The Communities Initiative

The Communities Initiative is an IPPR project that seeks to put 'community' at the heart of policy-making, moving beyond the traditional focus on individuals and individual needs. It investigates how individuals relate to each other and their neighbourhood, and reveals how such relations are affected by policy. It will suggest key ways in which public policy can foster and support community at the local level.

Why is the Initiative important?

Community matters. It matters to people who want to live in places where they can trust their neighbours, and where they feel at home. We now recognise that it matters to policy-makers too. People who feel an attachment to where they live are more likely to look after the quality of their living environment or take an active interest in local services. Following on from all the attention given to Robert Putnam's work on social capital, we also now know that there are certain health and welfare benefits attached to living in areas marked by reasonable levels of social trust and overlapping ties between residents.

The Initiative is important because we believe a focus on community should be a central concern of policy-making. In reality it is often neglected or misunderstood. How can policy-makers and practitioners build community in an area? It is hard to think of any effective policies which would have 'building community' as their sole aim, although many may help in a more indirect manner. The project as a whole thus focuses on identifying and recommending policies which whilst aiming at improving say, education, healthcare or housing also support community of place.

What are the aims of the Communities Initiative?

The central objectives of the Initiative are:
- To clarify the concept of 'community' and why it is important.
- To highlight and draw lessons from examples of mainstream public policy that harm or support community, and to suggest how we could 'community-proof' policy.
- To investigate what helps to build community and to establish whether there are common tractable factors that can make a difference in all areas.
- To recommend specific policies that could support and foster community.
- To raise the profile of community issues and initiate a debate around the aim of a community-focused policy agenda.

How is the Initiative achieving its aims?

As well as undertaking desk-based research, the Communities Initiative is supported by:
- Seminars exploring a wide range of policy issues from volunteering and civic renewal, to 'Wired-Up Communities', to liveability and the social effects of environmental design..
- Forthcoming books – the first of three, *Community Matters* exploring the policy framework for thinking about community, is due out in March.
- Area study – an innovative in-depth study of three contrasting neighbourhoods in Coventry is giving the project a subtle understanding of what factors support or undermine local community.
- Lecture series – three high profile lectures on policy areas of health, welfare and public environment will stimulate public debate around the policy implications of community.

What types of recommendations might the Communities Initiative make?

The Communities Initiative will deliver several types of recommendation to inform the thinking, policy-making and practice of key stake-holders:
- A conceptual framework for assessing the impact of policies on community, and for informing the development of community-friendly policies.
- A community-proofing tool or index to help identify policies which could undermine community.
- A range of detailed policy recommendations demonstrating how community could be supported.

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