



# « SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH CAPACITATION: THE CASE OF MARSH FARM »

Luton, United Kingdom

*Period of implementation: 1990s (launch) | Study case written in 2010*

The Marsh Farm Community Empowerment Strategy is a community-based regeneration program based on a 'capacitation' approach. The main objective of the policy is to enable the people living in Marsh Farm to improve themselves and their neighbourhood through the construction of a community of self-help. Within an urban regeneration process, the policy focuses on those with a story of social exclusion due to long-term unemployment. The process was started in an informal environment and, from the beginning, was based on citizens' direct participation. Over the course of its history, the initiators managed to involve a very broad part of the inhabitants from different social and ethnic backgrounds, creating an ever-richer community. During its implementation, the policy experienced an increasing level of institutionalisation as a consequence of the rising interest of the local and national authorities in the success of the local practices. In particular, the institutionalisation started with the recognition of a temporary use, communal living experience by the Department of Transport, who owned the facility.



The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** was launched in 2008 by the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights with the aim of creating a space for analysis and reflection on local social inclusion policies. The initiative was developed with the scientific support of Professor Yves Cabannes (University College of London) and the Centre for Social Studies (CES) from the University of Coimbra. At present, the Observatory contains more than sixty study cases mostly developed between 2008 and 2010. Even though many of these cases refer to policies that have already come to an end, they still have much to offer: from capitalizing on the learning acquired by other local authorities to discovering suggestive and alternative means to address social inclusion challenges from a local perspective.

## Context

### *Government and decentralization context*

The Greater London Area is divided into 33 boroughs that hold power over a number of fundamental areas such as housing, education, social services, transport, planning, and so on (Local Authorities Regulation, last revised in 2008). Although the governance system first appears to grant a high level of independence to local government bodies both financially and politically, as shown in Table 1, funding ties to the central government are quite strong.

**Table 1. Luton Unitary Council Budget 2009/2010**

| <b>Luton Unitary Council Budget 2009/10</b> | <b>Absolute</b> | <b>Percentage</b>                                |
|---|-----------------|--|
| Area Based Grants                           | £ 98 Million    | 17.53%   |
| Dedicated School Grants                     | £ 136 Million   | 24.33%   |
| Other Special Purpose Grants                | £ 134 Million   | 23.97%   |
| Council Taxes                               | £ 61 Million    | 10.91%   |
| Other direct sources                        | £ 130 Million   | 23.26%   |
| <b>Total</b>                                | £ 559 Million   | Government grants: 65.83%<br>Local funds: 34.17% |

To determine the national grants, the government uses a system that takes into account the number and value of properties in each area, and how much it costs to provide services there. Council Tax provides for about one third of local funding and is set locally. The tax is paid by each household depending on the value of the home regardless of whether it is owned or rented. The central government has the power to ensure that tax increases are justified and not excessive. Business rates (in Table 1, part of 'Other direct sources') are property taxes on businesses and non-domestic properties that are set by the national government although collected by local authorities. Local authorities are independent politically, but the creation in 2006 of the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has meant that a number of subjects (e.g., community cohesion, housing, regeneration, and equality), although formally decided and administered locally, are coordinated and discussed at a national level by the Cabinet's Office. The introduction of the DCLG does not mean that local bodies have lost their decision-making power, but the level of independence is certainly more limited.

### *City context*

The Luton Unitary Council and the Marsh Farm area in particular are located on the very fringe of the London Metropolitan Area, one of the largest and wealthiest urban conurbations in the world with a population of 7,753,600 (almost 12% of Britain's population). Some of the world's leading financial and service companies are based in the London region, and the average GDP per capita in the region is among the highest in the entire EU at £30,800. Despite this immense concentration of wealth and an income support system, however, large concentrations of urban poverty still exist within the region. In particular, as a consequence of the great industrial

closures of the 1980s, the outer fringes, like Luton, suffered from a sudden loss of jobs, which deeply impacted local economic structures.

One of London's five major airports is located within Luton's municipal boundaries, making it a strategically important access point to the region. Traditionally, Luton had been an important industrial centre prior to shifting its economic structure to the service sector, specialising in airport-related services. Luton's Marsh Farm neighbourhood reflects this working class neighbourhood character. Located at the fringe of the ex-industrial city of Luton, the Marsh Farm neighbourhood is made up almost entirely of social housing estates conceived and built in the late 1960s which, due to the poor materials used in their construction, are in very bad physical condition. In addition, the industrial heritage has resulted in abandoned brownfields.

Mismanagement and bad planning led the area to become one of 'the most deprived neighbourhoods' in the whole of Britain in 1997, according to a National Government report. Such places have a common history of a failed urban development project and long-term abandonment. Key deprivation factors are joblessness, lack of social engagement, and an elevated crime rate. These areas are in great need of improved skills/education to enable new work opportunities, which in turn impact on people's health and well-being.

### *Area based regeneration policies*

'Area Based Initiatives' is a type of policy adopted by the British Government to address territorial deprivation by concentrating a very large amount of funds and technical resources on targeted neighbourhoods. These programs, used for nearly 40 years, have typically been time-limited and mainly focused on physical issues, even when claiming a participatory approach. A program called 'New Deal for Communities' was launched in 1998, through which a massive investment (around £50 million for each area spread over a 10-year period) was delivered on top of already existing government funding. The program required direct involvement of the local community and the creation of strategic partnerships between community-based organizations active in the social and voluntary field, public bodies, and private enterprises.

These partnerships had to allow for, among other things, the reorganization and redefinition of local services beginning from the needs expressed by the residents' aspirations and direct involvement. The structure of the program decreed that: (a) the Social Exclusion Unit, under direct control of the Cabinet's Office, would participate in the program through its regional bodies; (b) local communities (inhabitants and organisations) would form local trusts that would coordinate interventions to be undertaken; and (c) local authorities would be directly accountable for the overall program.

**Institutional level of policy development:** National, municipal, and sub-municipal

### *Social context*

#### **Marsh Farm neighbourhood**

Only 67.5% of the population in Luton is officially employed, but this figure is certainly even lower in districts like Marsh Farm that suffered more than others the industrial dismissals of the 1980s and 1990s without profiting from the following economic restructuring. Social degradation, as a consequence of these mass dismissals and elevated youth unemployment (almost 50% of the population under 30 is dependent on unemployment benefits), is also present. The 2001 demographics of Marsh Farm residents are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Marsh Farm residents**

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Total population | 7,976   |
| Age              | 0-18: 2,721 or 34.1% [national average 20.2%]<br>18-30: 1,341 or 16.8%<br>30-64: 3,346 or 41.9%<br>64+: 566 or 7.1% [national average 7.4%] |
| Gender           | Male 3,901 or 48.9%; Female 4,075 or 51.1%  |
| Nationalities    | UK nationals: 6,840 (including 54 EU nationals) or 85.8%<br>Other nationalities <sup>1</sup> : 1,133 or 14.2%                               |

Source: 2001 Census

Like Luton as a whole, but to an even greater extent, Marsh Farm is home to a large non-white population of nearly 30% (compared to about 28% in Luton and 9% in England). Within the Black and Ethnic Minority group, the Asian proportion is smaller than in Luton generally and the black proportion correspondingly higher. A similar pattern is reflected in the declared religious affiliation of Marsh Farm residents: the Muslim community is very large (10.3%) relative to that in England (3.1%), but relatively smaller than that in Luton as a whole (14.6%). The proportion of Marsh Farm pupils staying on in school after age 16 (47.1%) is below that for Luton (54.6%) and that for the country as a whole (51.3%). The discrepancy grows when considering the proportion making successful applications to higher education establishments for the academic years 1991-2001: only 12.4% of applications from Marsh Farm residents were successful compared with 25.8% in Luton as a whole and 29.5% in England.

The neighbourhood offers, nevertheless, a high concentration of social capital due to a variety of organizations linked to ethnic minorities, religious groups, and different sorts of local activist groups. After years in which regeneration initiatives had been mostly physical and 'top-down', and after the neighbourhood became the stage for social conflicts and tensions between the different social realities living in the area<sup>2</sup>, the New Deal for Communities program gave the neighbourhood a chance to use that capital as a tool to tackle the roots of social exclusion. Not only local networks have been mobilized around the constitution of Marsh Farm Development Trust (MFCDT) and its activity: for the development of the programme, local cooperation has been extended to include other private and non-profit organizations and consultants attracted by the innovative approach adopted in Marsh Farm, even from abroad (e.g., International Network for Urban Research and Action [INURA], and the Latino-American grassroots cooperative *Clodomir Santos de Morais*, technical expert for the implementation of the *capacitation* process).

## Policy development

The Marsh Farm community initiatives started during the mid-1990s as a response to the condition of social exclusion suffered by the neighbourhood. At that time, a group of young residents, mostly with a history of long-term unemployment and with a strong thrive for self-

<sup>1</sup> This data does not include ethnic minorities holding British citizenship.

<sup>2</sup> During 1992, a series of riots put Marsh Farm in the headlines of the national news.

organization, started promoting music events as a strategy to encourage local youth to consider alternative use of spaces outside commercial mechanisms. The first formal group was named *Exodus* and, from the early days, it focused on broader aspects of the neighbourhood and of the community living in it with a working style based on self-help.

At the end of the decade, Exodus' development benefitted from a change brought about by the National Government: a new approach to urban regeneration and exclusion policies. In 1999, the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) – a structure appointed by the New Labour Government to explore exemplary cases of inclusion practices – considered the Exodus case, among others, designed a new national policy based on the logic of local self-management, and launched a competition to assign the funding. Marsh Farm was chosen as one of the areas for would become known as the New Deals for Communities (NDC) scheme, promoting a cooperative and locally managed approach to regeneration through establishing strategic partnerships between community representatives, local authorities, the private sector, and regeneration practitioners.

This policy allowed the up-to-then voluntary efforts to be recognized and formalised as part of the Marsh Farm Community Development Trust (MFCDT). This body was in charge of managing the funds granted by the government over 10 years to improve the neighbourhood's conditions through reusing available spaces and mobilising the community.

### *Policy goals*

At first Exodus promoted 'intelligent squatting' practices in order to allow for the self-expression of local youth and to reclaim necessary spaces for the local community to meet, build self-identity, and, in general, find an alternative to a market-driven idea of life. These objectives were reinforced and developed over time through working with local people to provide them with the opportunities and capacities they needed to develop their own projects which, in most cases, concerned their environment.

Since the very beginning, with the exception of the squatting of the Meadow Farm, the activists have tried to proceed inside standard procedural boundaries as much as possible, for two main reasons: (1) to attract as many citizens as possible rather than 'scare them off' and, more importantly, (2) to challenge them to point out faults and contradictions in existing systems that prevent them from making good use of certain resources.

The concept of *capacitation*, developed within the radical theoretical framework of innovative international development, is mostly applied in developing countries. This approach considers the lack of skills strongly related to the problem of autonomous development for communities. The Exodus members saw in this concept a possible theoretical framework for their work and used it to further develop their policy. *Capacitation* is defined as developing capacities through action rather than through a capacity building approach to tackle what it views as the biggest difficulty for the disadvantaged: the opportunity to act, rather than the skills to do so.

This more 'radical' approach held by the Exodus members was quite distant from the traditional and institutional approach held by local authorities and a number of other actors dealing with social re-inclusion, which created some tensions during the policy process. This conflict was only recently resolved through intervention by the Central Government via an Organisational Workshop pilot project.

### *Chronological development and implementation of the practice*

The policy, still in place today, can be divided into the pre-NDC program period, characterized by a certain degree of spontaneous actions, guided by a very clear inclusive principle, and

undertaken by the members of the Exodus collective; and a second, more defined and institutionalized phase which started with the NDC program, during which a great number of new players became involved in the policy.

Within this broad framework, a number of sub-phases defined various stages in the development of both grand stages. In particular, during the first period there was a constant refining of objectives and strategies by Exodus members in order to make the practice more effective and enlarge the basis of those who could benefit from it.

Over time, we can observe a three-stage transformation. Initially, it was an informal practice based on a self-help principle that gathered recognition, visibility, and institutional form through joining the NDC program. Then, part of the Exodus group moved from inside the institutionalised form of the MFCDT to return to a more 'grassroots type' movement with Marsh Farm Outreach. A third phase – not to be mistaken with a full return to the origins but, rather, as an enhancement – carries the fruits of the 'institutionalised season' and is characterised by a high degree of institutional recognition as well as financial backing while appearing and acting as informally as possible in order to facilitate easy access for those it tries to reach

## *Stakeholders, beneficiaries and participatory methodologies*

### **Agents involved**

The participants at one stage or another of the policy can be grouped into four large typological groups: institutions, professionals, local voluntary groups, and international activists.

The organizations involved in the *design* of the policy are mostly institutions such as the central government, which drafted the policy and consequently decided to include Marsh Farm in the NDC, and the new government, which decided to fund the Organizational Workshop in Marsh Farm as a pilot scheme.

The four types of organizations helped *implement* the policy:

- The Luton Council acted both as a facilitator (as part of the MFCDT) and as a 'foe' by denying the Ark project (a proposed community-run training and organization centre, described below) and other decisions that hampered the realization of a number of other smaller projects. This conflict can be understood as part of the conflict between *capacitation* and *capacity building*.
- 'Professionals', such as development and regeneration consultancies, were first drawn to the area as a consequence of the NDC program for their capacity to deal with such complex programs. For local participants, their role has been controversial: their interventions were often seen as an external economy, which was not adding much to the Marsh Farm community, although some interventions have deeply impacted the future actions undertaken by locals.
- A galaxy of local voluntary groups (some linked to faith, others to ethnic minorities and other groups), which were part of the MFCDT and participated in the decision-making of that phase. They also had a more general influence with their own actions to fight poverty, homelessness, and other forms of deprivation in residents' life.
- A group of 'international activists' (such as INURA) that helped Marsh Farm become known outside its local, marginal position. Their actions have drawn scholars' attention to it and allowed knowledge resources to reach those in the neighbourhood who were involved in designing the policy.

More marginal, and maybe specific to the English case, another set of actors was involved in the policy: so-called 'external capacity building agencies'. These agencies, which provide training and support in the search for jobs to local residents, have often been criticised for the top-down approach they have towards local contexts, not allowing for true knowledge creation and skill development, which would permit residents to take control of their situation and problems.

### **Beneficiaries**

The strength of the Marsh Farm regeneration policy (to date) is that the policy is developed by the same group of people that it aims to help. The policy, since its beginning, aimed to include all parts of the local society because it saw in this path the only real chance of ameliorating the neighbourhood's situation (and that of its residents).

### **Participation processes implemented**

The process has been one of inclusive participation and self-management from the start, with the beneficiaries and policy managers coming (mostly) from the same environment. Since the very beginning, the policy has been conceived as an inclusive process that aims to reach as many parts of the neighbourhood as possible in order to make more resources available. The main participants were the residents themselves as well as local councilmen and -women (both supporting and opposing the policy at various times). On one side, the choice to participate in the policy was made by residents as a reaction to the deprivation in the area, a situation for which institutions had not been able to find solutions. On the other side, external consultancies and other external actors joined the policy as part of the NDC program, mostly because of institutional requirements and because they saw both financial and networking advantages to participating in a NDC program.

## *Institutionalizing and financing*

### **Institutionalization processes**

The first push toward institutionalization came in 1995, when after lengthy negotiations with the Department of Transport, the Exodus group received a free loan agreement and permission to transform a farm owned by the Department of Transport, where they had previously squatted, into a community space. In 1997, the group began working on a new phase, which they conceived as 'The Ark', a community-run training and organization centre where the youth of the neighbourhood could learn to and eventually create a new economic basis for the neighbourhood based on self-organization. In 1999, another big push towards institutionalization came with the NDC program.

Another 10 years passed before the Marsh Farm residents could finally develop their initial 'self-organizational' plan – the Organizational Workshop as part of Marsh Farm Outreach (MFO), a structure almost completely merged with the Exodus group. The pilot scheme outlines a six-month trial period during which, with government funding, the MFO facilitates, coordinates, and supports the creation of a number of social enterprises. The Organizational Workshop is set up in partnership with the local jobcentre and can be attended by those on public benefits in order to provide them with more entrepreneurial skills, using a 'learning by doing' method. This, in the eyes of the organizers, will reach those who could not yet benefit from the MFCDT policies.

### **Financing**

The initial stages of the policy were self-funded by the residents of Marsh Farm. Then, the NDC suddenly provided access to a total of £48 million (over 10 years). The recent approval of the

Organizational Workshop brought an additional £8 million to the initial project. The use of these funds is limited to projects which had been approved and for which a budget had been presented according to precise guidelines.

## Outcomes and reflections

### *Key results and achievements*

The greatest result of this policy process is the policy itself: after almost 20 years of work on the neighbourhood's various issues, the residents of Marsh Farm are directly involved in the urban inclusion and regeneration policy processes being implemented in their neighbourhood. The first phase, while informal and extra-institutional, achieved an increase in awareness and consensus among the inhabitants while recovering an abandoned and marginal area of the neighbourhood. The second phase was somewhat less successful as The Ark project was never realised, although it created the basis for the NDC program. The third phase (characterized by the NDC program) allowed many projects to be realized. Over a 10-year span, the themes tackled vary widely, encompassing: crime reduction, education and training, ease of accessibility to health services, housing provision and, most importantly, unemployment. It was a very rich and complex season for Marsh Farm, leaving a legacy that will hopefully be confirmed by the Organizational Workshop Pilot Project.

Overall, the policy's greatest achievement has been its ability, through concrete and visible actions, to create jobs and even enterprises that arise from the needs and knowledge of the resident population. This use and awareness of resources available in the neighbourhood has created a more positive community feeling and identity.

### *Main obstacles*

There are a few key points to draw from the Marsh Farm experience, some relating to the applicability of the *capacitation* approach in deprived urban areas of developed countries and others relating more directly with the policy process itself.

First, strong bureaucratic structures and lengthy processes of control have slowed down dramatically the policy especially in the built up phase. Understandably, a system of checks and balances is required spending public money, but the system in place today in England, based on a thorough *ex ante* evaluation of all phases of a project, might not be the most appropriate to monitor a situation which is characterized by its flexibility to adapt to ideas which are constantly in progress and to needs that come up during the policy itself.

Second, a major conflict, easily transferable to similar situations elsewhere, is the competition between this system, aimed at giving actual independence to the community, and other welfare programs, especially if based on services of independent companies. In this case, there was a clash with training providers, which profit from huge public contracts for courses that are often criticised for their ineffectiveness.

Third, local political conflicts have played a major role in determining the speed at which some of the problems were tackled in the Marsh Farm case. For long time, the community did not have unitary political representation because of different internal views, so their role inside Luton Council was often marginal, if not antagonist, causing delays and step-backs as in the case of the 'Ark'.

### *Overall assessment and replicability or adaptation elsewhere*

## Overall assessment

One of the biggest advantages of this process, since the very beginning, has been the strong inclusive approach which allowed all parts of a very diverse community, such as the one in Marsh Farm, to participate and profit from it. In the words of the members of Exodus-Leviticus (see Leviticus website), nobody in the neighbourhood is excluded from the policy and this is the spirit in which the MFO was conceived. Over time, the basis of those benefiting from the practice has broadened because of the number of different initiatives taking place in Marsh Farm and the way in which the process has become more diversified as different people joined the strategy. For example, the participation of external consultancies in the NDC program and a learning-by-doing approach provided the 'core organizing group' (those who had been involved since the beginning) with new instruments in policy drafting, which ultimately paid off when the opportunity for the Organizational Workshop emerged.

## Replicability or adaptation of policy elsewhere

The policy could be replicated in similar areas that are considered marginal if we accept the starting point of the policy: it is not a lack of abstract skills that hinders the development of an autonomous economic cycle in the area but, rather, a lack of opportunities and the need to refine skills through putting people's ideas to work. This, as the Marsh Farm case shows, favours ideas that are needed by the local community while permitting citizens/organizations to become independent from the welfare programs on which they rely.

The external financing certainly enabled the development of the policy and its results, helping give local initiatives a much more stable base and therefore enabling them to reach additional people living in the area and activating new services. However, at the core of the process is the initial idea of self-help and self-organization which, as far as possible, aims to use and re-use internal resources available locally (both material and 'intellectual'). The recognition of the Organizational Workshop as a pilot scheme with the possibility of being replicated on a country-wide basis is proof of the power of this strategy.

A challenge or limitation to replicating the policy elsewhere may be linked to its development within the UK context, in particular to the circumstances of the British welfare system, which provides a strong financial backing to those most in need as long as they are officially looking for a job ('jobseekers allowance'). This support permitted many of those who became leaders of the policy to devote their time to it.

## Further information

This case was researched between 2005 and 2009 by Dr. Paolo Cottino (Department of Architecture and Planning, Polytechnic of Milan, Italy) and written by Dr. Christian Oxenius (Planet Association, Italy) under his supervision in 2010. Case development was supervised by Dr. Giovanni Allegretti at the Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal, in 2010.

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