

Social Exclusion in the Countryside

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Introduction

Almost everyone is aware of the rhetoric surrounding social exclusion and inclusion. Although strongly associated with the New Labour agenda, the roots of social inclusion are more distant in time and space. In spite of the term's widespread use and numerous attempts at definition, the precise meaning of inclusion and exclusion remain rather elusive. Further, as is evident from the research, some definitions of exclusion are more obfuscatory than enlightening.

Defining Social Exclusion

A number of people and organisations have offered definitions of exclusion. The Cabinet Office (2000) (<http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/>) suggest that:

“social exclusion is a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown”.

The Local Government Association (1999) defines social exclusion as:

“the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live. This can include a range of processes (e.g. unemployment, lack of entitlement or access to social security benefits, social security benefit levels, and poor transportation) and outcomes (e.g. poverty, ill health and isolation).”

Burchardt et al. (1999) offer a further definition:

“An individual is socially excluded if (a) he or she is geographically resident in a society but (b) for reasons beyond his or her control he or she cannot participate in the normal activities of citizens of that society and (c) he or she would like to so participate.”

The first definition suggests multi-dimensional disadvantage, reflected in a range of identifiable symptoms. The second definition asserts that exclusion is a process or set of processes. The third implies also that exclusion is a function of a set of processes resulting in the failure to participate in the ‘normal activities of citizens’ but adds that exclusion is only exclusion when the person has an unfulfilled desire to participate.

When applied to leisure, the concepts of exclusion and inclusion become no clearer. Whilst it is easy to acknowledge that non-participation cannot necessarily be taken as indicative of exclusion, it is difficult not to recognise that leisure choices for many are constrained by the very factors that, depending on definitions, are either correlated with social exclusion or which, linked together, comprise social exclusion.

In the context of countryside leisure, Harrison (1991) has argued that leisure opportunity has been constrained by the adoption of what she terms an ‘aesthetic imperative’. In countryside recreation there is thus both a problem of socially constructed supply that creates particular types of opportunity (often with substantial public sector support), and socially constructed demand which leads certain groups out of choice to ignore some of the goods and services on offer. Under such circumstances, it is disingenuous to define away exclusion simply on the basis of the evidence of limited demand for countryside leisure from poorer groups.

It is interesting to contemplate the factors that, over a generation or so, have so dramatically altered the behaviour of working-class people in the countryside. The uplands of Britain were very widely used by working people for informal recreation in the inter-war and immediate post-war period. Has a more exciting array of opportunities? Has the

demise of public transport rendered the countryside more inaccessible? Or more controversially, has the access to the countryside by working class people been 'designed out' by agencies, keen to extol its educational value, but rather less keen to make the countryside an enjoyable place to experience the freedom that Ewan MacColl (who wrote the anthem for the Kinder Trespass) so valued?

A second (related) problem emanating from the definitions concerns the issue of what constitutes the 'normal activities of citizens'. There is an implicit bundle of values wrapped up in the notion of citizenship. However, in a pluralistic and multi-cultural society defining 'normal activities' is problematic, as we might anticipate substantial differences in leisure and other behaviour. Moreover, these differences are an obvious source of tension. A desire for quiet recreation is compromised by the desire of other groups for more noisy activities. Whose preferences comprise the legitimate mainstream wishes of citizens is open to debate.

Given the distinct decline in participation in the countryside, it is disturbing to read about the declining recreational infrastructure in towns. A recent Policy Studies Institute report (PSI, 2001) catalogues this failure: "at last we have definitive

information showing the dramatic decline in the quality of our parks and, for the first time, a national database of parks which can be built up into a reliable and comprehensive record. The record currently shows that for many (urban) parks the decline in funding and quality continues. Reversing this deep-seated trend requires clear leadership from government and decisive action from local authorities, with substantial support from government departments and agencies as well as the Lottery distributors." The same report quotes Jennifer Jenkins: "public parks are in serious decline, especially those in deprived areas".

There is unambiguous evidence of under-participation in countryside recreation by young adults, low income groups, ethnic minorities, and the disabled. However, the extent to which these groups (or at least some amongst these groups) are excluded or choose not to use the countryside is open to more debate. Questionnaire evidence reveals a combination of disinterest and a range of factors associated with exclusion (see Table 1)

The Survey

The approach we adopted was to screen as widely as possible to find examples of good practice in inclusion. We approached several hundred local

Table 1: Reasons for not visiting the countryside for those who did not visit at all during the year in Great Britain (% of reasons ranked for 1998)

Reason	1996	1998
No particular reason – just have not gone	23	19
Health reasons or disability	13	18
Work reasons – always too busy or a lack of time	19	17
Not interested: the countryside has no appeal	19	17
Lack of suitable means of transport	7	9
Not enough money or can't afford it	6	7
Nervous or uneasy about visiting the countryside	0	1
Lack of information about where to go	1	0
Other reason	12	12

Sources: Social and Community Planning Research, 1997 and 1999

authorities, quangos and non governmental organisations to determine what activities were taking place in relation to social exclusion and countryside recreation, and received over 200 replies, most of which comprised projects. It was interesting how many of the requests for information were redirected within organisations and how replies trickled in about interesting projects long after the selection process. From this long list we sought a short list, based on the type of countryside and the target group of people (see Table 2). Twelve projects were selected for detailed investigation including at least one in each box.

The Results

The twelve projects selected for analysis are indicated in Table 2.

We sought to visit each project and to interview both project managers and, wherever possible, beneficiaries. Semi-structured questionnaires were used to elicit responses to a wide range of questions. Most meetings were tape-recorded and provided a rich source of material for subsequent analysis.

All of the projects provided useful insights into policies and practices to address excluded groups. There is no recipe of success but rather a bundle of variables that help us to understand why some projects appear to succeed when others struggle. Our research design did not permit a focus on failure, but looking at some of the failures would be highly informative. Instead, we endeavoured to identify factors that predisposed projects to succeed.

Factors Contributing to Success

Successful projects tend to be community-driven, championed by members of the community in which they are located. Community-driven projects contrast with top-down paternalistic projects where assumptions are made about community demands and projects are managed through top-down interventions. Where projects are community-driven, they tend to have higher levels of participation (representing real rather than assumed demand), have greater commitment and longevity, and tend to remain focussed on community rather than external interests. However community driven projects can give powerful individuals a chance to

Table 2: Projects selected for analysis

PROJECT	TARGET BENEFICIARIES
Antrim Borough Council	Ethnic/religious groups
Big Issue Hill Walking Club	Homeless urban poor, young adult
Black Environment Network	Ethnic minorities
Fairbridge	Young adults, urban poor
Glodwick Community Outreach	Ethnic minorities
Greenwood Community Forest (Bestwood)	Ethnic minorities
Mendip Hills AONB	Poor and young
Midlothian Council (Vogrie Country Park)	Disabled
Northants Council Brixworth	Disabled
National Trust Inner City Project	Poor; young and elderly inner-city residents
PACE (Croydon)	Ethnic minorities
Youth Route 70	Young adults, urban poor

'steal the show' and can allow antagonisms between conflicting interests to develop. Further, they may, in spite of focussing on the excluded, focus on the least excluded, with minority and weakly articulated interests being neglected.

Projects are more likely to succeed where empowerment of the target groups is a key component of the approach. Empowerment not only enhances the self-esteem of those involved but also increases the sustainability of the project. Rather than being passive beneficiaries, the participants become active citizens. Indeed, there were a number of examples where the actions of the beneficiaries was a major factor in perpetuating the project. However, empowering one group may challenge established users, a point that was raised in one of the cases. Further, given the project basis of so many of these initiatives, too much empowerment diminishes the need for project management. Finally, empowerment is not easy to quantify and thus is not easily defensible in a world where clear numerical indicators of success are often sought by project sponsors.

Increasing social cohesion may, at first sight, seem like an unlikely correlate of project success. However, where projects promote social cohesion, they tend to reduce barriers to participation and enhance the prospects for project success. As noted in the literature review, not all groups feel welcome in the countryside. Several projects built bridges to enable previously under-represented groups to become more active in the countryside and enjoy their visits more. The beneficiaries of one project noted how getting involved had re-engaged them in society: they had in their words 'been given back their lives'.

Projects that were based on partnership had a greater chance of success. Partnership formation often enables a pooling of resources that result in more joined-up action. Some partnerships provided a means of strengthening human and social capital in communities and this gave projects greater durability. Often, partnerships were able to survive

the difficulties that might afflict single-agency projects through drawing on experiences of partners with a range of skills and experiences. Not all partnerships work: inter-agency rivalries, conflicting rivalries and slow decision-making are all potential problems.

Appropriate staffing was seen as a key ingredient of project success. In almost all of the projects examined a principal success factor was the energy, motivation and skill of key project staff. Whilst the charisma of many of these individuals is difficult to define, it nonetheless contributed dramatically to project success. The use of 'outreach' as well as countryside management staff was seen as a desirable project attribute.

Both quantitative and qualitative evaluations were seen as desirable elements of successful projects. Those projects that depended on quantitative indicators often seemed more concerned to generate positive values for these indicators than to address less quantifiable concerns such as social capital building and empowerment. A recognition of the need to assess performance was seen as beneficial, but it was seen as desirable to embrace both quantitative and qualitative evaluation.

Effective marketing was seen as important. Given the competition for leisure spending by households and individuals, it is simply not reasonable to assume that countryside recreational products will market themselves. Although there is now greater tolerance amongst countryside managers of the need to take a more customer-oriented perspective, there has been a considerable suspicion of marketing in the past.

Factors which Limit Effectiveness

Many of the projects examined suffered from a semi-permanent need to seek future funding which would enable the projects to continue. Of course, finance emerged even amongst the successful projects as a factor limiting what could be achieved. However, the fixed term of many funding packages means that there is constant stress in many organisations to maintain their financial position that enables project

aims to be met. Well-endowed projects were distinctly advantaged.

The nature of the human resources employed on projects can be a source of weakness. Caring professions can subordinate the values of the intended beneficiaries to their own values. Paternalistic values might potentially take power away from local groups.

The problem of project dependency is often associated with the issue of paternalistic values of project personnel. As one of our respondents noted, success in the project is at the expense of your job: an empowered community should not need the person who facilitates the access.

Final Thoughts

This study exposed to the study team some excellent examples of good practice in addressing social inclusion and exclusion in countryside leisure. It also exposed the challenges of dealing with a malleable concept that many practitioners only partially understood. This is through no fault of the project officers and personnel on the ground. The inclusion agenda has been thrust upon them and increasingly funding revolves around taking inclusion issues into account in project design.

We need to better understand the attitudes of those who do not use the countryside and for whom exclusion may be an issue. The countryside is a place that many recent immigrants may feel no close affinity for. The educational ethos of a great deal of public sector provision may not appeal to less educated and poorer people who are simply seeking entertainment and fun. Certain disabled groups may not be able to access certain types of countryside. And the deeper recesses of the countryside may simply be too costly for poorer to access. But all the time we need to probe whether there are exclusionary forces at work or whether those in groups with low participation rates simply choose to spend their leisure pound in other places. As Isobel Emmett exposed in an early article for the Countryside Commission (1971), social filters can

operate to exclude certain groups from the countryside. These social filters still operate in the new millennium.

One facet of contemporary government activity is the tendency towards 'projectisation'. Funding is often not available for routine activity. Instead, institutions are forced to bid for scarce funds, and obliged, if they wish to succeed, to dress up project proposals in the jargon of the moment. This means that the work of honest journeymen may be neglected in favour of trendy wordsmiths. Whilst the need to select projects is an essential task for administrators, the dismal record of appraising the payoff from injections, for example, of lottery money is all too apparent.

There is a conflict of interest that is particularly evident in inclusion projects. With the inevitable desire to pick winners, the not-so-excluded may be easier to include than the most excluded. Consequently, there may be a tendency to ignore the most marginalised groups. The inevitable consequence is a concentration of effort where it may be less needed.

The mainstreaming of good practice in projects still presents an enormous challenge. It may not be easy to move from good practice in projects that address exclusion to embedding good practice into the enormous breadth and diversity of countryside recreational provision.

We know that neo-liberal economic policies generate inequalities between different countries, regions and groups. Inequality is associated with exclusion in a range of complex relationships. Alongside social exclusion in the leisure sphere lies social exclusion in a range of other spheres. Such exclusion is in part a product of structural economic and political forces, which are sometimes challenged (for example, the anti-globalisation demonstrations) and sometimes uneasily accepted as the status quo within which those addressing exclusion must work.

The Agencies and institutions involved in countryside

recreation need to look critically at policies, actions and projects that they have engaged in for those that might have increased exclusion. They need to think how else their budgets might have been deployed to reduce exclusion? The risk is that there remain powerful exclusionary processes forces inherent within countryside recreation policy.

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We would be naïve to believe that mainstreaming social inclusion in countryside leisure will be anything other than a formidable challenge.

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