

## PARTNERSHIP AND THE BOTTOM-UP APPROACH : WHERE ARE WE NOW ?

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1. The point of entry of the approach was at the high point of the Neo-Liberal revival and at a time when States' costly policies of uniform rights and entitlements to welfare support were perceived as failing to meet increasingly sophisticated individual needs
2. The Bottom up Local Partnership (BULP) approach is in opposition to the Neo Liberal agenda of allowing the free play of market forces and seeking to remove the State as an interference in that free play but it does go some way toward a recognition that the world is increasingly differentiated and increasingly complex and that the grand theories of Welfare Statism and of systems of public administration to support it are increasingly unable to match the demands of people to have wider choice.
3. While acknowledging contemporary reality, BULP retains as fundamental those ideas of mutual interest and solidarity that the retreat to simple market forces seeks to discard. Its root lies in partnership – a term that sees people *coming together* to share concerns and explore solutions. Its domain is the local – a spatial entity capable of carrying an *identity meaningful to people* by virtue of their shared experiences of being in proximity to each other.
4. Partnership set at the local level can offer a means to mediate contemporary circumstances. It can be both flexible and responsive to change. It is not constrained to be either a single form or a single entity. It can take a variety of forms that suit perceived local circumstances and be an evolving structure learning its way forward as things change or as relations and stakeholders change.
5. In a given local space numbers of partnerships can exist that are able to map onto both differing purposes and different groups. Networked together, families of partnerships can offer co-ordinated and integrated solutions to complex issues. Integrated both horizontally and vertically (through the system of governance) partnerships can give flexibility and the requisite variety of response that is needed to cope with the pressures of the modern world.
6. In a world where globalisation and the free play of market forces are producing strong social and territorial disequilibria, States and their institutions are struggling to buffer these effects with an armoury of tools and resources that is both shrinking and becoming less effective. An alternative that sees people coming together around those things less subject to the forces of the market – home, family, friends, community, culture – essentially the essence of the local life, can offer a very human way of “erecting windbreaks” to buffer Joseph Schumpeter’s “gales of creative destruction” and these disequilibria.

7. The point of entry to this local partnership based alternative and what gave it prominence as a potential instrument on which to develop policy has tended to be the issue of *unemployment*. There is an immediate coming together of interest here by governments threatened by its social and especially its electoral effects and by local people looking to find ways of having their claims for help recognised as their livelihoods come under threat. While policies at other levels – macro-economic and structural/regional/sectoral – strive to readjust at the level of the economic system, a policy that proposes *directly* to look for and effect a *local* solution has strong appeal.
8. The BULP approach had, in response to this, a relatively easy passage into the policy frameworks of the EU and its Member States during the 1980s and 1990s. It was envisioned as an instrument of unemployment policy and this determined its development pathway from then until now. In economic analysis it was to work on both the supply and the demand side. On the first it was to offer a means to mobilise labour to adapt to new work opportunities and skill needs through new “pathways to integration” with strongly local points of entry. On the second it was to be a means to prospect for new sources of jobs at the local level – particularly by identifying those gaps that were unfilled by private enterprise or public provision as service demands changed faster than orthodox responses or as resources dwindled to meet the needs of what Birkholzer has called the “shadow places”.
9. The BULP approach by virtue of this entry point to policy has become strongly attached to these “shadow places”. As an instrument to tackle the effects of unemployment and by simple extension, once the term became popularised, social exclusion. It has been very much associated with “poor people in poor places”. This strongly instrumentalist view has also conditioned the terms of the debate about its effectiveness. Thus, while BULP could be debated as a *generalised approach* for maintaining a root of solidarity and common purpose in economic and social life while still realistically acknowledging the need for choice and flexibility in a turbulent world, we only hear of it as an instrument to help with unemployment and social exclusion.
10. Thus BULP has a bi-polar agenda. It is at one extreme a policy instrument to be measured by its success in delivering outcomes – jobs, training places and the inclusion of those on the margins. At the other extreme it is worthy of consideration as an early experiment in devising a new model of governance that fits the needs of people for more choices, that has a potential for flexibility and creativity in matching a turbulent world but that also has built into it a root recognition of the importance of trust, common purpose and solidarity.
11. It is important that the narrower and more instrumental mission should not continue exclusively to be the only focus of debate and the approach should be finally judged to have succeeded or failed only from this perspective. Equally, a more utopian view of the potential of the approach to bring back a degree of solidarity politics into a mean and individualistic world should not glibly dismiss the instrumentalism of the narrower approach. Both can have their place. From what has been by any measure a huge expenditure of funds on experiments within the instrumentalist approach, new learning about the robustness of the utopian vision can be extracted and built up. What is lacking is the concerted effort of academics and policy analysts to work over the record of the last decade and begin to construct the outlines of the wider, perhaps more utopian, debate.

12. There has never been a better or more urgent time to do this under circumstances where policy-makers have become increasingly bemused by the difficulties of the tasks piling in upon them and where there is evidence of a retreat to the line of least resistance marked out by “more research”, “more infrastructure” and “more law and order”.
13. So how are we doing on BULP across Europe? Everybody seems to have adopted the vocabulary and bought into the instrumentalist agenda of local partnership as a fix for poor people in poor places. But national experiences are highly variable. The European Commission has surrendered its vitally important intellectual leadership with the end of Articles 6 and 10 and the policy of rotating officials through a wide variety of internal and external experiences. But a “funding marketplace” for instrumentalist approaches does seem to have emerged and is still just about in place at the end of a programming cycle. A set of evaluation rules has been developed to offer a “proof of effectiveness” – job counts, SME creation counts, reductions in conflict events counts and so on. Maturity of this sort has, however, meant the squeezing out of creativity in the interests of efficiency.
14. Significantly, what seems to have emerged is an acknowledged place across almost all of the EU15 for a “third” sector that operates between the private for profit and the state public sector. In some countries a formally recognised Third Sector can be defined with a discrete membership, with laws to regulate it and a set of institutional structures to support it. In others the development is weaker and more fragmented. The notion of a Third *System* that not only contains the core elements of the institutional Third Sector but that finds a source of dynamic growth by the emergence of hybrid forms across the boundaries into the private and public sectors is being debated in some quarters. One clear feature of both is the rise of locally based organisations of all kinds coming into place to “colonise” those spaces where higher level policies are found to be inadequate. While the “push” of local policy initiatives has had a significant role in this there is also a sense that there has been a degree of “pull” by local people themselves as they have sought to get some leverage on the problems confronting them.
15. National experiences are, once again, different across a complex set of encouragements and regulatory instruments. In some cases these take the form of a set of rules for compliance: – “you must consult”; “you must have a multi-stakeholder partnership involving social partners”; “you must not trade more than 30 percent of gross revenue if you are to qualify for state subsidy”; “you must have procedures that protect the interests of women and/or the environment”; “these activities are to be supported only in defined local contexts of extreme multiple deprivation” and so on. These may be set within clear legal frameworks that set conditions for say co-operatives, charities or associations or may simply be administrative rules associated with the conditions for access to state funding. Experimentation is widespread as national administrations seek to accommodate a growing trend toward new more flexible and often locally driven initiatives to allow people to “get handles on” a complex and fast moving world.
16. Variety is, indeed, the norm and appropriately so - as people and places flexibly make their choices about partnership and its purposes on the basis of their history, culture, class and perceptions of need. It is a paradox that the greater the flexibility of local approach and response needed effectively to

confront a complex and fast changing environment the harder it is for observers to make simple observations about process and to come up with the models and types of activities that policymakers need if they are to choose where best to intervene. Knowing whether to intervene and where to intervene for the best is the bane of the BULP approach for politicians and bureaucrats.

17. Where the BULP approach steps outside the narrow confines of its instrumental role as a means to create jobs and pathways to integration for the unemployed and socially excluded it very quickly impinges on even more complex questions about local democracy and the decentralisation of state power. How the participative form of the BULP agenda interfaces with representative local democracy is an issue that constantly arises. While some will argue that it serves to weaken traditional forms of local government and is partly responsible for the widely observed “democratic deficit” others suggest that it is for the traditional local governance forms to recognise that this is a fundamental change in the way people seek to represent their local views and that the democratic process must move on to respond to it.
18. It seems that there may also be an economic argument to be confronted that where the local democratic system interfaces effectively to sponsor a more participative, inclusive and engaged form of civic society with trust as a key component there may be competitive advantage to be captured. The now “classical” model of the Third Italy that regional governments are seeking to reproduce by actively attempting to install “clusters” seems to suggest that getting the economic and cultural milieu in harmony offers more than civic and social gains.
19. Looking at theoretical frameworks there seem to be two models currently in play with more work needed on how they relate to each other. These are; a) socio-political – looking at the capacity for self-organisation among local groups (partnership formation) and; b) socio-economic (social enterprise formation) – looking at alternative forms of economic activity to the orthodox model where business activity is driven by social and ethical motivation. These appear to be playing themselves out across a number of cross-national sub-models:
  - a. Scandinavian – egalitarian and cohesive state policies and legislation but little scope for those at the margins;
  - b. Continental Northern European – France, Belgium, Germany, Italy – where the state takes on the role of policeman defining the limits of the public and private spheres by law and maintains close watch on the internal rules and the boundaries of each;
  - c. Mediterranean – Greece, Spain, Portugal – where as yet the BULP model struggles to gain a foothold;
  - d. Eastern European – the new members from the east – where a blighted history of social organisation and the supposed benefits of co-operation makes for suspicion and a lack of enthusiasm;
20. While there are visible differences in BULP from state to state and across these groups of states, there are also strong differences in the way the agenda plays out within states under different contingent conditions. There is, for example, a strong rural-urban contrast and great differences between say old industrial regions, traditional agricultural centres and newly emergent

ex-urban towns and villages. It is not a matter simply of what takes place but also of different levels of enthusiasm for the local partnership project in general. In urban areas, for example, the problems are inevitably complex with social tensions providing a strong incentive to find solutions that accommodate a variety of stakeholders. Here it is, at least geographically, easier to get people together. The difficulty here tends to be the sheer proliferation of local partnership forms and how to cope with them in an ordered way. At the other extreme, in dispersed rural areas the problems that can respond to local action are less obvious and at the same time the difficulties associated with bringing people together are often virtually insurmountable. There is clearly no one model for BULP (or certainly of best practice) across all these contrasting sets of conditions. It is essentially a cultural, political and economic entity for which different trajectories are inevitable – indeed that is its very strength. The only realistic measuring rod is whether it works in *particular* local circumstances.

21. Why then has BULP failed as yet to gain a secure foothold and move from experiment to received practice? We can offer a long list of reasons as follows:
  - a. A failure to secure confidence in the project as a whole;
  - b. A failure to come up with a satisfactory model of inclusive stakeholder partnership;
  - c. A failure to explore the issues arising from the interface with representative local democracy;
  - d. A failure to engage the attention of local communities (other than by the incentive of project funding) and the “traditional” political entities;
  - e. A failure to construct a grand narrative that can present the case in simple terms to the wider audience;
  - f. Above all a failure to make the wider case sufficient to carry it beyond the funding streams and initiatives that carried it initially.
  
22. And yet, all this is too negative. Things have been laid down even through the instrumentalism of the first wave that have seen BULP colonise political and economic thinking. Few will now argue against the importance of a local perspective in any form of social, political and economic narrative. The local is on the main agenda alongside equal opportunity, environmental sustainability and social inclusion. Indeed, it is a prime component running through these contemporary debates and there is a case to be made that the local is a domain where all of these things are actually played out and that sensitive policies to deal with them can best be built from the bottom up. If politicians and social theorists remain wary, local people (in some places and not others as we have suggested) have adopted the idea strongly seeing them in some cases as “windbreaks” and in others as positive vehicles for the expression of their creativity.
  
23. But what have we also learned about the limitations of the approach?
  - a. Perhaps it is all just too complicated when applied in practice. Certainly there is case to be made that for getting assistance to excluded people it has become far too heavy handed as the need for compliance with funding regimes has fostered a bureaucratic jungle of rules and procedures. This has converted it often into a measure “done to” the beneficiaries by those acting on their behalf rather than something that takes them on board as partners with the power to set

- objectives. This is, of course, not an intrinsic or even necessary feature – merely a measure of the distrust of the public authorities.
- b. Just a device to hi-jack public money. If this is true it has been an unsuccessful ploy because the lack of trust coming from the funding authorities has seen it pay the price of being trussed up with bureaucratic rules to ensure accountability. Nevertheless, it has needed to attract subventions of public money to get as far as it has and make the beginnings of the case set out here.
  - c. It claims falsely to be a democratic project. There are certainly observable shortcomings in this respect as we have already pointed out. There is in its favour, however, a proposition that it seeks to establish a new democratic form and not merely be an uncritical subscriber to an old one that is failing to capture the attention of the electorate.
  - d. Not a remedy but just a palliative. Part of the difficulty in making the case has been precisely this. Governments and to an extent its own promoters have seen it as a short term fix for the problems of the day – experimenting with new techniques and then seeing the best of them drawn up into the mainstream along with their proponents. Indeed, part of the evidence for its success against this narrow criterion is to be found in the large numbers of people who began with local projects and now find themselves in key post in mainstream government. The counter to this proposition can only come from what we have been suggesting all along – the clear articulation of a case that is not a short term instrumental fix but a basis for a new component of the established system of governance.
  - e. Failed to come up to standard once evaluated. Perhaps the greatest weakness of the approach in getting its case across convincingly has been that traditional forms of quantitative and formal evaluation have produced at best a verdict of “not proven”. The argument put forward by the supporters of BULP that the “tools are the wrong ones” is easily dismissed unless there is a stronger burden of proof as to why this might be. However, the case to argue for more appropriate tools demands that there is much greater clarity about the core objectives of the approach in general terms. This, in turn, demands a much clearer narrative to support the general rather than simply the instrumental value added of BULP.
24. Looking to the future from the perspective of the EU which was the most powerful early promoter of the approach the signs are not good. The Lisbon process has nothing to say about it – having been hi-jacked by the intergovernmental compromise around a sectoral view and some hoped for information society miracle. The Open Method of Co-ordination on which so much rests for future policy in the EU25-30 has settled for “partnership” as the watchword at national level and exchange of best practice as the device for setting benchmark standards and levelling up to them. The vision is narrowly economic and very much top-down. The case for BULP will be that much harder to make face with this sort of agenda from the Council of Ministers. However, the acknowledgement that Lisbon has failed dismally to capture the interest of the public and of the traditional political classes gives the hope that all is yet to play for and that other routeways to a competitive and cohesive future will have to be explored.

25. There is much to be done and what is lacking above all is a platform of parties interested in the Bottom Up Local Partnership agenda. The interest is there on the ground what is needed is a means to mobilise people and organisations and to give coherence to the debate. The challenge is before us and this paper is designed as a point of departure.