empowerment ..is about collective, community (and ultimately class) conscientization – to understand reality critically in order to use the (currently limited) power which even the relatively powerless possess to challenge the powerful, and ultimately to transform that reality through conscious political struggles( Mayo and Craig: 1995:6)

The common element in all these definitions is that empowerment is seen as a process which endows an individual or collective with the ability to orchestrate change in their lives with a view towards having a degree of autonomy and control over the world around them (Weissberg, 1999:17). It is conceptualised as having the

power to make decisions and access and mobilise resources. Notions of 'empowerment' operate on different scales, from empowering individuals to people within particular groups or localities that are often labelled as 'communities'. However, by putting these all together under the term 'community empowerment', there is a danger that tensions between different groups and the complex relationships between them (which may include patterns of multiple membership and diverse linkages) are obscured. The drivers of empowerment are also as varied as its various definitions, they include among others: *The World Bank* driven policies aimed at empowerment of the poor in the global south, feminist calls for empowering women, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) identity politics, and corporations touting customer empowerment and choice.

### 3.2 Forms of empowerment

The varied definitions of empowerment share certain assumptions about various forms of empowerment as linked to debates on the *politics of empowerment*, *collective and individual empowerment*, and *empowerment as participation*, to these we will turn to in the following sections.

#### 3.2.1 Empowerment and the concept of 'power': *politics of empowerment*

Power relations and the way in which power is conceptualised are crucial to issues of empowerment. Functionalist sociologists like Parsons (1963) define power in society as a variable sum where the amount of power in society is not fixed but variable and resides with the members of society as a whole and can increase as society pursues collective goals. The implication of such a position for empowerment practice is then that empowerment of the less powerful or powerless can be achieved without any effects upon the power of the powerful. Neoliberalist stance on market driven empowerment strategies and the co-option of empowerment theory by those on the Right can be seen as being driven by this view of power.

The alternative to this is the zero sum conception of power, which implies that there is a fixed amount of power and that societal relations are marked by the interaction between those who have more of it and those who have less. Taking this view then the empowerment of the powerless cannot occur without taking away power from the powerful. This stance is thus characterised by understanding power in relational terms as exemplified in the Marxist stance which argues that political and economic power is inherently linked and there are limited possibilities for empowerment under



a capitalist mode of production. In this view empowerment 'is a matter of collective mobilisation of marginalised groups against the disempowering activities of both the state and the market' (Mohan and Stokke: 2000:248). Some argue that there exists a non-linear and dialectic relationship between empowerment and power where empowerment is imagined as a ping pong ball: 'oscillating between the polarities of ideology and conscientisation, control and change, personal and collective, identity and class, solidarity and autonomy, centralisation and decentralisation'(Eller cited in Forrest:2000).

The idea of empowerment appeals to all across the political spectrum, the left and the right and to the rich and the poor. This has encouraged some authors to conceptualise power struggles in 'a politics of empowerment' (Weissburgh, 1999). As Forrest (2000) argues that the growth of the idea of empowerment is central to politics in the contemporary era. Empowerment in the public sector has decentralisation as its main feature and as Hambleton and Hogget (1987:35) note: 'cuts to Welfare State expenditure are smoothed over by appeals to empower the people through 'active citizenship' and user involvement' in social services...empowerment is becoming a social project that is intimately connected with the exercise of government.

Thus when community empowerment is virtually government policy it turns out to be really about containment and state control (Mowbray, 2011) and there is a need to challenge the readiness with which we can use empowerment to signify a radical political strategy. As Cruickshank (1999) argues in relation to US government policies such as empowerment zones, empowerment was equated with the privatization of public services and with market solutions to the problems of urban poverty and racism. She (Cruikshank,1999: 60) illustrates this argument by arguing that relations of empowerment involve much like power relations the following four characteristics:

- empowerment is a relationship established by expertise, although it is contested between the expertise of the 'experts' the 'expertise of the objects of empowerment- the disempowered' and the expertise of the 'activists and representatives'.
- It is 'democratically unaccountable exercise' in so much that the relationship is initiated by one party seeking to empower the other

- It is dependent on social scientific models of power and powerlessness which constitute but one kind of knowledge about the objects of empowerment and lastly
- Relations of empowerment can be simultaneously voluntary and coercive

Thus according to Cruickshank (1999:60) the 'will to empower may be well intentioned, but it is a strategy for constituting and regulating the political subjectivities of the empowered. Whether inspired by the promise of self government and autonomy...empowerment is itself a power relationship'.

However in contrast to this view, Allen (2004:25) argues that it is in the relational nature of power and its effects that the key for meaningful intervention and space for radical politics can be found. He argues 'the mediated relationships of power multiply the possibilities for political engagement at different times and spaces'. He suggests thinking about power as a 'topological arrangement - as a relational effect of social interaction' and to look at different modalities of power and how they are constituted differently in time and space. He illustrates his point by looking at contemporary UK state government because of its apparent centralisation of authority on one hand and its attempts to govern at a distance by devolving power to new agencies on the other. The argument is that in order to grasp the whereabouts of power it is not so much the language of centres, hierarchies and dispersions which reveals its presence but 'rather the diverse, cross-cutting arrangements through which power is exercised' (Allen, 2004:29). In a similar vein Dominelli (2000) argues - if we conceptualise the power relations in empowerment as dynamic and fluid we can see that 'they can be both positive and a negative source of energy and can be used collectively.....Power can be shared and new forms of power can arise...where people engage in power relations by exercising their agency either individually or collectively' (Dominelli, 2000:3).

The stress on agency and creating a framework where people feel enabled to exercise their agency can be seen to be a prerequisite for public sector led empowerment. Empowerment is experienced in different domains of a person's life (the state, the market, society) and at different levels (macro, intermediary and local). At the intersection of domains and levels, people can experience different degrees of empowerment which are contingent upon the agency and opportunity structure

within which the actor operates (Alsop, 2005). The state apparatus, even though it derives its legitimacy from wielding a higher degree of power than its citizens, can nonetheless take the lead in providing an enabling democratic framework within which individuals and communities feel supported to make interventions and effect change. The public, third, and even private sector agencies or activists may be involved in creating supportive conditions in which people are more likely to take action themselves. These supportive conditions may be non-directive or involved in directing and shaping the action.

### *3.22 Individual to collective empowerment: community empowerment*

Wallerstein and Bernstein (1994:142) argue that terms community empowerment and empowerment are interchangeable where the former is 'the preferred usage because of the social context in which empowerment takes place, and thus embodies an interactive process of change where institutions and communities become transformed. Rather than pitting individuals against communities the community empowerment construct focuses on both individual and community change'. In spite of this view of community as being the default site for empowerment, there is debate among scholars between the nature of community versus individual empowerment.

Literatures in community studies which take their lead from the discipline of psychology have traditionally leaned towards a more individualised conception of empowerment. This literature projects 'the image of an empowered person (or group)' based on 'separation, individuation, and individual mastery'. In such a scenario 'empowerment theory becomes more about conflict rather than co-operation and control rather than communion' (Riger, 1993:285). Feminist interventions in empowerment theory (Gilligan, 1982) provide a contrast to this conception of 'the empowered individual' by revealing that relatedness and interdependence are central attributes of the human psyche and as such it is counterproductive to disassociate empowerment at an individual level, away from the broader context of its occurrence which is in associations, networks and community.

For scholars like Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988:726) 'empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems,

and proactive behaviours to matters of social policy and social change'. Although it can be a multilevel concept linked to different settings such as organisations and communities it finds expression at an individual level, in what they term, as 'psychological empowerment'. However, they also argue that in spite of the role played by individual attributes such as self-esteem and self belief in the experience of perceived control over one's own or the community's affairs, they are nonetheless related to the broader empowerment construct and are very much enhanced and experienced via collective participation. This view is echoed by Speer and Hughey (1995:730), who from their research on community organising, 'conceptualise empowerment as the manifestation of social power at individual, organisational and community levels of analysis.'

It is important to note that empowerment is seen as a process and as an outcome of good governance practices which take into account local needs, perceptions and requirements for change with the view of strengthening democracy. As Humphries(1997: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/2/1/3>) argues empowerment cannot be something that is simply done to people, for empowerment initiatives to realise their potential, state agents, policy makers and the intellectuals all need to:

..acknowledge the practice of liberty - it is not something which can be conferred; it is not something gained once and for all, but has a view of power as fluid, a back and forward movement rather than binary; which is available to dominated groups; which is multifaceted and contradictory; which recognizes both discursive and material realities; which is historically and culturally specific; and which is grounded in the struggle for survival of the most disadvantaged and the poorest, not in the privileging of the researcher or other groups as the norm or referent ( Humphries, 1997).

Thus, empowerment is most consistently viewed in the literature in the form of a dynamic continuum involving: personal empowerment, the development of small mutual groups, community organisations, partnerships and social and political action. [It is argued] that the potential for community empowerment is gradually maximised as people progress from individual to collective action along this continuum' (Lavarack and Wallerstein, 2001:182).

### ***3.33 Empowerment as an outcome and process of participation***

The most common form in which empowerment is conceived is via the idea of community participation. The *empowerment as participation* construct can trace it

roots to the participatory paradigm in the field of development studies (Freir 1972, Chambers 1983). Participation has come to be seen as the antidote to the top-down modernisation approach to development and empowerment. Empirical studies report a strong correlation between empowerment and participation (Lyons et al 2001, Perrons & Skyers 2003) and moves towards more participatory forms of government are advocated by policy makers (DCLG 2009, NCR 2006). Researchers have provided tools and models for empowerment through participation, such as the 'ladder of participation' (Arnstein, 1969), the CLEAR framework (Lowndes et. al. 2006) and a typology of 'spaces for participation in a power cube' (See Gaventa, 2005 <http://www.odi.org.uk/events/documents/139-presentation-1-john-gaventa-participation-citizenship-exploring-power-change.pdf>). The emerging consensus is, that weather via simply turning out to vote or by attending public local council meetings, a citizenry that actively participates in the decision making processes that affect it makes for an empowered polity and for successful democratic governance.

The literature is disproportionately skewed towards an empowerment by participation model which has led several critics to question its efficacy in bringing about genuine empowerment. For instance, Cooke and Khotari (2001) challenge the move towards participation as the dominant route to community empowerment and 'demand at best their rethinking, if not their abandonment' (2001:2). For them, making participation compulsory for empowerment initiatives constitutes a tyranny as 'the illegitimate and/or unjust exercise of power'. Their argument is that by emphasising participation as the main channel of empowerment, it becomes a prerequisite, a 'tick box' category for most development initiatives as in a 'participation by command' culture. Moreover, the significant question of participation in what form and on what scale is not always made clear in this form of empowerment initiatives. The advice varies from encouraging participation in local community groups, local government structures, by voting and through various forms of community action. One of the ways that community empowerment is pursued by governments is by promoting it in a pre-neutralised form, where participation is encouraged in already existing institutions and structures where power hierarchies are predefined. In such a scenario there is little room for effecting change and as a result people rapidly become disillusioned. Thus, empowerment is best viewed as being about more than just about the state/citizen interface, but about the interaction between citizens and

all forms of wider powers that influence their lives (See Gaventa 2005 on 'closed, invited, and claimed or created spaces of participation'). This approach to seeing participation as compulsory for empowerment and development initiatives forecloses the possibility of understanding inequality as a problem of power relations and political influence.

In contrast Hickey and Mohan (2005:3) argue that the view of participation in Cooke and Kothari's critique is that of a narrow reductionist form popular among development agencies and the evidence so far suggests that 'participation has actually deepened and extended its role in development, with a new range of approaches to participation emerging across theory, policy and practice'. They reconceptualise participation as a genuinely transformative approach within citizenship analysis. Drawing upon civic republicanism to highlight the links between participation and citizenship they argue 'the notion of citizenship thus offers a useful political, social and historical form of analysis within which to situate understandings of participation, as located within the formation of a social contract between citizenry and authority' (Hickey and Mohan, 2005:70-71).

This citizen-state interface is being championed as a key element in localism driven debates on community empowerment. Here good governance is viewed as dependent not just on fulfilling citizens' demands for entitlement and obligation accrued to them by the welfare state but also on facilitating 'the practices through which individuals and groups formulate and claim new rights or struggles to expand and maintain existing rights' (Isin and Wood 1999 cited in Hickey and Mohan 2005).

#### **4 Linking Localism and Community Empowerment: Case Studies**

Our analyses of the concepts of localism and community empowerment and the research literature on the interactions between them reveal substantive grounds for questioning the assumption that increased localism necessarily promotes community empowerment. We identified particular conditions (See section 5) that need to be fulfilled if localism and decentralisation are to enhance community empowerment. To understand these conditions we analysed four international case studies:

1. Fung and Wright's (2001) study of Empowered Deliberative Democracy
2. Avritzer (2006) study of participatory district budgeting in Brazil

3. Gaventa's (2004) study on Local democracy and Community Participation
4. Glaser et al's (1997) study on local government sponsored community empowerment, Orange County, USA.

We also considered two assessments (NLGN 2005 and LRGRU 2005) of the New Labour government's localist policies in the UK.

We selected these case studies because each provides wide-ranging international examples of localist governance in both the global North and the South; focuses on a key area of the localism and community empowerment debate; and is widely cited, e.g., Fung and Wright's (2001) study had over 450 citations. (See Appendix for detailed selection criteria).

#### **4.1 Fung and Wright's (2001) study on Empowered Deliberative Democracy**

Fung and Wright (2001) explore five examples of empowered participatory governance in both the global North and South, out of which four are of direct relevance to our review as they show how local participation under the stewardship of public and private actors can bring about community empowerment. These are:

- Neighbourhood governance councils in Chicago which address the fears and hopes of inner-city Chicago residents by turning an urban bureaucracy on its head and devolving substantial power over policing and public schools.
- The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) which brings together organized labour, large firm management, and government to provide entry level work training to workers and facilitate the transition into meaningful careers in volatile economic times.
- The participatory budgeting scheme in Porto Alegre, Brazil which enables residents of that city to participate directly in forging the city budget and
- Panchayat reforms in West Bengal and Kerala, India that devolve substantial administrative and fiscal development power to individual villages.

Their conclusions from these case examples was that they have resulted in

...deepening the ways in which ordinary people can effectively participate in and influence policies which affect their lives...They are participatory because they rely upon the commitment and capabilities of ordinary people to make sensible decisions through reasoned deliberation and empowered because they attempt to tie action to discussion (Fung and Wright, 2001:11).

Based on these studies, they propose a model of Empowered Deliberative Democracy (EDD) that include three broad 'design properties' which are crucial for

participatory approaches if they are to deliver gains for localities and governments alike: First, empowered participatory governance is best carried out in tandem with a process of genuine devolution, e.g., ‘the administrative and political devolution of power to local action units’ who are ‘charged with devising and implementing solutions and held accountable to performance criteria.’(2001:21). Secondly, they advocate a strong coordinating role for the central government unit, proposing a ‘coordinated decentralisation rather than autonomous decentralisation.’ The central government will ‘reinforce the quality of local deliberation and problem solving in a variety of ways: coordinating and distributing resources, solving problems that the local units cannot address themselves, rectifying pathological or incompetent decision making in failing groups, and diffusing innovations and learning across boundaries’ (Fung and Wright 2001:22). Thirdly, these approaches are ‘state centred and not voluntaristic [which means they ] generally seek to transform the mechanisms of state power into permanently mobilized deliberative-democratic, grassroots forms’ (Fung and Wright 2001:17). They attempt to ‘institutionalize the ongoing participation of ordinary citizens, most often in their role as consumers of public goods, in the direct determination of what those goods are and how they should be best provided’ (Fung and Wright 2001:23).

#### **4.2 Avritzer’s study of participatory district budgeting in Brazil**

According to the Demos project in *Better Local Government*, which lists some twenty one initiatives worldwide as examples of good practice in local government, participatory budgeting was first introduced in Porto Alegre in 1989 and is today practiced in 103 Brazilian cities. Participatory budgeting involves a series of meetings between March and July each year which host public deliberations on the city’s budget priorities. During this period the Municipality (the Prefeitura) coordinates two major meetings (called rodadas) in each of the sixteen administrative areas into which the city has been divided. During the first rodada the municipality accounts for its policy, action and expenditure during the previous year and submits to the area residents and elected citizen’s representatives its investment plan for the coming year. It is in the first rodada that the residents of each area elect their citizen representatives to a Forum of Area Delegates, proportionally to the number of residents that attend the rodada at a ratio of one representative for every ten citizens. The same system of ‘proportional representation’ is used to elect delegates



to a parallel series of six thematic plenary sessions for key development issues for the city and areas. After the first rodada, the elected delegates then organise a series of informal meetings in their community (rodadas intermediaries) to discuss local needs compared to resources that may be secured. They also determine their expenditure priorities between education, housing and sanitation. Following this round of meetings is the second rodada. For this meeting between delegates and Municipality, a Council for Participatory Budgeting (COP) is established which has formal responsibility for finalising the budget for the coming fiscal year. Although clearly there are continuing budget and service obligations on a year to year basis, the COP has to establish priorities for, and allocate, around 10 to 20 percent of municipal budgets which involve flexible expenditure or new flows of funds into the local authority, for example, for urban regeneration and economic development. (for a detailed description of the practice see

<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/60203408/Demos-International-Good-Practice-Report>).

Participatory budgeting in Brazil is regarded by many policy makers in the UK as testimony to the power of localism; it was one of the proposals of Ruth Kelly's 2008 White Paper *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power* and has been continued and promoted by the current coalition government's continued funding of the New Labour started Participatory Budgeting Unit (See <http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk/>). However, Avritzer (2006) notes that the success of participatory budgeting in Brazil has to be appreciated *in situ* and for it to be replicated in other national contexts a number of considerations need to be made. The main reasons why participatory budgeting is so effective in Porto Alegre is because it can rely on a long historical record of public mobilisation and the presence of other associative movements in the city. Moreover, in order to maximise the impact of participation and community empowerment, the city has redesigned the administrative regions so that they overlapped with the spatial distribution of the already existing forums of mobilisation. The legal infrastructure for participation is also enshrined in the Brazilian Constitution via the acknowledgement of popular sovereignty.

### 4.3 Gaventa's (2004) study on Local democracy and Community Participation

Gaventa (2004) in his review of international evidence on community participation and local democracy also provides successful case study examples that are pertinent in highlighting a positive link between localism and community empowerment. The review quotes successful government legislations aimed at promoting community participation in local governance in countries such as India, Bolivia:

- The Law of Popular Participation passed by the Bolivian government in 1994 mandated neighbourhood based participatory processes, as part of the process of local government decentralisation by formally recognising grassroots level 'social organisations' as registered community representatives in the planning process. It also required local governments to legally create 'citizens' oversight or Vigilance committees in each municipality, which are empowered to freeze municipal budgets if actual expenditures vary too far from the planning processes' (Gaventa 2004:21).
- In India, as part of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, local government has been given the task of planning for economic development and social justice, which often begins at village level in an assembly of local representatives called the 'gram sabha' (village assembly). Effects of this can be seen for example in the state of Kerala, where as part of the People's Planning Campaign, local governments received 40% of the state budget allocation for local services. Grassroots planning processes were carried out in thousands of villages which were then approved by direct vote in popular village assemblies. Similarly in the state of Madhya Pradesh, a new law was passed in 2001 which virtually transferred all powers concerning local development, including budgeting, levying taxes, education and social justice, to the village assemblies. (Gaventa 2004:21).

These examples highlight the valuable role that government initiatives can play in bringing about community empowerment by facilitating participation at a local level. One of the main findings of his review on citizen involvement in local governance was the need for strong legal and statutory provisions which support and enshrine public participation in local governance. In the case of the UK, developing 'an inventory of the legal and statutory frameworks that support community participation, and how those in turn relate to local governance' could be argued as marking the first step towards effective community empowerment (Gaventa: 2004:25). Moreover, the approach to community empowerment needs to be seen as a continuum, where on one end of the spectrum are mechanisms that lay the foundations for empowerment by 'creating the pre-conditions for voice, through awareness-raising and building the capacity to mobilise' (Goetz & Gaventa 2001) and on the other end are attempts

which strengthen local government initiatives in increasing their receptivity to local needs and demands.

#### **4.4 Glaser et al's (1997) study on local government sponsored community empowerment, Orange County, USA**

This study examines a partnership between local government in Orange County, Florida, and the community of South Apopka, a predominantly African American neighbourhood located in the Orlando metropolitan area. South Apopka has a poverty rate of more than 20% and an unemployment rate nearly twice the state average. The partnership in South Apopka included the formation of a Community Based Organisation (CBO), referred to as the Apopka Coalition to Improve Our Neighbourhoods (ACTION). The CBO has its headquarters in a community centre situated in the neighbourhood. The Orange County authorities created a companion government entity in the neighbourhood called the South Apopka Project (SAP) to assist ACTION during its development phase.

The research conducted by Glaser et al (1997:77) uses survey data as empirical evidence associated with the Orange County government SAP and the ACTION community-development vehicle 'to assess the extent to which those associated with the development effort felt they are empowered [and also] examines linkages between perceptions of empowerment and perceptions of community change.' It is one of the few studies which offer quantitative (statistical correlation) evidence in aid of analysing the impact of government sponsored CBO's on community empowerment. Their research findings provide some valuable insights into the nature of community empowerment. They conclude that, as expected there is a strong co-relation between 'local government responsiveness and community involvement in decision making and perceptions of community improvement. However, in the early stages of community development, citizen participation in the development activities is not strongly correlated with either the perception of community impact or the anticipation of positive change' (1997:76). Consequently, in order to offset the lack of confidence and/or apathy in community initiatives, community empowerment efforts need to actively seek and encourage strong community leadership, existence of grass roots movements, information and communication as tools to secure citizen participation and the will and integrity of key public figures. Thus, their research provides evidence that community development

models that actively develop and build upon local citizen participation coupled with strong leadership both from government and community figures can eventually result in positive community outcomes.

#### 4.5 Evidence from the UK Experience of local government reforms

Community empowerment, understood broadly as active participation by citizens in local democracy and decision making, has been the main goal in the localism driven reforms of local government initiated under New Labour. There are two reviews that have assessed the evidence on the effectiveness of these initiatives – both were published in 2005 and include –

The New Local Government Network (NLGN) commissioned *Councils Embracing Localism: lessons in decentralisation from Birmingham, Wakefield and West Sussex* and

The Local and Regional Government Research Unit (LRGRU) digest *New Localism - Citizen Engagement, Neighbourhood and Public Services*

The NLGN study conducted by Anna Randle looks specifically at the impact of localisation on three case study councils and their efforts in encouraging community empowerment. She concludes that there are three different models under which each council was operating its localism initiatives. West Sussex's 'County Council Committees' are primarily concerned with localising certain aspects of county council budgets, functions and services, empowering councillors and supporting citizen engagement. Wakefield 'Local Area Partnerships' have no devolved services or budgets, and aim to enable joined up engagement and influence over services among key local partners. While Birmingham's 'Going local scheme' could be seen to combine the two models, with devolved council budgets, services and managers, committees of councillors, and a local partnership approach at the District level (30). She argues that all three models are 'not strong models of citizen empowerment' but are more concerned with 'citizen engagement'. They can be seen 'more empowering in a direct way of councillors than citizens'. She also points out that although 'localisation is the right thing to do in terms of creating citizen engagement and empowerment...but...greater citizen engagement does not come about as an automatic result of localisation' (Randle,2005:32-33). Arnstein's ladder of citizen empowerment is cited as one way of distinguishing between different levels of participation and that for localism to be effective in community empowerment:

- the emphasis on engagement needs to be much wider than meetings held in public (as was the case then)
- localisation should go further to a more local level by considering other than just area based models of empowerment. They can include reform to neighbourhood governance and
- citizen empowerment through neighbourhoods should be 'with' and 'through' local government, not by by-passing councils(Randle 2005:33-35).

Randle's conclusions (2005) about community empowerment stopping at community engagement while not involving actual devolution of power and decision making to the level of citizens are also echoed by the study commissioned by LRGRU in 2005 on the impact of new localism initiatives on local democracy. It cites evidence from several local authority attempts at encouraging community participation and argues that approaches taken by authorities to facilitate participation tend to be more passive than active. It makes recommendations for more active approaches, in particular, those involving direct user engagement in service delivery or decision making. It also concludes that community empowerment can be facilitated by ensuring that:

- new localism initiatives are supported by adequate education, training and consultancy to community organisations and citizens
- community Planning Partnerships are truly representative of the community and not just 'communities of interest' or geographical areas of interest and
- new organisational frameworks are required to co-ordinate the new working relationships between the community and the authority as well as within the community(8-10).

The findings from the NLGN and LRGRU study are also supported by other empirical studies which look at UK government attempts at rolling out localism driven initiatives such as the New Deal for Communities (McCulloch 2004), Community Strategies as part of Local Strategic Partnerships (Raco et al 2006) and Local Area Agreements (Ellison and Ellison,2006). The broad conclusion from these studies point towards a lack of coherence in New Labour's approach to community empowerment via local government reform. Gaventa (2004:24) highlights two reasons for the limited nature of the UK experiencing in participatory governance when one compares it to

experiments in other countries. Firstly, local council attempts at greater involvement have focussed on processes of consultation rather than increasing active participation. Secondly, unlike in other countries the legal and statutory frameworks supporting participation in the UK have been relatively weak. In most government initiatives, 'community empowerment and participation have been seen as add-ons' to the responsibilities of local government and 'were rarely linked in a meaningful way to local government modernisation and reform'. Stoker (2002) argues that New Labour's approach to local government strategy was based on the 'principles of lottery' and was marred by a lack of trust between New Labour and the institutions of devolved government. On the whole, New Labour's localism model, based as it was on the 'equal opportunity for all rhetoric' promised more than it could deliver (Ellison and Ellison, 2006) and is now seen by many (McCulloch 2004, Fuller 2008) as nothing more than an extension of neoliberalism.

### **5 Linking Localism and Community Empowerment: conceptual issues**

In our review, we have used four international case studies and two government assessments of UK government's localist policies to explore the functional links between localism and community empowerment. The evidence it can be argued, largely supports the claim that localism in its variants such as local government reform, decentralisation, devolution and participatory governance brings about community empowerment. The dominant model for community empowerment is based on increasing citizen participation in the practices of local government rather than on independent community action. The case studies highlight four conditions under which this form of localism has a positive bearing on government efforts to increase community empowerment. These include localist initiatives that:

- i. are actively pursued by different tiers of government as policy priorities in contrast to using community empowerment and localism as mere tokenistic additions to a centrally-driven and controlled policy;
- ii. involve a move away from the mere rhetoric of localism to active devolution of power to different scales of local government;
- iii. are supported by complementary legal and statutory frameworks to accompany the devolution of power; and

- iv. promote and encourage active forms of civil society to organise and engage by supporting community leadership and grass roots movements.

It is important to note that the case studies highlighted here vary significantly in their scope, rationale and interpretation of the terms 'localism' and 'community empowerment' and as such can at the most be regarded as examples of best practice in government policy. They are also very diverse studies ranging in examples from Brazil, to India to Bolivia and the US. Consequently, they cannot be regarded as easily replicable examples, dependent as they are on particular political, socio-economic and cultural conditions in these countries. Moreover, the ways in which the policy makers in the examples have adopted localism and community empowerment is not uniform. Where in the Brazilian case of participatory budgeting, deliberative democracy becomes the conduit of delivering empowerment, the Indian and Bolivian examples (from Gaventa's study) are geared more towards establishing legal and statutory frameworks to facilitate policies that give different tiers of local government power to initiate and implements policies aimed at community empowerment. The US example is largely concentrated on local government sponsored community capacity building. Hence, these examples might not provide a full proof blueprint for localism driven community empowerment. At best, they offer examples of encouraging signs of the potential effectiveness of localist initiatives in enhancing community empowerment under the four conditions outlined above. In addition to the case study analysis, our review also identified five conceptual issues in the literature which problematise the links between localism and community empowerment:

- Different and/or conflicting rationales for localism and community empowerment
- Problems with conceptualisation of the term 'local scale'
- Problems with conceptualisation of the 'community'
- The localism of social capital thesis
- Technologies of citizenship in community empowerment

### 5.1 Different and/or conflicting rationales for localism and community empowerment

One of the key issues in the localism and community empowerment debate is the different rationales which drive the adoption of the terms localism and community empowerment as a metaphor for governance. For instance as Clarke (1993:5) argues 'the political rationales for localism are not based wholly on privatisation or community values or even necessarily locational logics; they also include the instrumental use of localism as a political strategy to circumvent or replace outmoded structures of central bureaucracies'. Consequently, efforts such as local government reform for community empowerment find the limit of their impact in merely changing institutional structures or redefining the remit of local authority functions. In a politics defined by media sound bites, government policy initiatives for localism get couched in an ever newer vocabulary to keep up with the latest paradigms in governance but are not always supported by strong legal and statutory frameworks. As has been argued was the case in New Labour politics where 'localism' became a problem of 'political economy... a neoliberal conceit' (Davis 2009:419) characterised by rapid shifts in localist discourse ranging in vocabulary of new localism, to double devolution to place shaping.

Moreover, the spectre of neoliberalism looms large over the localism and community empowerment debate. Neoliberal governance, it is argued uses 'space as its privileged instrument' (Brenner and Theodore 2002:343) which results in the commodification of empowerment. As is evident in the neo-liberal takeover of the terms such as 'social capital, empowerment, community participation which were once the subversive, emancipatory tools of activists [but have now been] depoliticised in their interpretation by the development industry and by governments' (Miraftab 2004:239). It is also important to note that although expert opinion is in favour for enhancing consideration of 'the local' in government decision making, the 'organisational' 'economic' 'political' and 'ideological' tensions that exist between central and local government invariably adversely influence all attempts at community empowerment. As Saunders notes:

in the organisational dimension there is a tension between centralised direction and local self determination, in the economic dimension there is a tension between economic and social priorities, in the political dimension there is tension between rational planning as seen from the centre and



democratic accountability; and in the ideological dimension there is tension between social-citizenship rights and private property rights' (Saunders 1984:30).

As a result of these tensions, even though there is evidence in favour of the links between localism and community empowerment, localism when translated on to a larger scale seems to fall victim to the paradoxes of neo-liberal governance which is unable to reconcile the tension between individualism and communitarianism.

## 5.2 Problems with conceptualisation of the 'local scale'

Geographers have long argued that in contrast to the nested 'Russian doll model' of the global, national, local levels; the concept of scale is best conceptualised as being both, fluid and fixed, strategic, and relational. It is socially constructed (Marston,2000) and the particular characteristics which make up a given scale are not inherent but contingent upon the different conditions and opportunities offered to different actors in particular time and space conditions. Investing faith in making one scale, such as the local, more significant or – as seems evident in the Big Society – *desirable* over certain others are fraught with contradictions. Some like Purcell (2006:1925) argue against the 'localist trap' of thinking that 'decentralisation is necessary for democratisation', thus making the local the most favourable scale for intervention in pursuit of community empowerment by academics and policy makers alike. As such, most of our evidence can be regarded as falling into the 'localist trap', with policy literature tending to do this more than academic literature. Purcell's (2006) argument that localisation should raise no a priori assumptions (such as democratisation, empowerment) and it should be seen as a means to an end rather than an end in itself can be seen as a timely call in the current zeitgeist where 'we are all localist now' (Walker, 2009).

We could consider that this might be the case for any scale or indeed any form of 'territorial trap' (Agnew 1994). Moreover perhaps the really significant trap in all this is to see politics as essentially topographical, when, in fact, much of what people practice as 'the political' or indeed as routine everyday habits and practices is also topological, connecting to various individuals and communities 'elsewhere' (perhaps through work, but also through friendship patterns and social media not least).

The main challenge then for the localist issues related to community empowerment lies in capturing the boundaries of the local in a functional administrable unit which once

identified can serve as a favourable site for policy intervention. A key critical contribution in identifying such a site has been by Lowndes and Sullivan (2008:57) via their advocacy of neighbourhood governance. While recognising the difficulties of defining the neighbourhood they argue for a 'civic', 'social' 'political' and 'economic' rationale for neighbourhood level governance where the 'civic rationale' is characterised by citizen participation and empowerment. Taking inspiration from this fourfold rationale for neighbourhood working Durose & Richardson (2009:36) present an empirical study which asks the question 'does neighbourhood working empower citizen?'. Their conclusions broadly point towards evidence that 'neighbourhood action planning is beginning to take shape in some local authorities in the UK. However, their study also finds that there is a dominance of the 'economic' and 'political' rationales in neighbourhood governance 'where neighbourhoods are defined and implemented as too large a scale and based on political control rather than people's day to day experience' (Durose and Richardson, 2009: 42-43). Moreover it is with the civic rationale – aimed at empowering citizens – that local authorities have particularly struggled. Overall their persuasion is that even though neighbourhood, as a scale in focus for national level policy and findings, slips in and out of favour with subsequent governments in power, they are nonetheless an 'enduring site that citizens identify with, if defined in proper ways' (Durose and Richardson, 2009:49) and as such can form a valuable arena for empowering citizens.

### **5.3 Problems with conceptualisation of 'community' in community empowerment**

The term *community* appears as the focus of neoliberal governance in parallel to the demands for the 'rollback' (Peck and Tickell:2002) of the state in light of the crises in the fiscal viability of national welfare states and from the pressures of governing increasing complex and diverse societies. A literature review undertaken in 2005 for the Electoral Commission in England to assist with the establishment of ward boundaries within local government (Chisholm & Dench 2005:5) reported that there was no single agreed definition of *community* and that 'in the full meaning of the concept, communities consist of complex patterns of personal inter-relationships and that much of this behaviour lies in what may be called the 'private realm', where it is not readily visible to the 'public realm...all that can be hoped for is an *approximation*

to the pattern of local communities in the territory of a local authority'. As such, there are considerable constraints under which the term community can be employed both as a site and object of governance.

In a review of New Labour's Community Strategies Raco et al (2006) argue that the agenda of 'developing community focused governmentalities in aid of community empowerment' finds itself drawn in the tensions inherent in the opportunities and constraints contained within the concept of community. The uncertainty over what constitutes a 'community' and how to define its boundaries has a significant impact on localist driven governance which at its worse can result in community becoming 'a false door'(Herbert:2005) which traps populations und labels such as communities in need, problem communities and ethnic communities. As Wallace (2010:805) in his assessment of New Labour driven community empowerment argues that 'in seeking to empower 'cohesive' and 'sustainable' communities, policy circumscribed local voices and obscured the complex interplay that constitutes local life worlds'. Similar critiques of the community empowerment rhetoric of New Labour policies have been made by Amin who suggests (2005:614) that 'community' was a key unit in the 'repackaging of the economy and society' associated with the Third Way, and a means of segregating and localizing the socio-economic problems generated by neoliberalism. In reference to New Labour's community cohesion policy framework, Worley(2005:483) argues that the use of the ambiguous term community 'enables for language to become deracialized, whilst at the same time the language of community cohesion draws upon earlier discourses of assimilation through notions of intergration' undermining previous attempts at multiculturalism. Raco and Flint (2001:609) in their research on the working of the Community Councils in Stirling and Fife highlight 'place-space tensions' that have marked the search for community participation and empowerment by local authorities by arguing that

'in an attempt to establish new domains of congruence between places and spaces ...policy reforms have drawn on different rationales....one the one hand they sought to mollify and legitimate policy by identifying and incorporating place based communities into decision making processes. On the other hand, they have developed policy programmes which use those very communities as functional spaces of action...and as such attempts to 'freeze' or 'capture' community involvement in particular points of space-time is ..fraught with difficulty'.

Since, the notion of community has such evocative power, it is not surprising that state instrumentalities try to manage, regulate and contain it in some ways so that it might become a tool of social management rather than something that is almost inherently unpredictable.

#### **5.4 The localism of social capital thesis**

The localism of the social capital argument is made by Mohan and Stokke (2000) in their essay on the dangers of localism. They recognise the evidence which largely supports a positive correlation between the degree of social capital and the extent of community empowerment in an area. However, they argue that an overreliance on social capital, in policy and academic literature, as a tool in delivering empowerment at the community level ignores some of the pressing critiques of the social capital thesis (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). Approaches to community empowerment via participation, it can be argued, turn a blind eye to the path dependent nature of social capital and they also ignore the state's role in enabling or destroying social capital. More significantly, the 'thrust of social capital theory is to strengthen economic growth' and in this respect 'it reflects the colonisation of the social sciences by neoclassical economics as it attempts to give an economic rationale to all non economic behaviour'. In this sense it allows for sidestepping the state and its relation to the global economy since the economic basis is not rendered problematic but the focus is on the shortcomings of the local society (Amin,2005) in inserting itself into economic life (Mohan and Stokke 2000:257-258).

The most compelling critique of localism inspired initiatives at increasing social capital among communities by state agents centre on the nature and types of social capital in action in such initiatives. Robert Putnam, the original proponent of the social capital concept, also recognised that social capital can take many forms and is not always a force for good. It is reliant not just on the existence of linkages and relationships (formal or informal) between community group members but on the nature and scale of these relationships which can take on a bonding, bridging, and linking role in defining the strength, shape and ultimately the efficacy of social capital. According to Woolcock and Sweetser (2002:26), 'bonding social capital refers to connections to people like you [family, relatives, kinship]...bridging social

capital refers to connections to people who are not like you in some demographic sense,' and 'linking social capital pertains to connections with people in power, whether they are in politically or financially influential positions. 'Linking social capital also includes vertical connections to formal institutions (Woolcock, 2001). Putnam distinguished between - 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital where the former is characterised by strong intra-community ties and the latter with strong extra-community networks. Localism driven government initiatives are generally aimed at harvesting existing bonding social capital among communities in the guise of community empowerment which is evident a) in the effectiveness of public service outcomes in middle and higher income areas (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004) or b) in community cohesion and community capacity building initiatives aimed at minority ethnic and/or lower income groups.

This distinction between the different forms of social capital has given rise to the 'synergy view' on social capital (Woolcock and Narayan 2000: 13) which links the concept of social capital and state function by 'capturing the dynamic aspects of state-society relations and suggests that different interventions are needed for different combinations of governance and bridging social capital in a group, community or society'. For community empowerment to occur via localist initiatives aimed at increasing the efficacy of social capital they will need to be tailor made to suit the *type* of social capital dominant among a group with an eye to the fundamentally connected nature of communities.

### **5.5 Technologies of citizenship in community empowerment**

Cruikshank (1999:2) argues that empowerment is but one form of 'technologies of citizenship' which however well intentioned, are invariably aimed at regulating citizens via empowerment as a strategy for governing the very subjects whose problems they seek to address. A sentiment also echoed by Humphries (1997, 1996) when she argues that empowerment cannot be something that 'is done to people' and 'our efforts to liberate perpetuate the very relations of dominance'.

Localism via participatory forms of governance, it can be argued, sees the creation of 'new identities of citizen-users-identities which frequently combined an apparent increase in power (as partner, as customer) with increasing responsibilities (to participate in policy making or service delivery, to make informed choices) (Barnes

and Prior, 2009:5). In the words of Durose, Greasley & Richardson (2009:3) the changing character of local governance includes changes in the nature of the '*practice of citizenship*' as linked to citizen rights and responsibilities.

However as research evidence indicates local communities feel overextended and burdened by neo-liberal offloading, not empowered (Herbert, 2005). For example in the celebrated case of neighbourhood planning in Seattle; those active in the process expressed concern that city government dumped responsibility for public projects onto neighbourhood NGOs. One activist felt that the city was withdrawing from the neighbourhoods, that they "dumped a bunch of stuff back in our lap" (Ceraso, cited in Purcell, 2008: 135).

In the UK, the current coalition government's political intent to shift from a 'big state' to a 'big society' sees localism appear like some spatial fix for enabling the flourishing of a new spirit of capitalist entrepreneurship: one that need not be protestant but must certainly be market oriented. Moreover, the summoning of local community responsabilization sees the creation of new citizen subjectivities such as in the discourse of the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving poor' (Bowlby, 2010). Moreover, while the kind of localism being advocated by the UK coalition government is presented as enabling a place-oriented and rights-enhanced and empowered polity, there are little signs of any serious discussion on the policy landscape in which such an approach might work. The shift from government to the vocabulary of governance has been in parallel with the move towards increasing responsibilities on the polity to take decisions about their welfare under the banner of participatory governance. Little thought has gone into the tension between representative and participatory democracy. As Taylor (2004:74) argues:

Not enough thought has gone into the relationship between the two with the result that many politicians are no longer sure of their role and feel threatened by the power that they feel is being given to community representatives. It is this that creates 'wounded lions' at all levels that frustrate the rhetoric from the centre'.

Thus, when power is devolved via 'technologies of citizenship', (as is the case in the localism driven *community empowerment as participation model*) the governmentalities of active citizenship and participatory democracy can be regarded

as competing and conflating with more representational and managerial modes of local governance, raising questions about the role of the welfare state, its legitimacy and authority and more widely, the nature of democracy itself.

## **6 Conclusions and directions for future research**

There is a lack of clarity and coherence in the literature in the usage and interpretations of the terms 'localism' and 'community empowerment'. They are often defined by implication or tacitly assumed to have an accepted definition as is specifically the case in the literature on localism. Most authors use the term localism to imply decentralisation, local autonomy, local government functions and devolution when referring to the functional aspects of the term. Closely related to these are the ideological underpinnings of the various 'isms' that support the desire for localism driven politics. In contrast to the literature on localism, the definitions on 'community empowerment' are many but varied, as the review has identified. The scale of localist driven community empowerment also varies ranging in focus from tiers of local governments, government and non governmental institutions, 'local people', community workers, grass roots activists to the ever present but elusive 'local community'.

In such a scenario it can be assumed that the term localism and its presumed benefits such as community empowerment exhibit a hegemonic presence in policy and academic literatures. In its hegemonic form, localism particularly in its various political avatars, works as a powerful ideological pull with a charm for one and all (even at opposing sides of the political spectrum) principally because its definition, resultant meaning and expression are so difficult to pin down. Localism it seems, finds function in policy discourses in its implied meaning of 'power moves' (Carnegie Trust,2008) and 'empowerment' by constitutently deferring definition to an ever slippery realm of contrasting ideologies, rationales and outcomes. The links between the theoretical and empirical realms of localism are not always explored and examined in the literature. Consequently, its adoption in public policy can run into difficulty related to the five tensions we have identified in the previous section. Thus, we argue that localism and community empowerment should not be understood in terms of isolated islands of either particular local areas or particular empowered community groups. Instead, our review has highlighted the need for policy-focussed research on the fundamentally connected nature of the communities that are

involved, and the importance of engaging with this interconnected nature as part of both free civil society and governance if they are to be truly empowered. Our review suggests the following directions for future research:

- Examining the conceptual underpinnings of the terms ‘localism’ and ‘community empowerment’, together with research that uncovers the historical trajectory of the term ‘localism’ in policy and academic literature.
- Analysing the implications of diverse uses of the term ‘community’ and the scales of its practice and presence in relation to empowerment by addressing the linkages between the local, national and global through notions of social capital, wider networks and political relationships.
- Investigating the nature and constitution of the neighbourhood as the spatial expression of the local which captures to an extent the locus of many communities and is a functional site for policy targets.
- Exploring how the interplay between localist politics and wider collective movements interacts with community empowerment discourses and issues of diversity and identity within local interactions.
- Identifying the mechanisms through which the role of the state in relation to community empowerment is being changed for instance, in light of the ‘Big Society’ agenda (including the Localism Bill) in England and the Community Empowerment Bill in Scotland.

Lastly, all these research recommendations could go into addressing the bigger question about the conditions of citizenship and governance under which distinctive localist politics can flourish in the current political and economic context.

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### Appendix Note on research activities and methodology

The project, which ran from March to September 2011, involved three main activities: literature search, literature review, and critical synthesis. Working in the spirit of the Cochrane Collaboration's protocols for Systematic Review, we used Web of Science, Google Scholar and Google to undertake extensive searches of the academic and policy literatures on localism and community empowerment. These comprised 32 searches using Boolean combinations of keywords related to 'localism and decentralisation' and 'community empowerment', resulting in a total of 51,197 hits. These initial outputs were filtered to eliminate duplicates and false positives unrelated to the themes of the review, leaving 593 relevant records. Bibliographic data for each reference (including abstracts and citation counts) was downloaded and stored in an *Endnote* database. Abstracts were read where available and each record assigned a priority (high/medium/low) following Bambra's (2011:18) guidance on conducting 'real world' systematic reviews of qualitative and social science research evidence. Bambra recommends a 'pragmatic approach' to selecting the 'best available evidence' using a critical appraisal of the records in terms of relevance to the aims of the review. The final selection of papers for review drew on the researchers' expertise and supplementary searches complemented the selection of relevant sample literature in a structured systematic review. Our pragmatic real world review resulted in a select sample bibliography of 60 high priority papers (30 each on 'localism' and 'community empowerment') which were reviewed in depth and a further 60 lower priority items which were given more limited consideration. Each output was reviewed against an annotation template based on the research questions for each theme. The outputs of this phase were recorded in the *Endnote* database and consisted of structured notes and additional keyword codes. The database was used to produce an annotated bibliography, an edited version of which forms one output of the project (available from the authors on request).

This evidence was used to produce this synthesis. In this, we evaluated the connections between localism and community empowerment using a 'Realist Synthesis' approach to the use of systematic reviews for evidence-based policy research in the social sciences (Pawson, 2002). This approach was chosen for its ability to assess a policy claim or hypothesis (in this case, that 'localism promotes community empowerment') through purposive sampling of evidence from a range of

forms, including formal research reports and case studies. It adopts a 'generative approach' to causation, whereby it is not 'programmes that work [that are sought] but the underlying reasons or affordance that they provide that generates change' (Pawson, 2002:344). From this systematic review, four international case studies were identified which explored the 'affordances' that link particular localist approaches to community empowerment and analyse the tensions inherent in the two concepts.

Initial findings were presented at the Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (London, August 2011) and the Regional Studies Association Conference on Localism (Manchester, November 2011.)