INTRODUCTION

In the field of regeneration, the collective effort and focus of activity is on tackling social exclusion, addressing poverty and creating fairer and equitable communities for all. But increasingly the field of regeneration is characterised by complexity, which in itself poses a challenge for delivery on the ground. However, we cannot get away from complexity, nor can it be simply ignored. In this edition of Local Work we draw on the theoretical world to inform our understanding of regeneration and to search for answers that will help shape service delivery solutions

Therefore, in this Local Work what we want to address is:

the reasons why we should work with theories and concepts of complexity
Look at the factors that make the field of regeneration complex
Explore some arguments for reducing complexity

The field of regeneration, many would argue, is becoming more complex. Some of the common complaints and frustrations expressed by those working on the ground are that there are too many:

Partnerships
Meetings
Competing views on the way forward
Initiatives
Targets and difficulties to prove the real worth of activities.

On the one hand, it is argued that because of this complexity there is not enough 'doing', which hinders effective delivery of projects and programmes. To this end, complexity is viewed by many professionals as a barrier for effective working and inhibits the regeneration. However, on the other hand it is important to recognize that complexity is just 'the way of the regeneration world', and in many instances is a necessary feature of good governance and effective interventions. Theories of complexity need to be further explored to see if they can inform a more realistic and democratic approach to achieving policy goals.

What we would like to show in this paper is that regeneration professionals have to understand and work with complexity because the problems facing regeneration are complex, and, at times, they will require complex solutions.

Complexity theory is traditionally rooted in the physical sciences yet, in recent times, it has increasingly informed the development of the social sciences. The benefit of applying complexity theory to the social world is that it can tells us, be it changes in the weather, traffic flow patterns, epidemics, the behaviour of groups of people on a Saturday night, that everything is interrelated. Every individual action has repercussions, which are continuously changing and unpredictable results and interventions are the norm.

A fine balance needs to be struck between embracing complexity yet still being alive to simplicity. There is no need to embrace complexity just for the sake of it. There is no point in aiming for a situation in which people try to devise sophisticated techniques and means to solve problems when it may not be needed. However, whilst we should strive for simplicity and not overcomplicate issues, we also need to work with complexity, recognising that in some situations complex issues will need complex solutions.

WORKING WITH COMPLEXITY

By Neil McInroy, Director &
Stuart MacDonald, Policy and Information Researcher
Centre for Local Economic Strategies

Author: Neil McInroy and Stuart MacDonald
Centre for Local Economic Strategies
Tel: 0161 236 7036
E-mail: stuartmacdonald@cles.org.uk

Edited by. Christopher Mawdsley
Researcher, CLES Consulting
Tel: 0161 233 1922
E-mail: chrismawdsley@cles.org.uk

In working with complexity, we need to recognise three key things. In particular there is a need to

· Recognise different shapes of policy and types of adaptation
· Use the local
· Ensure creativity is supported

Different shapes of policy and types of adaptation

Adaptation is an emerging feature of the British policy landscape and is the key to a progressive agenda, which allows for complexity and diffrence between various places and people. It is important to recognise that adaptation can happen at a variety of scales be it neighbourhood, community, local authority area, sub regional and regional. Thus, the ability of mechanisms to create different processes, structures and styles should be recognised and supported. It is only through this structural and procedural adaptation and measures to address issues can be truly addressed. The desire for institutional neatness and the blind application of best practice imported from elsewhere, only serves to constrain adaptation, local knowledge and thus the abilities to address the issue.

A policy process described from the stand point of complexity theory would have a number of adaptive characteristics. Cillers (2000) summarises these characteristics and states the policy process would:

· 'Consist of a large number of elements which in themselves can be simple' but 'which interact dynamically by exchanging energy or information'. The effects of interactions are propagated throughout the system'

· have many direct and indirect feedback loops

· be characterized in terms of open systems - they exchange energy or information with their environment and operate at conditions far from equilibrium

· Have memory, not located at a specific place, but distributed throughout the system and thus has a history

· Have emergent properties, that is behaviour of systems is determined by the nature of interactions, not by what is contained within the components. Since the interactions are rich and dynamic, fed back, and above all, non-linear, the behaviour of the system as a whole cannot be predicted from an inspection of components

Use the Local

A community, neighbourhood or area of a city, is composed of thousands of individual needs. Thus if we want to change the city for the better, by changing its land use, its travel patterns, its use of public spaces for example, complexity tells us that top down intervention, or implementing an a-priori rigid plan, will either not make much of a difference or have an unpredicted or even counterproductive effect (as the example form Glasgow highlighted).

Thus the community and local practitioners who know the local area the best, are the most valuable, as it is these local people and organisations which are most adaptive, most capable of dealing with the issues. The people involved in running the system are the people best placed to improve it, since they often are best placed to see the problem, and have the greatest amount of direct and 'real time' information relating to that problem. This lends itself to local people ion the ground having an innate understanding of the nuances that are missed by simple monitoring systems. Thus, we need to involve local people where appropriate and ensure that local knowledge from people working with local communities is captured.

Supporting Creativity

Successful regeneration is in part reliant on having creative thinkers and innovators. Creativity is a vital part of dealing with the complexity within regeneration it is vital for affecting positive change. That we have people involved in regeneration, who have the abilities and skills to think cross sectorally, think differently, and think in the context of the problem is necessary. In this, more effort must be made to increase and retain diversity and wealth of skills within the regeneration sector. Many regional centres of excellence are looking at this sort of thing, though it must be ensured that they don't just focus on traditional skills, but also set in train methods for developing innovative and creative skills as well.

Understanding why the field of regeneration is complex

Complexity is far from being all encompassing of the regeneration field. The key point raised in the section above is that solutions should be developed on the basis of being an appropriate response to the specific context. In some instances, the context may be complex; in other instances, there will be greater simplicity and clarity to this situation. To be able to distinguish between those different situations there has to be an underlying understanding of why complexity occurs and what form it takes. Four overarching reasons are outlined below explaining why regeneration is complex.

2

Interrelated factors

The problems of failing local economies and poor local environments, declining housing markets, low employment, crime and poverty are complex issues. What makes them complex is that they are all inherently inter related and are created by a broad range of social, economic, cultural, historical and physical factors. Individual experiences of the problems regeneration tries to solve are also complex, for example, one person's experience of being socially excluded will differ from that of another. Understanding the factors that combine to create an individual experience of social exclusion is difficult to achieve, and even more difficult to address through policy interventions. For example, the experience of a young, white unemployed male will be completely different to the social exclusion of an elderly Asian woman. As a result of this complexity of factors nobody can be positive of the ideal starting point, it is difficult to know which factor is most important or how a blend of interventions can be created that complement one another. Social scientists have for too long assumed that their goal is to link well defined causes to well defined effects.

If we look at the regeneration world through the lens of complexity we see that those in the policy and regeneration fields tend to look for solid links between policies and outcomes. Policy areas have been separated off, such as transport or housing, and policies are created under these banners as if nothing else is happening in the locality. As a result of these divisions a range of funding streams have been created by different government departments. The outcome of this approach is that transport policies are formulated and implemented in isolation from housing policies, for example, without full consideration of the complex and interrelated relationship between the two policy areas and the impact that it could have more broadly. Driven by a desire for positive change, funding streams are designed to fulfil a particular function, or nuance, of a particular issue. To assist mainstreaming and bending of resources, a range of structures, including partnerships and other mechanisms for deciding on strategy have been set up. In attempts to draw the interrelated factors together, each of these structures has its own strategies and plan, which frames these sets of interventions as a result it produces a complicated weave of activity.

Understanding complexity and the interrelation of issues is one thing but being in a position to be able to address those complex issues is another. Part of the problem currently is the policy instruments available lack sufficient subtlety to be able to meet the challenge of complexity. The indication of the need to move away from a silo mentality as reflected in the rhetoric of joined-up policy-making is a move in the right direction. There is still some way to go in meeting this challenge but if we are to be successful then policy needs to be developed in a more flexible way, where innovation and creativity are actively encouraged.

Multidisciplinary approach increases complexity

Regeneration covers many disciplines and policy areas and requires a raft of skills and experience. The breadth of policy areas covered by regeneration means that many individuals come at the issues from different disciplines bring with them different perspectives. This multidisciplinary basis to regeneration means that it has many traditions and schools of thought, many perspectives that have a different emphasis; this creates tensions and increasing the complexities. For instance the ongoing tension which emerges between those who favour social approaches to regeneration, opposed to economic approaches. Indeed these debates are consistently played out within agencies, in planning strategy and in discussing the best way forward.

Regeneration is a process

Regeneration is a process, and a complicated one at that. There are many issues that need to be considered, in reducing unemployment for example, it is not just a case of providing jobs. Many other factors need to be considered due to the number of interrelated factors, such as :

· skills,
· providing the context to local investment,
· transport infrastructure
· type of jobs.

In addressing unemployment for example, a set of interventions needs to be put in place and then the process of these interventions taking effect, takes time.

These interventions attempt to tease out the varied facets relating to the issue, and monitoring of these various strands of activity is required. There are now many sophisticated performance management systems being set up, which gauge both quantitative and qualitative change, which ensure there are feedback and feed forward mechanisms in place. This 'knitting' process can work, and when it does it is a truly 'radical' project in that it attempts to provide a comprehensive policy mix and solution to poor places and people.

Arguments for reducing complexity

As regards to how to reduce complexity, many answers are posited. People in the field of regeneration make the following suggestions,

· Less funding streams. There is particular emphasis on Central government joining up budgets, clearly there is some work to be done, but the government has started this.

- Simple solutions, which focus on single issues. By trying to address one problem at a time

- Banks of best practice spread out across the country, a whole 'off the shelf' products.

- Interventions that have predictable outcomes and results should be used, interventions that don't get bogged down in process.

There is a case to be made for each of these suggestions as a way of reducing complexity. However, there is a crucial caveat to these simple solutions to reducing complexity. That is the relationship between policy and outcome is not always linear. Not as straightforward as we would want or hope.

Regeneration policy and outcome is not straightforward

When you look at areas that are being regenerated, they are usually in a state of flux. There may be a churning of population, changing picture of local health and education, pockets of enterprise alongside pockets of deprivation. When we have this internal scenario, it is not always that easy to discern what the issues are, or are going to be, and how they need to be addressed.

Thus the clear linear relationship between policy and outcome is unclear due to internal context. For instance, in an area which is socially changing, but where there are low levels of community activity. Do you invest in a community centre when the demographics and picture of need is changing? If not, what do you do with the existing problem of low levels of community activity?

Similarly, thinking about the wider external context including the global economy, it is very difficult to predict what is going to happen. Its chaotic, change is inevitable. Thus, whilst complexity can be reduced in some instances and simple measures will work, it is increasingly difficult to create a tight link between policy and outcome. Of course in areas of social and economic stability things are easier, however, in many cases we are left with situations in which we need to work with complexity.

Conclusion

The field of regeneration is complex, but it is only a reflection of the complexity of the real world. Complexity needs to be embraced as a concept if we are to produce lasting impacts in regeneration. Complex solutions are a fundamental and key feature of good governance and healthy democracy. The search for simplicity in policy making is understandable, but if the policy process is to be improved, then a deeper understanding needs to be achieved.

What complexity theory tells us is that we need to have processes and systems that are capable of adaptation and change. Complexity theory offers conceptual tools and methods that can help in understanding the complex nature of the policy making process. Complexity theory argues that controlled, centrally delivered top-down polices are least effective because their very nature prevents adaptation to the continually changing world in which we live. On the other hand the potential for an inclusive nature in bottom-up strategies, means a greater number of individuals are involved in the delivery of policy aims, and the more individual participants that contribute to the whole, the more adaptive to changing circumstances the policy related actions will be.

"Many individual participants, following the simple rules for adjusting their actions without seeing or understanding the dynamics of the larger system can deal with complex reality"

An understanding of complexity tells us that it is not strategy and structures that are important for tackling complex issues but people and relationships. It is through creating the right conditions for self-organisation that associated creativity and innovation can flourish.

REFERENCES

For details of previous issues of Local Work or to subscribe to CLES products and services visit

www.cles.org.uk