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Claire Edwards
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CLAIRE EDWARDS
University College, Cork

Regeneration works? Disabled people and area-based urban renewal

Abstract
Disabled people are increasingly being drawn into the UK Labour government’s strategy to address area-based deprivation through projects which focus on employability as a means of tackling social exclusion. This paper draws on a case study of an employment project aimed at young people with learning difficulties funded as part of the Single Regeneration Budget, to explore how such projects operate in the context of area-based renewal, and with what gains, if any, for disabled people. The case study suggests that the perceived contribution of the project – and people with learning difficulties – to the area was as much about social regeneration, as building a local economy through the creation of active workers. Whilst being part of the SRB seemed to offer some opportunities for participation, the parameters of the policy itself – including its spatiality – acted to circumscribe some of the potential linkages with broader area renewal processes and the potential benefits for project participants, thus raising questions about New Labour’s social inclusion agenda.

Key words: community, disability, local economic development, social inclusion

Introduction

Urban policy has traditionally been seen as an arena in which area-based initiatives are employed to tackle deprivation and poverty in particular neighbourhoods. Understandings of the root causes of deprivation – and hence policy interventions – have nevertheless shifted dependent on the political orthodoxy of the time, swinging from market-based property interventions (renewing urban places through private sector investment and physical development) to community-led initiatives
CRITICAL SOCIAL POLICY 29(4)

(renewing people through jobs and training, and community participation) (Cochrane, 1999, 2003; Wilks-Heeg, 1996). In the context of the UK Labour government, the ‘urban problem’ has become recast as one of social exclusion, whereby people in particular areas become increasingly detached from society; the proposed solution is thus a focus ‘not just on housing and the physical fabric of neighbourhoods, but the fundamental problems of worklessness, crime and poor public services . . . ’ (Blair, 2001: 5).

There are evident parallels between Labour’s approach to broader social policy and urban initiatives (Cochrane, 2003; Edwards, 1997). In particular, the focus on addressing worklessness amongst certain groups deemed to be ‘dependent’ – lone parents, disabled people, the young unemployed – has been central to Labour’s welfare reforms, but has also become linked to the urban renewal agenda. Increasingly, for example, we are seeing initiatives in the urban context which are ‘both area-specific and client based’ (Scott et al., 2002: 231), such that urban regeneration has become concerned with ensuring people in deprived areas have the ‘skills and capacities to reduce [their] poverty and dependence on welfare’ (Imrie and Raco, 2003: 13).

Historically, disabled people have rarely been seen as a part of, or relevant to, the urban renewal agenda (Edwards, 2001, 2003). However, with the increased focus on tackling the needs (and employability) of particular groups, and involving local people in the process of regeneration itself, disabled people have become more visible in urban policy documents. The government’s key strategy on neighbourhood deprivation, the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR) (2001), notes the experience of poor services in deprived neighbourhoods which create difficulties for vulnerable groups, ‘including older people, lone parents, disabled people and black and minority ethnic residents’ (Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), 2001: 4). Disabled people are also cited in the NSNR as one of a number of ‘communities of interest’ that ought to be engaged as participants in the regeneration process itself (SEU, 2001). Yet how far area-based regeneration initiatives offer a route to inclusion for disabled people, and how this inclusion is understood is a matter for debate. How do projects aimed at disabled people function as part of area-based renewal initiatives, and what type of contribution are they perceived as making to local areas?

This paper considers some of these questions in the context of a case study of a project aimed at providing training and job opportunities for young people with learning difficulties, which received regeneration
funding – the Roots and Shoots Environmental Partnership (RSEP) in Lambeth, London. The case study forms part of a research project conducted over a three year period which sought to explore the involvement of disabled people in urban regeneration initiatives and more specifically, the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB). The SRB, which was established in 1994, has broad aims to address social exclusion, create job and training opportunities, and improve the physical environment in specific localities (Rhodes et al., 2003). It is based on the formation of partnerships between the community, private and public sector in local areas, which, in the early years of the scheme, bid competitively for funding for specific projects. Whilst SRB funding was wound down in 2007, the programme’s emphasis on partnership and the engagement of the community in the regeneration process has been continued in current neighbourhood renewal initiatives and agencies, not least Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), which act as conduits and co-ordinators at the local authority level for the NSNR.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first, I discuss the increasing elision of urban policy with the government’s broader social policy agenda (in particular, its focus on employability as a route to social inclusion), as a context to disabled people’s role in regeneration. The second section introduces the case study, and drawing on documents and interviews conducted with the project partners and young people with learning disabilities, explores how the project and its links to the local ‘economy’ and ‘community’ were understood by actors involved in regeneration in the locality. The third section discusses some of the policy dilemmas for the project about working within the remit of the SRB, and questions how certain policy prescriptions could actually hinder attempts to build linkages between the project and wider communities and economies. The paper concludes by asking about the potential gains (if any) for disabled people in engaging in area-based regeneration projects.

Urban policy goes social: Inclusion, work and area-based renewal

Over the past thirty years, urban policy has been characterized more by its incoherence than a clearly defined, consistent, entity. Urban initiatives have often been short-lived and experimental, reflective of the quixotic values and political ideologies underpinning different
government administrations. The Labour government has put its own stamp on interpretations of the ‘urban problem’, and in line with its broader welfare reform agenda, has redefined urban poverty in terms of social exclusion. For the government, social exclusion is seen as a key stumbling block to urban renewal and growth; hence a ‘key management role for those involved in urban regeneration is to reduce social exclusion . . . not for its own sake, but as an essential component of wider regeneration and economic renewal’ (Cochrane, 2003: 227). As part of this process, the government has put an emphasis on enabling residents of so-called deprived areas to help themselves out of poverty and welfare dependency, such that they are expected to be not just recipients of urban funding, but also active citizens in the regeneration process itself (Amin, 2005; Imrie and Raco, 2003).

The construction of urban disadvantage in terms of social exclusion has been a source of contention amongst both policy makers and academics, however. Proponents of the term stress its benefits in identifying the multidimensional nature of poverty, and the recognition that marginalization is about not just a lack of material resources, but also poorer access to social, political and cultural processes (Allen, 1998; Madanipour, 1998). Critics, on the other hand, have suggested that New Labour’s take on the concept is indicative of a conservative political agenda, in which inclusion reflects a concern to ensure social cohesion and integration in deprived urban communities, rather than addressing distributional issues and deep-rooted structural problems in society (Levitas, 1996, 1998). Notions of social exclusion arguably construct a normalized ‘mainstream’ majority into which the marginalized, excluded minority are to be integrated, yet what the ‘mainstream’ is, and who decides when inclusion has been achieved are open to debate. Such constructions can have particular implications for those groups – such as disabled people – who may require diverse forms of support to enable them to participate in society, as well as those who choose to pursue alternative ways of living outside the constituted ‘mainstream’.

The question of how people are to be integrated into Labour’s ‘mainstream’ in the context of tackling social exclusion has been particularly contentious. For whilst social exclusion/inclusion is supposed to include social, political and cultural dimensions, Labour has emphasized reducing worklessness and addressing employability as a route to promoting inclusion. There may be little dispute about the links between unemployment, economic inactivity and poverty, but the evangelical zeal which has led Labour to proclaim that ‘the best welfare policy of all is work’ (Hutton, 2006: iv) has been more subject to question.
(Grover and Piggott, 2007). Levitas (1998) for example, has pointed to the way in which premising paid work as the only meaningful form of participation in society may lead to the devaluation of unpaid and informal types of work (see also Barnes and Mercer, 2005). Meanwhile, a number of authors writing in the context of disability have stressed that attaining a job does not necessarily lead to greater social participation in society for disabled people, with the quality of the job and work environment (including employers’ attitudes) also being significant in how people experience inclusion (Hall, 2005; Wilton and Schuer, 2006; Wistow and Schneider, 2003).

Others have criticized Labour’s ‘supply-side’ strategy in addressing worklessness – a strategy focused on providing excluded groups with skills to participate in the labour market and pull themselves out of benefit dependency (Imrie and Raco, 2003). Indeed, one of the more problematic elements of New Labour’s social inclusion agenda, is the emphasis it places on the ‘excluded’ themselves to take responsibility for their actions, and the construction of social problems in terms of personal deficit (Colley and Hodkinson, 2001). As the oft cited New Labour dictum ‘no rights without responsibilities’ suggests, citizenship is to be earned, and is underpinned by a moral order in which citizens deemed to be active – and hence responsible – are distinguished from those who are inactive, or, in other words, deviant and dependent (Clarke, 2005). Active citizenship – in which individuals are supposed to work in partnership with, rather than rely upon, the state to address their welfare – has thereby become a key strategy of governance in the implementation of New Labour’s social policy and urban agenda. In the context of urban policy, however, it is local communities that are constructed as the conduits through which regeneration will happen; they are both entities to be worked on (to be made responsible by actively seeking work, for example), and also the means through which urban policy itself becomes activated (through their involvement in local regeneration partnerships and decision-making fora) (Imrie and Raco, 2003).

The overlaps between the government’s approach to broader welfare policy and urban agendas are evident in discussions about what constitutes regeneration activity. Fitzpatrick’s (2003: 22) assertion that, under New Labour, ‘economic efficacy is now supposedly gained by reforming the worker rather than reforming the market’ is apparent in the different strategies utilized by regeneration partnerships to promote economic development. A recent report published by the Department for Communities and Local Government (2007) titled What Works in Economic Development for Deprived Neighbourhoods?, suggests that
regeneration partnerships have focused predominantly on addressing employability, rather than creating new jobs or tackling barriers to work, for example, which they acknowledge are a significant contributor to worklessness. ‘Skilling up’ specific groups has therefore become a valid regeneration activity.

That disabled people should feature as one of these groups in the context of regeneration is perhaps not surprising. An earlier phase of this research, for example, discovered that the main way in which disabled people were involved in the SRB was through jobs and training schemes (as opposed to other activities, for example, such as initiatives relating to physical development or housing, tackling crime and so on) (Edwards, 2001). Disabled people have been impacted on by Labour’s ‘reform of the worker’ agenda more than most, through national initiatives such as the New Deal for Disabled People which seeks to provide disabled people with the necessary skills to move into the labour market (Hutton, 2006; see Easterlow and Smith, 2003; Roulstone, 2000). Such initiatives are part of the government’s broader crusade to reduce the number of incapacity benefit claimants, and within the NSNR, linkages are being drawn between the perceived welfare dependency of incapacity benefit claimants and the problem of urban deprivation. For example, the aforementioned report on regeneration strategies to address economic development makes the point that ‘the need to reduce the number of economically inactive incapacity benefit claimants is accepted as a priority in addressing both worklessness and in realising the economic potential of all regions’ (DCLG, 2007: 10).

There has been much critique and debate around the government’s approach to increase the labour market participation of disabled people, and it is not my intention to repeat these discussions here (see, for example, Barnes, 2000; Barnes and Mercer, 2005; Danieli and Wheeler, 2006; Drake, 2000; Easterlow and Smith, 2003; Grover and Piggott, 2005, 2007; Hyde, 2000; Roulstone, 2000). Rather, in a context where disabled people are increasingly being caught up in analyses of urban deprivation – and their employability is being identified as one of the supposed routes out of exclusion – my concern is with exploring ‘on the ground’ how a specific project to provide disabled people with jobs and training, fitted into local regeneration agendas, and was seen as a way of promoting inclusion as part of an area-based initiative. In this context, the case study of RSEP brings us face to face with two key issues. The first of these relates to the way in which the project’s, and its recipients’ (young people with learning difficulties) relationship to the
regeneration of the local area was perceived and understood. Situated within Labour’s focus on increasing employability as a central tenet of its strategy to improve urban areas, we might assume that the project would be seen as contributing to economic regeneration, and building the economy of the local area. However, such initiatives may also have other imperatives, related to community development and linkages to social aspects of regeneration. In discussing the role of childcare and regeneration, for example, Scott et al. (2002) highlight how childcare has been linked to not only economic development – by creating childcare jobs and, through use of childcare, enabling people to take up employment – but also social regeneration through childcare’s role in community development. As they stress, however, there can be tensions between these economic and social dimensions, with impacts for those participating in, and on the receiving end of, childcare work.

The second issue concerns how the relationship between Roots and Shoots and the locality was mediated by the parameters of the SRB as a policy itself. Like many initiatives, the SRB had its own set of rules, procedures and terminology, including the process of partnership working, outputs to be delivered within specified timescales, and the provision of funding for a specified period of time. Like many other urban initiatives, moreover, the SRB works on the basis of a defined spatiality, employing the *locality* as the unit through which deprivation should be addressed. Critics of area-based initiatives (ABIs) have, however, questioned whether it is possible, or appropriate, to talk about specific locally bounded economies or communities (see Amin, 2005; Edwards, 1997; Hastings, 2003; Imrie and Raco, 2003), and how far it is an effective way of promoting participation in urban regeneration processes. It is to these issues that I now turn.

**Building economies and communities? The Roots and Shoots Environmental Partnership**

Roots and Shoots, based in the London Borough of Lambeth is a small voluntary organization offering training to young people aged 16–25 years with learning difficulties, in gardening, woodwork, basic literacy and numeracy. At the time of the research, it had a small salaried staff team, comprising the project manager, a teacher and three other members of staff who assist with horticulture and woodwork, but has numerous volunteers. Most of its trainees have come through special schools or
are referred to the scheme by social services. Roots and Shoots aims to help its trainees toward employment through work experience with local employers, and retail experience gained on site, through the sale of plants and wooden garden furniture made on site.

As an organization, the capacity of Roots and Shoots was limited in terms of both its revenue and facilities. Since the organization came into being in 1981, it has been funded by various sources, but had been subject to a number of budget cuts by the local authority, and threatened with closure. It was these budget cuts which provided the impetus for the project manager to bid for the SRB. The SRB required that partnerships made up of different sectors bid for funds, and in order to fulfil these criteria, the project manager established RSEP, made up of Roots, Lady Margaret Hall Settlement (the charity from whom Roots had originated), the Peabody Trust (a local housing association), the London Borough of Lambeth, and the supermarket chain Sainsbury’s, who had in the past provided work placements for trainees.

In many ways, when we consider the government’s focus on promoting social inclusion via tackling worklessness, the overall aim of the organization, and the bid itself, fitted closely with this agenda (Levitas, 1998). Indeed, the overall objectives of the partnership set out in the bid document were to ‘enhance the employment prospects of young people with learning difficulties by developing their self-esteem, vocational and other skills necessary to finding and keeping employment’ (RSEP, 1996: 4), to build the project’s business base by the sale of trainees’ products and exploring the potential of developing a social firm which could provide employment to trainees and provide work preparation, and to heighten awareness of the project locally amongst employers and the community. Whilst the focus of the project was on the employability of the young people, there was also a recognition about the need to address the attitudinal barriers facing young people with learning difficulties from employers (Barnes and Mercer, 2005), with the bid noting that the collaboration with Sainsbury’s would ‘help to promote a change in employers’ attitudes leading to an increase in employment levels amongst this group’ (RSEP, 1996: 7).

Much was also made in the bid document of the links between this project and other regeneration schemes in the local area. Roots and Shoots sits within north Lambeth (more specifically, Lambeth Walk and Vauxhall), which despite bordering on central London and containing the businesses and tourist attractions which make up the South Bank, is an area marked with high levels of deprivation; as one member of
another local regeneration partnership, the Vauxhall Regeneration Company (VRC), said of the locality, ‘the paradox of this area is that we have one side of the line, meaning the railway line, we have some very big employers, very wealthy employers. Just the other side of the line we’ve got some incredibly poor estates and that is what really characterises Vauxhall these days’. There were therefore a number of regeneration schemes active in the locality, most notably in terms of the SRB, the Lambeth Walk SRB Partnership (concerned with estate renewal), and the Vauxhall Regeneration Company which was funded to provide training and environmental improvements in the area.

Situated within the geographical boundaries of these renewal activities, RSEP had a key aim that the trainees would not only gain from the outcomes of other local regeneration initiatives, but also participate in the regeneration process itself. In terms of the former, for example, the regeneration of the Vauxhall and Lambeth Walk area was seen as a way of assisting the young people from the project into the labour market, as the bid stated: ‘It is vital that young people with learning difficulties are able to share the benefits generated by the wider regeneration strategies in the area if they are not to be excluded from society. This pilot bid will enable them to take up work experience and employment opportunities created by the regeneration of Lambeth Walk and the Vauxhall area’ (RSEP, 1996: 7). In the context of participation, then, the trainees were to gain from other economic development initiatives in the locality. However, the trainees’ participation in processes of regeneration itself was also a vision of RSEP, with the aim being that the project would ‘empower young people with learning difficulties to actively participate in the regeneration of Lambeth Walk and Vauxhall area’ (RSEP, 1996: 2) through initiatives such as the ‘greening’ of Lambeth Walk. Participation was not just about a means to an end (attaining a job, for example), therefore, but an end in itself with involvement in a process being seen as a ‘social good’ (Jones, 2003).

Interviews with project partners and members of the Lambeth Walk Partnership and Vauxhall Regeneration Company revealed different views about how Roots was contributing to the area and what inclusion meant in this context. The bid document was very much concerned with creating potential employees and trainees, and these things were reflected in the outputs of the project, which focused around number of jobs created, number of training weeks and qualifications obtained. Yet despite this emphasis (on paper, at least), none of the key actors in the area perceived of Roots’ contribution being to the economic base of the
area – for example, in developing an active labour force or contributing to tackling worklessness. Rather, the contribution of Roots was seen as a social or community-based one. As a regeneration officer from Lambeth council described the project:

it’s a 3 year pilot, which in SRB terms, testing a social model with a voluntary organisation that’s small, that’s always on the edge of disappearing altogether, but does a whole range of things. You’ve got schoolchildren, people with learning difficulties, able-bodied people, volunteers from all over the place . . . but it’s a real community type thing, and very interesting as a model of a voluntary organisation trying to do something a lot more formal in terms of providing support for people with special needs as well as a service to the community.

This was also stressed by the representative from Peabody housing association, who said ‘once you go over the threshold, you’re captured really, it’s an enchanted garden type place’, whilst for a member of VRC, ‘Roots and Shoots are a really good example of the community doing it for themselves . . . it’s a great project because it integrates . . . you can buy . . . plants there, even if the trainees come from outside [the area]. So in that sense it can really make a contribution, because it can improve the environment and facilities, as well as offering this opportunity.’ For local regeneration actors, then, the benefit to the area was that it provided a service to many different groups in the local community, not just people with learning difficulties. Thus, local schoolchildren used the centre as an educational resource, and it also provided a point of interaction between other members of the community who would come in to buy products.

Indeed, part of the basis of opening up the project in terms of retail was that it would also ‘help to change the community’s attitudes through increasing contact and work with trainees’ (RSEP, 1996: 7). The stigma and societal prejudice experienced by many people with learning difficulties has been well recognized, and is not something the trainees were immune to, as one of them said:

There was a very horrible sign outside Roots and Shoots which caused a lot of grief on a lot of people, because there’s a school down the road . . . some of them used to make fun of some of the students because it says for people with learning difficulties, which is like labelling all of them, which is not nice because most people who are in here have illnesses, not necessarily just learning difficulties.
The ‘community’ is not necessarily a comfortable place for people with learning disabilities. Hall’s (2004, 2005) research with people with learning disabilities illustrates how their daily lives are shaped by an identification of exclusionary and inclusionary spaces: in other words, spaces that they avoid because they feel ‘out of place’, and other places which provide a ‘safe haven’ where they can meet and feel accepted. Communities can be inherently exclusive in terms of their attitudes to particular groups who are seen to be different. In the context of urban policy, moreover, the identification of what constitutes a community in the first place has always been highly contested. Increasingly in Labour’s urban policy, community has become connected with a localized ‘place’, although such a notion is fraught with difficulties in that ‘geographical places do not represent single, uncontested entities’ (Raco, 2003: 238; see also Colomb, 2007; Fuller and Geddes, 2008). SRB guidelines, for example, state that the community should be anyone who lives, or works in the area. However, in the context of Roots, the fact that many of the trainees came from outside north Lambeth meant they were precluded from accessing certain ‘community fora’. For example, whilst Roots and Shoots were to be involved with improvements in terms of ‘greening’ the Lambeth Walk area, they had no engagement with the community forum which had been set up as part of the Lambeth Walk SRB Partnership partly because, as Peabody noted ‘the Lambeth Walk area is so tight and Roots and Shoots trainees come from a far wider area’. Access to consultative events and fora often has a spatiality defined by the geographical boundaries of SRB.

In seeking to link the economic and social dimensions of the project, another way in which the project manager and other local actors perceived Roots’ potential contribution to the area was in the building of a third sector economy in the locality, by establishing the organization as a social firm. This would involve Roots both providing employment to people with learning difficulties, but also becoming more of a self-sustaining business, providing gardening products and services to other businesses in the area. As Amin et al. (1999) note, social enterprises are seen as initiatives which operate in the gap between the state and market, and have been seized upon by the government – including in the NSNR – as a means of providing responsive local services that engage more directly with local communities and their needs. At the time of receiving SRB funding, Roots was performing a bridging role between the welfare system and the mainstream labour market, with its emphasis on moving its trainees into paid employment. However, there was a question for the project manager about how far she wanted Roots
to become a self-sustaining commercial enterprise in its own right as part of its involvement in the SRB. The representative from Peabody noted how linkages built with other local regeneration initiatives (in this case, the Cross River Partnership, another large regeneration initiative in the locality) had been used to build the business base of Roots:

We got some Cross River SRB funding to do some environmental works to an estate on Stamford Street, which is about half a mile away... and it included lots of things like park benches. I was aware of Roots and Shoots because I work with them. It wasn’t actually my job to run that contract, but what I made certain was I had a chat with them and said ‘if you’re doing stuff on park benches, why don’t you go to Roots and Shoots?’

However, he noted that there were questions about the capacity of Roots to supply bigger contracts, and to develop ‘on to that more commercial footing’, an issue also raised by the project manager herself. As she stated of the demand to be a ‘productive’ enterprise: ‘I can’t say... that so many people [trainees] are going to end up as super-qualified gardeners. It won’t work like that’. There can be a perceived tension between the social goals of such projects (in this context, the development of trainees’ skills which requires significant time and support), and economic and commercial imperatives, therefore – not least the need to maintain financial sustainability in an arena where community organizations frequently find themselves struggling to access scarce resources.

**Working within the SRB: Policy dilemmas**

The previous section highlighted the ways in which Roots was understood in terms of its contribution to local area regeneration. However, it also hinted at the practicalities of turning the ideals and visions of SRB bid documents into reality. The RSEP bid document stressed the linkages that were to be made between the different regeneration projects in the area, for example, but interviews revealed that actual contact and engagement between them had been minimal. Discussing the Lambeth Walk SRB Partnership, for example, the project manager of Roots noted: ‘the idea was that we would probably get contracts for the “greening” of Lambeth Walk, but it looks like Lambeth Walk might not be greened now.’ Different projects had their own aims and as the manager of the Lambeth Walk Partnership said, ‘certainly I think it would be fair to say everyone’s been ploughing their own...
furrow over the last three years, making the milestones and outputs. There hasn't been that coordination of activities.’ Such issues perhaps point to some of the limitations of the SRB as a policy itself, which as many commentators have acknowledged, has a strongly managerialist imperative in which central government seeks to monitor and calculate the outputs of schemes within a defined timescale (Foley et al., 1998; Raco and Imrie, 2000).

Indeed, working within the parameters of the SRB raised a number of dilemmas for the project. One of these related to how many jobs, training schemes or new houses have been provided with SRB funding, while exercising distanced control of outputs that partnerships were required to meet, within specified deadlines. SRB outputs and indicators provide a means by which central government can assess, and demonstrate to the public, how many jobs, training schemes or new houses have been bought with SRB funding, whilst providing distanced control over what partnerships can, and cannot, do. There has been much criticism of the system of outputs for the way in which it serves to focus regeneration on core (arguably, economic) activities and ‘deliverables’, whilst sideling more difficult to measure outcomes and processes (see for example, Foley et al., 1998). Such criticisms have not been limited to the SRB, moreover; recent research on the New Deal for Communities and LSPs, for example, has highlighted the way in which local flexibility to develop appropriate targets has become subordinate to national frameworks of targets (Fuller and Geddes, 2008).

For Roots, the outputs raised particular issues for working with people with learning difficulties. Some of the key outputs cited in the bid document were around the number of training weeks provided and jobs created, but the project manager of Roots noted that they could be difficult to achieve because they require visible achievement for a group of people who may need more time than an SRB scheme can provide. Similarly, the manager of Lambeth Mencap, who had knowledge of the SRB and its outputs from work at another disability organization in the borough stated:

You progress somebody, but it should be about where the person starts from, and where they end up, and how they’ve progressed along that route. Yes, a qualification might look good, but it could be someone feeling a lot more confident about themselves. But it’s not something the government is prepared to fund – they want people off unemployment benefit, and into a job.
This was reflected in discussions with trainees, who noted that finding work can be a daunting prospect, which takes time. As one trainee said: ‘I’m trying to get a job . . . Travis Perkins where we get our material. Or I’m going into this hotel washing up or porter. I’ve just got a couple of months left here. Not long. Getting a job’s a bit scary, because I haven’t been to work before’. More broadly than this, however, it was clear that there were other things that trainees came to the project for and not all these things were related to getting a job. One trainee said he came to Roots to ‘be with my friends, basically, and get away from home’. As another stated, ‘You get to chat to boys and all that and get to have fun’. For her, her main aim was ‘to do my English, my GNVQ and GCSE’. Social networks and meeting people are therefore also significant, but do not always feature as an output of regeneration. Indeed, the SRB outputs of Roots and Shoots did not necessarily fit with the perceptions of what the project could contribute, both from trainees and local stakeholders, or indeed, the government’s ideal about what social inclusion constitutes. Disabled people’s needs – or indeed, the needs of any individual – cannot be neatly defined by SRB outputs, and the notion that schemes, and their impact on people’s lives, can be quantified in such a way is problematic (Imrie, 1996a).

The final dilemma relates to the very essence of area-based renewal, and concerns how the spatiality of area-based initiatives works in terms of projects aimed at specific groups – in this case, young people with learning difficulties – and how this impacts on their participation in the regeneration process. Roots and Shoots clearly sought to locate itself as part of the Lambeth Walk area, even though in many cases, the trainees did not come from the locality; this raises questions about how far they would be seen as members of the local community given that their networks stretched across London. Many ABIs (including the SRB) work on the basis of a locally bounded community, and put an emphasis on local community consultation and participation as a means of creating social capital, to underpin the renewal process (Amin, 2005). However, as Hastings (2003: 88) notes, this approach can prove insular for a number of reasons, including the way in which it ‘can provoke solutions located in the neighbourhood rather than explore the need to connect poor neighbourhoods and their residents into the mainstream urban fabric’. In the case of Roots and Shoots, despite people describing the project as a key facility for the community, the trainees were seen as peripheral to the Lambeth Walk community because they did not
reside in the area; this in turn impacted on their (and the project’s) participation in local decision-making fora, including consultations on the broader regeneration of the Lambeth Walk area.

The same might be said of the trainees’ participation in a ‘local’ economy, which was a somewhat nebulous concept given the area’s proximity to the South Bank and location within a broader London economy (Watt, 2003). Local economies are necessarily tied in to, and influenced by, broader urban, regional and national economic structures and processes; as Amin (2005: 619) notes, ‘the history of areas experiencing marked economic decline . . . is also a history of connections: the product of external control, dependent development . . . outflows of resources and skills and so on’. In the context of Roots, some trainees had taken up work placements in the local area (for example, with Sainsbury’s), but others would not necessarily find employment within the boundaries of Lambeth Walk or Vauxhall. Similarly, it is not clear how far the skills being created for the trainees fitted with the skill demands of a local labour market, or how far structural barriers to employment experienced by people with learning difficulties were being addressed. Indeed, a key criticism of many in the disability movement is that government policy regarding disabled people’s relationship with the labour market has placed too much focus on the skills of individual disabled people rather than addressing barriers which make access to the labour market problematic, including attitudes of employers, inflexible work practices, and the physical environment of workplaces (Barnes and Mercer, 2005; Wilton and Schuer, 2006). Communities and economies, then, are arguably more diffuse and complex than ABIs would suggest, and in the context of Roots, could sometimes act as an ‘artificial’ barrier to participation.

Conclusions: Promoting inclusion . . . or what disabled people gain from regeneration

There is little doubt that disabled people experience significant marginalization in a range of areas in society including access to education, the labour market and housing opportunities (Barnes, 1991; Imrie, 1996b). The barriers that people with learning difficulties face are particularly acute, given that many people have grown up in a context of dependency and lack of control, where care professionals and family carers have been the key decision-makers in their lives (Hall, 2004, 2005). Government policy around disabled people in the UK, and more specifically, people
with learning disabilities, speaks the language of social inclusion and of promoting their rights as citizens (Bates and Davis, 2004; Gosling and Cotterill, 2000). Documents such as the White Paper *Valuing People* (Department of Health, 2001), for example, focus on people with learning disabilities having socially valued roles in the same way as the mainstream ‘majority’: as employees, as family members, as citizens with a political voice. Yet the disjunctures in Labour’s approach to disability and social inclusion are clearly evident in its drive to cut the number of incapacity benefit claimants, and responsibilize disabled people into actively seeking work.

This paper has sought to transpose some of these debates into the context of urban renewal, by exploring some of the potential linkages between disabled people’s lives and the regeneration agenda in the context of government visions to create sustainable and ‘socially inclusive’ local economies and communities. As the paper has demonstrated, inclusion is a notoriously problematic concept, and government ideals about what it represents (in particular, being economically active) arguably have their limitations in the context of young people with learning disabilities. Thus whilst bid documents may talk about creating trained workers, for some trainees at Roots and Shoots, gaining friends out of the project was more significant. Meanwhile, inclusion is never a zero-sum game that reaches an end point, but, as Hall (2005) points out is mediated by different socio-spatial contexts. For example, whilst Roots represented a ‘safe’ place where trainees and the local community could meet, outside the project trainees could still feel excluded and vulnerable.

From the perspective of disabled people themselves, it is debatable if, or how, regeneration can facilitate inclusion, and whether inclusion as it is currently defined in New Labour’s urban policy is a meaningful concept. In a policy more concerned with outputs, it would seem that the SRB is insufficiently sensitized to, or able to deal with, more complex imaginings of inclusion, raising broader questions about how far Labour’s urban policy is equipped to deal with difference and the needs of diverse groups. It could be argued that there were potential benefits and ‘additionalities’ to be had for the trainees via Roots’ involvement in the SRB (for example, through the potential for engagement in an ‘alternative economy’ for a number of trainees in moving towards a social firm, and the potential for increased networks and relationships with other organizations in the area), but in many cases these things were stymied by a lack of time in the context of focusing on the deliverables of the SRB, as well as what appeared to be a forced spatiality in the way the local communities and economies were defined in the area.
In particular, the way in which ‘community’ is constructed as an object of urban policy is problematic, and in this case study, was unhelpful to any sense of participation for the trainees in the regeneration process. This is partly connected to the way in which policy imposes definitions of community, and understands them as ‘already existing’ entities; thus, for Raco (2003), communities serve an instrumental purpose for government, as a means of operationalizing urban policy. In the case of Roots and Shoots, the trainees were factored out of the community, reflecting the failure of the SRB to recognize the heterogeneous plurality, and diverse interlocking networks, which might better describe urban areas (Amin, 2005; Jones, 2003). This in turn raises questions about how far the community is the best vehicle for engendering local participation and democratic processes, particularly in an arena where the ground rules for engagement have often already been set, and notions of ‘community empowerment’ might best be understood as a strategy of governance to render urban policy more efficient (Cochrane, 2003; Raco, 2003).

Indeed, such a notion of empowerment is in marked contrast to that of the disabled people’s movement, and, amongst people with learning disabilities, the self-advocacy movement, which calls for disabled people’s self-determination, and universal rights for disabled people grounded in a critique of the disabling structures which characterize society (Hall, 2004; Imrie, 1996b). Projects such as Roots and Shoots have the potential to be places where people with learning difficulties can express their own agendas and issues that affect their lives – to enable that self-determination and political voice. However, they are unlikely to be assisted by participation in a policy which dictates terms of engagement, and views disabled people as active citizens only in the context of projects to inculcate responsibility in terms of labour market participation.

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Note

1. The research involved a three stage methodology: i) interviews with national disability organizations and policy actors within the then
Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions; ii) questionnaires sent to 200 SRB partnerships across England asking them about the involvement of disabled people in their activities and the partnership process; iii) two case studies of SRB partnerships whose activities were aimed at disabled people.

References


