



# An argument for active citizenship and organisational transparency

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for active  
citizenship

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to argue that active citizenship and organisational transparency are necessary to increase stakeholders' influence in policy processes. Active citizenship is necessary to involve stakeholders in policy processes and organisational transparency is necessary to improve communications between them and policy makers.

**Design/methodology/approach** – First, this paper explains a conceptual framework to understand communications in social systems. Second, it illustrates its application with reference to concrete policies in England.

**Findings** – It is found that for active citizenship it is necessary not only to increase stakeholders' competencies but also make effective those organisational structures relevant to the policy issues of concern. However, and this is a key reason to increase people's competencies, these structures are the outcome of self-organising processes shaped by those who are better organised, with more resources and in positions of power.

**Research limitations/implications** – Beyond informed and well-grounded dialogues, communications between citizens and policy makers happen through organisation structures that activate some resources at the expense of others and involve some stakeholders at the expense of others. Unless these structures make possible balanced communications between them, citizens will find it difficult to influence policy makers.

**Originality/value** – The paper sees the policy for active citizenship and community empowerment in England under the lens of a cybernetic framework.

**Keywords** Cybernetics, England, Organisational structures, Citizenship, Communities, Empowerment

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

Though at its core the emphasis of this paper is theoretical, it uses as a referent the English policy for active citizenship and community empowerment. We explain the evolution of this policy and its implementation over the past decade. The theoretical framework recognises strengthening stakeholders' competencies and organisational transparency as necessary to make stronger the influence of stakeholders in policies such as social services, education and nuclear waste management.

The idea of organisation we use here is that of a *closed network* of people in interaction and not that of an institution legally established; an organisation can emerge from institutionally distributed resources sharing focus on the same policy (Beer, 1979; Espejo, 2000). The idea of citizenship we use here is that of a property that emerges



from interactions building the public domain and not of a normative definition (Mendiawelso-Bendek, 2002).

Power imbalances between citizens/stakeholders and policy makers contribute to the misalignment of values in society (Espejo, 2006). For instance, people's local concern for a safe and clean environment can be overridden by the national need to support economic development and competitiveness. The challenge is redressing these imbalances through dialogues and communications avoiding situations where the global overwhelms the local, or sometimes, where minorities held to ransom the global interests. Aligning values is not a claim for uniform values; quite on the contrary, it is highlighting interdependence and diversity.

Our arguments are grounded in organisational cybernetics, in particular the works of Ashby (1964), Beer (1979, 1981, 1985) and Maturana and Varela (1992). Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety is a powerful construct to understand requirements for effective communications and mutual recognition between local individuals, groups or communities and policy makers at multiple levels. Beer's viable system model makes possible seeing the structure of social organisations beyond formal institutions. This is an epistemological tool to increase the systemic sensibility of policy makers; in particular their appreciation of the long-term consequences of their decisions. Maturana and Varela's autopoietic systems have also an important epistemological relevance. Structural coupling and structural determination are constructs that help us make sense of the co-evolution of organisations in a complex ecology.

In what follows, we first introduce Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety. This is followed by a short discussion of the complexity management strategies used by viable systems. Next, we clarify relationships for transparency between stakeholders and policy makers and introduce the ideas of structure determined systems and structural coupling. We then focus on the English policy for active citizenship to illustrate aspects of community empowerment. Finally, we illustrate the framework for transparency and the policy for active citizenship with reference to a particular policy situation for social services.

### **Managing complexity: problem solving in the light of the Law of Requisite Variety**

We are constantly confronted by challenges that exceed our response capacity and without ingenuity and learning capacity we would be overwhelmed by their complexity. A key conceptual construct to deal with these imbalances is the Law of Requisite Variety (Ashby, 1964).

It is a truism to say that organisations are complex. The number of possible interactions among a handful of people is indeed large to the point of making irrelevant their quantification; the variety of these possible interactions is exceedingly large (Beer, 1979). Thus, in cognitive terms, we pay more attention to the collective behavior of a group than to their moment-to-moment interactions and in doing so we choose the particular aspects that we want to observe. We need to ascribe purpose to the group's interactions unless we are prepared to be swamped by its variety. We need to find ways to reduce the situational variety; we are restricted by the distinctions we can make. The ways we construct a situation are constrained by our possible experiences but technology plays a significant role in this construction. The most significant technologies underpinning the seventeenth scientific revolution were instruments that helped us "see" nature in ways that we had not seen it before. Telescopes and microscopes helped us

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penetrate the “scopic” aspects of nature, amplifying our experiences with the eyes. As such, our construction of the world was dominated by physics and the machines to control it. It was on this platform, among other aspects, that we were able to travel further afield and discover new worlds and were able to see “invisible” worlds that gave us new insights about our relations with other living entities. The laws of physics were the platform for the development of rational mechanics and the design of machines that helped us producing the industrial revolution; the co-evolution of the technologies of the seventeenth century with more powerful models of the physical world gave us the chance to develop new machines and harness nature’s powers in desirable directions.

Similar processes of co-evolution are being responsible for the on-going transformation of our organisations. These experiential learning cycles emerge from perceived challenges in the world. Dealing with threats such as terrorism or global warming or dealing with opportunities such as introducing new services in the market or empowering communities to make their own decisions, requires from us far more than trial and error; they are too complex and time is too short. We need ingenuity, systemic thinking and *resources* to anticipate and avoid undesirable outcomes. These are all problem-solving situations that share a common structure; persons or collectives, limited by their biology and organisation, want to achieve desirable outcomes in a surrounding that poses challenges that are indeed difficult to overcome. For instance, when old civilisations confronted the challenge to move heavy stones from quarries to burial sites they were not stopped by the apparent impossibility of the task; they basically developed means to simplify the task, such as constructing roads and they developed means to enhance their physical strength, such as lifting equipment and transportation vehicles. The first type of response was all about *attenuating* (selecting) the complexity of the task and the second was all about *amplifying* their capacity to do the task. Their performance depended on the balance they achieved between attenuation and amplification. The less good they were in constructing roads the more difficult it was for them to move construction material. Quite naturally they went through long-term learning processes that eventually made them very good at building, say, pyramids.

An explanatory principle of these learning processes is Ashby’s (1964) Law of Requisite Variety; in his words “Only variety absorbs variety”. Or in Espejo’s (1989, p. 80) words “The complexity at the disposal of the regulator has to match the situation’s *residual complexity*”. Residual variety is the complexity that those in the situation itself are unable to absorb by self-regulation and self-organisation but needs to be absorbed to achieve required performance; this is the variety that needs to be absorbed by the regulator.

Early on, when knowledge and practice to build pyramids was small, the architects responsible for their erection might have required several decades to complete them. However, as individual and organisational learning took place most likely workers increased their capacity to respond locally – by themselves – to more and more situational variety. This had the effect of reducing the residual variety relevant to their supervisors, who perhaps used this as an opportunity to improve processes and collectively all had the chance to build up pyramids quicker and better.

The Law of Requisite Variety is a relational construct; it is about our relations with relevant and challenging situations. Living in any context, particularly for citizens in an increasingly complex society, poses challenges – it is a learning experience – suggesting that one way or the other we (either as citizens or collectives) are always finding ways to

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match situational variety. In this practice of living, we develop *variety operators*, that is, particular strategies and practices to deal with the variety of our world. What is of significance is that for any situation unwittingly, we develop a wide range of variety operators. The quality of these operators is responsible for whatever performance we achieve and furthermore gives us the opportunity to diagnose the variety management in use. This is of significance in a world experiencing more and more challenges; not any variety management is adequate. It is common to find imbalances between amplifiers and attenuators, something that implies a waste of resources and/or poor management. This is happening precisely in challenging situations where we should be striving for more and more ingenious forms of problem solving. Thus, from the perspective of complexity, how can we develop more ingenious and effective *forms* of variety management?

Seeing our world through the lenses of complexity opens up new opportunities to understand, dissolve and resolve organisational problems. It implies seeing them in terms of the mutual influence between those attempting to control a situation and those constituting it and possibly wanting to avoid unilateral control. This is at the core of a systemic view; this view is about recognising connectivity and closure between stakeholders and policy makers. Meanings emerge from the strategies they use to balance their complexities. The meanings that we might experience from policies produced by interactions between organisations and stakeholders that do not give the latter opportunities to challenge them are likely to be those of restricted and imposed policies. These are situations with regulatory imbalances between a one-way organisational amplification of the views of policy makers and an ineffective attenuation of stakeholders' views (in relation to policy makers). In such situations, society is confronted to learning; it is necessary to redress the lost balance from participatory processes that do not give stakeholders opportunities to construct policies together with policy makers. This redressing makes it necessary an appreciation of the qualities of the situation's "*holistic nature*". For instance, this view implies that to improve performance we require learning that improves in tandem organisation's capabilities to observe and articulate distinctions and to design and produce responses, and, ethically society has to answer questions such as to what degree it is socially right allocating resources to increase stakeholders' appreciation of needs at the expense of allocating resources to respond to these needs and therefore, possibly, cultivating unsatisfied expectations and frustrations.

Holism is inherent to the hugely interconnected reality we live in; some form of order emerges from chaos and we align any emergent order, or organisation, with the quests for problem solving. Dealing with these problems requires communications among those agents producing the situations of concern. With this conceptual background, we want to explore complexity management strategies to relate stakeholders with policy makers.

### **The viable system model and strategies to manage complexity**

A challenge is giving stakeholders the capacity to influence policy makers. This is equally the case for commercial and public enterprises; customers should have the possibility to influence the quality of products and services and stakeholders should have the resources and capabilities to influence enterprises' externalities. For citizens affected by *local* services such as education, social services and many others the challenge is strengthening their capacity to influence those local policy makers. Equally, citizens affected by *national/regional/global* decisions should have the capacity to influence the relevant, perhaps more distant, policy makers.

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How is it possible for local people to influence those at the global level? How is it possible for distributed customers to influence the activities of an enterprise? These are neither problems of occasional conversations and dialogues nor problems of making on-line surveys once in a while; these are problems of co-influence that happen through recurrent communications between stakeholders and decision makers. Since direct communications are seldom possible, it is through structures that they must happen. These structures, for significant policies, emerge largely from self-organising processes but are also influenced by purposeful decisions that often produce structural fragmentation and undesirable consequences for current and future stakeholders. Self-organisation is a distributed learning process that depends on trial and error communications to produce a viable organisational system from multiple unrelated parts. However, trial and error may take too long; decisions are necessary to speed up this learning in desirable directions. We can learn from nature which are successful strategies to manage complexity and use them to design viable systems; these are strategies that on the whole rely on self-organisation and self-regulation to reduce the residual variety that is relevant to keep a situation under control. In organisational terms, the challenge for policy makers is working out the relevant organisational system consistent with their purposes and fostering interaction and communication that enhance self-organisation and self-regulation in the benefit of stakeholders in the longer run. If they understand the principles for viability, they only have to nudge communications to create, regulate and produce desirable policies, sensitive to stakeholders' interest, values and norms. Stafford Beer's viable system model clarifies communication requirements for viability and in particular it helps visualising the complexity management strategies entailed by the intricate relations between policy makers and stakeholders. This model clarifies that effective complexity management strategies entail both structural recursion and effective mechanisms for policy formulation and policy implementation (Espejo, 1989).

The traditional and pervasive hierarchical structures that restrict the development of people's talents and force the views of the few in power over the most are superseded by non-hierarchical relations (Beer, 1975). In democratic enterprises, we are more and more aware of the undesirable consequences of hierarchies. Enabling effective self-regulation and self-organisation is desirable and offer a way out of hierarchies through autonomous units' purposeful alignment of their interests with those of the global society. But, even in hierarchical structures autonomy emerges simply because the Law of Requisite Variety asserts itself; if managers do not nurture the large complexity absorption capacity of functional self-regulation and self-organisation they will not have requisite variety to control the situation; the residual variety relevant to them will go beyond their response capacity. But autonomy by happenstance is unlikely to be desirable; dysfunctional autonomy is common when there is no alignment of purposes. Effective complexity management happens when the autonomous systems emerging within autonomous systems produce *the organisation's shared purposes* rather than the self-interests of some groups. The structural implication of this embedding of autonomous systems within autonomous systems within autonomous systems and so forth is *structural recursion*, that is, the same structure for policy making and policy implementation recurs within all autonomous units (Beer, 1979). This is an important issue; explaining how to work out this structural recursion is beyond this paper however, it should not be interpreted as a simple decomposition of organisational activities (see paper by Espejo and Kurupatwa in this issue of *Kybernetes* (Espejo and Kuropatwa, 2011)).

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Organisational systems are structural solutions to problematic situations; ingenuity is necessary to *create* implementable solutions. The task of policy makers is orchestrating communications to create solutions to self-constructed problems. An organisation's *policy function creates this problem space and clarifies purposes*.

Policy decisions shape the identity of the organisation but the quality of these decisions depends on the talent available in the organisation and their relations. Policy makers need to bring and structure this talent by orchestrating recurrent interactions that balance the contributions of those with a long-term perspective with those focused on today's efficiency. *This is the mechanism for policy formulation*. This structural arrangement allows policy makers to focus on values and purposes while using the organisation's resources to the best of their abilities to create options. Policy debates should bring together knowledge of the "outside and then" and the "inside and now" to produce policy options; the better are these debates the smaller will be the residual variety relevant to policy makers (Beer, 1979).

Constructing the "outside and then" is constructing the organisation's problematic environment and this construction depends on developing organisational capabilities and using them to respond to environmental stretching. Developing organisational capabilities is configuring the organisation's resources "inside and now". Structural cohesion avoids fragmentation and creates the space for people to develop and use the organisation's capabilities. The on-going reconfiguring of its resources implies capacity to negotiate resources, enable the moment-to-moment coordination of people's actions and develop responsible trust among them. Cohesion, as a systemic function, aligns the organisation's distributed resources with policy makers' purposes and permits the emergence of responsible autonomy. This is a strategy to increase the organisation's complexity without risking fragmenting resources. Structurally, the cohesion mechanism underpins the *process of policy implementation*. This process enables local autonomy while maintaining the organisation's cohesion.

The same complexity management strategies for the whole organisation recur in each of its autonomous units. Structural recursion implies that the above requirements for policy formulation and policy implementation are recurrent within all autonomous units from the global to the local, providing qualified observers with powerful lenses to recognise the quality of the order in the chaos of social communications (Espejo, 2000, 2008).

An appreciation of the communication mechanisms relating local stakeholders to global policy makers through a nesting of autonomous organisational units is precisely what the VSM gives to qualified observers as a platform to diagnose and improve stakeholders' communications with policy makers.

### **A transparency model for influence and citizenship**

The VSM makes apparent the relationships that are necessary for stakeholders to influence policy processes, and furthermore provides criteria to assess their quality. Visualising these relationships is necessary to make transparent the relevant organisational system.

A close scrutiny of the viable system model makes apparent that in-between stakeholders and policy makers the following six *relationships* are necessary for autonomous units from the local to the global levels:

- (1) *Relationship of achievement* between those actors implementing a policy and those stakeholders affected by the organisation's products, services and externalities.
- (2) *Relationship of cohesion* between all the actors constituting the organisation's "inside and now" (e.g. policy makers, experts, administrators, professionals and workers in general); at the extremes, these relationships can be governed by the authoritarian tendencies of those in power or by the mutual respect among all actors that enables autonomy within a cohesive organisation.
- (3) *Relationship of stretching* between those concerned with *the outside and then* in the organisation and agents of all kinds in its problematic environment. At the extremes, this relationship may be controlled by greedy lobbyists, vociferous unrepresentative minorities and conservative bureaucrats or by empowered citizens, enlightened entrepreneurs and innovative bureaucracies. This stretching puts pressure on improving organisational processes to invent new responses.
- (4) *Relationship of policy making* between policy makers and those in the organisation focused on the "outside and then" and the "inside and now". Policy makers need to orchestrate conversations that enhance the structuring of robust policy options.
- (5) *Relationship of ownership and inclusion* between policy makers and the owners of the organisational system. For commercial enterprises, owners are shareholders in the first place but also are all those affected by their externalities. For social enterprises in democratic societies, owners are the people to whom these policy makers are accountable. In particular, these are relationships of inclusion and legitimacy which suggest a relationship of social ownership of the organisational system.
- (6) *Relationship of organisational citizenship* between the organisational actors and those providing normative context to their activities, for example, those in society who are guardians of societal values.

These relationships are responsible for the performance of the organisational system, which is as good as their qualities allows it to be.

Through the *relationship of ownership and inclusion* local stakeholders can influence the identity of the organisational system as they elect representatives or buy shares that reflect their values and concerns. For a more direct, participative and deliberative influence, stakeholders can directly leverage their power, first, through their moment-to-moment communications with local implementers (*achievement relationship*) and second, through their dialogues and other forms of engagement with policy makers and experts (*stretching relationship*). The first of these direct forms of leverage are communications that transmit the customers' views and concerns about the implementers' achievements to policy makers. The influence of this *local feedback*, that is, its capacity to leverage customers' power on global decision-making processes depends on the quality of communications within the organisational system (*relationship of cohesion*); do managers, experts, professionals and policy makers know the reality of the implementers' activities; have they built responsible trust with implementers? do they have a realistic grasp of these activities? If these communications are weak, and they often are, customers' communications with the organisation will fail to reach global policy makers. The second of these direct forms of leverage is the stakeholders' stretching of global actors, through

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organised stakeholders representing their interests, as they assert their long-term interests and concerns. This form of influence requires effective communications between stakeholders and its purpose is clarifying policy makers' purposes and values and thus the definition of policy priorities and options.

Customers and stakeholders in general, to different degrees, exercise these two forms of influence or leverage on policy makers. However, it is common to observe that the attention of policy makers is caught by vocal minorities and the media and not by the silent majorities, whose voice is short-circuited locally by an organisational system that fragments implementation from policy making and globally by ineffective communications between local and global stakeholders. Indeed, in policy dialogues, stakeholders constituting the organisation's problematic environment ("the outside and then") are often ignorant of the local silent majorities' concerns; this obscures another opportunity for the latter to make their voices heard in policy processes. Consideration of the wisdom of local stakeholders is excluded.

Public sector policy makers are often unaware of the organisational system underpinning their policy deliberations, particularly if multiple institutions at several structural recursions are involved, giving more attention to immediate conversations at the expense of managing organisational processes. Often, they assume unchangeable institutional processes without realizing that it is through changing these processes, by redesigning them, that they can include stakeholders and improve their own judgments and decisions. In fact, it is through this management (or non-management) that they make *boundary judgments* about the unseen organisational system, which have a profound influence on the decisions that they make. Ascribing purpose to the various institutions contributing to the policy issue; selecting participants and spaces for dialogues (i.e. tacitly orchestrating conversations between *the outside and then* and *the inside and now*, thus defining the balance between short and long term); including or not particular stakeholders in deliberations, and deciding forms of ownership of institutional resources are but a few of these boundary judgments that they make all the time are.

### **Relationship as structural coupling**

Relationships emerge from the recursion of interactions; the operational coherence of organisational systems is produced by the recurrent interactions or *structural couplings* between actors: "we speak of structural coupling whenever there is a history of recurrent interactions leading to structural congruence between two (or more) systems" (Maturana and Varela, 1992, p. 75). This is a powerful insight; the bonding between actors (e.g. commitments and trust between them) is produced by their recurrent interactions and not by occasional dialogues or visits to the "shop floor" (see final section). Commitment and mutual support may be the outcome of people's recurrent interactions and not of models prescribing the necessary connectivity between them. If the purpose is building up a cohesive organisation focused on its ascribed purposes, the concern should be enabling people's recurrent interactions as well as designing structured work flows (Winograd and Flores, 1986). The crucial point is that an organisation's complexity is in people's recurrent interactions, with all the communication difficulties that these may entail, and not just in designing work processes and asking for people's compliance.

As an organisation is constituted by the recurrent interactions of its components, it becomes more and more *self-referential*, that is, the information or signals it receives from agents in its environment are perturbations that are accommodated by its components and

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their relations (i.e. its structure) in order to conserve identity. As such, an organisation is largely *structure determined* in the sense that everything that happens in it or to it, happens in each moment determined by its structure at that moment. Its behavior is determined by its structure at any moment and not by the inputs coming from its medium. That is, as the components' connectivity gain in strength the organisation's complexity grows making it increasingly difficult to specify from the outside what happens in it; as the organisation is buffeted by disturbances all that an observer sees is accommodations determined by the organisation's structure rather than responses to information (Maturana, 2002, p. 15). The meanings within the organisation of external communications are determined by its structure rather than by the environmental agents' intended meanings.

*Recurrent interactions produce relationships* between components that produce a structure determined organisation that conserves identity in its medium. In other words, the organisational system is produced by its components' structural couplings and these *couplings or relations* produce the relationships that the organisation conserves in its interactions with agents in a changing medium.

The dynamics of these structural couplings have significant implications for the boundaries of an organisation. Organisations produce meanings as an outcome of structural couplings rather than of people's formal roles. If some of the "actors" are *structurally decoupled* from other organisational actors, this fact affects the organisation's boundaries. This fact may make the boundaries of organisations much more fluid than it is often granted; weakly coupled actors within a "formal organisation" may have less influence in the organisation's operational boundaries than external *agents* strongly coupled to some of the actors. For instance, an actor's structural coupling with agents may transform them into organisational actors, though formally they may still be considered as external agents (cf. final section). This makes apparent that an organisation's boundaries emerge from existing structural couplings whether or not they match the institution's formal boundaries.

We are now, in what follows, ready to use this conceptual framework to work out its relevance in making sense of policy processes. We focus on policy for active citizenship in England.

### **Policy for active citizenship in England**

The above theoretical framework has emphasised the need for effective organisational communications to increase stakeholders' influence in policy processes. Now, we turn our attention to active citizenship as a complementary requirement for this purpose. Strong citizenship has an influence on the achievement, stretching and ownership relationships of the above transparency model.

#### *The evolution of a policy*

Democratic deficit is a concern of politicians and social scientists in many democracies. Among varied concerns, politicians want to appreciate the roles of learning and stakeholders' organisation in building citizenship capabilities in communities.

The interest in citizenship is centuries old, but much more recently since the 1990s political philosophers have been paying particular attention to this issue. The debates between liberals and communitarians have made more apparent that the concept of citizenship goes beyond people belonging to a community; it integrates community membership and demands for justice (Kymlicka and Norman, 1994, p. 352). From

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a systemic perspective, citizenship is more than a normative condition; it emerges from the collective properties of belonging, fairness and solidarity (Mendiweso-Bendek, 2002).

In the UK, citizenship learning and building community capacities for a stronger democracy were highlighted by David Blunkett in his capacity of Secretary of State for Education and Skills, as he accepted the recommendations of the report of the advisory group on Citizenship Education and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools, chaired by Crick (1998), which included citizenship as a mandatory requirement of the National Curriculum for secondary schools. This was quickly followed by citizenship education for the 16-19 years old in different spaces like colleges, youth clubs and so forth.

In 2001, David Blunkett gave up his portfolio in education to become Home Secretary where he saw the practical possibilities to apply the ideas of citizenship as participatory processes with adults. This possibility was structured in the "Civil Renewal Unit" in 2003, which aimed at building more empowered and active communities (CRU, 2003). The Civil Renewal Agenda brought three elements to the political agenda: active citizenship, strengthened communities and partnership in meeting public needs (HomeOffice, 2003). None of these elements was a new area of public policy; the new idea was the aspiration to bring together the three elements in a single and coherent government policy:

Together, We Can became the cross-government umbrella for a number of significant developments. The most comprehensive was the Together, We Can action plan, published in June 2005, which brought together in one government document 65 policies, programmes and initiatives of 12 different government departments, which collectively illustrated the government's commitment to empower citizens to work with public bodies to set and achieve common goals across a wide range of policy areas (Woodd, 2007).

Thus, David Blunkett pushed ahead the policy of increasing the opportunities for adult learning through the Civil Renewal Agenda and active citizenship through the Together, We Can action plan. In this context, a consultation process by the Home Office in 2003 led to setting the Active Learning for Active Citizenship (ALAC) programme. This was a two-year programme of community-based action research, providing a platform for action-based learning in seven sub-regional hubs. The aim was to identify effective approaches for active citizenship and to expand and support learning opportunities for adults (Woodward, 2004). These hubs were working in very different geographical areas, using different approaches and with very different target groups. The outputs of their work made clear that all of them were building upon previous lessons from best practice, starting from the experience of individuals, groups and collectives and identifying through them learning opportunities to enhance their voice and collective action.

The three-year ALAC programme ended with a National Evaluation Report (Mayo and Rooke, 2006) which among other things recommended the publication of a national "Learning Framework" as a resource for those wishing to deliver ALAC. It was recommended that this framework should be aimed at central and local governments, other public bodies, key learning institutions and practitioners, and learners themselves as a benchmark for effective provision of active citizenship learning opportunities. It also recommended the creation of a national network to disseminate the framework.

In 2006, the responsibilities for the Civil Renewal Agenda were transferred from the Home Office to newly created Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG). The ALAC programme continued with intensive participatory processes, through which it identified the learning experienced of the seven hubs. These learning experiences were

published in a National Learning Framework and ALAC was renamed TAKE PART (Take-Part, 2006). The old hubs were reconstituted as regional units of the Take Part National Network, with the commitment of disseminating the learning framework and the ALAC learning lessons.

The new Department for CLG produced a White Paper “Strong and Prosperous Communities” (CLG, 2006) where it recognised the value of the Take Part Learning Framework to increase active citizenship and included it in the “Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success” to be implemented across the regions (CLG, 2007).

In 2008, after a wide consultation process, the Department for CLG publishes the White Paper 2008 “Communities in Control; real people, real power” (CLG, 2008). This paper maintains the government’s commitment on active citizenship learning for adults and building on the Take Part Network successful experiences the CLG agreed to fund 19 Take Part Local Pathfinders and nine Take Part Regional Champions, both supported by a number of national programmes, such as Training for Trainers. *The local pathfinders were set up as partnerships between local authorities and community-based programmes, with the purpose of disseminating the Take Part approach to improve skills, knowledge and confidence of citizens and to improve the structures and processes for community engagement and empowerment.*

Take Part was consolidated as a bottom-up learning approach, where the local learning lessons define the content and approaches for producing regional and national learning resources. These resources are then used locally and their outcomes are transmitted again to the regions and the national level in a continuous process to keep them in touch with the local realities. This is conceived as a continuous process of reflection of that is locally effective for local people to influence decisions that affect them.

The UK Labour Government intensified until the election in May 2010 its policy of generating strategies for public participation and learning citizenship to transform citizens from passive recipients of public services to active members of the communities (Mayo, 2010). Now, the new Coalition Government is building the Big Society Agenda, a cross-government initiative, to promote local participation in services and policy processes. This is a new initiative and still is too early to know whether it will build upon the learning lessons of the last decade.

Whatever the future of the policy for active citizenship may be, it makes apparent governmental efforts to connect with communities and provides them with the strength and skills to influence policies relevant to their daily lives. The ALAC pilot programme led to a significant number of local partnerships and regional champions and a national network committed to its dissemination. Throughout their implementation, the ALAC/Take Part programmes have been developed by community practitioners and researchers, who have taken significant steps in this very complex journey. There is no doubt about the government’s commitment to strengthen the achievement, stretching and ownership relations of our transparency model. Yet, still a majority of citizens feel that they cannot influence decisions affecting their local areas (CLG, 2010). This paper makes apparent that increasing local influence on local and national policies is much more complex than increasing citizen’s competencies. Indeed, increasing local competencies and skills is important and in that sense the policy for active citizenship in England has been relevant and much

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necessary in a national context. However, the complexity of local relationships let alone of local-national relationships is huge and our transparency model makes apparent that beyond building local capabilities, improving these relationships requires attending a whole range of communications beyond the community, which imply to account for what is happening within the relevant organisational systems. This accounting for the quality of organisational processes is a challenge to enhance the policy for active citizenship and community empowerment. Improving the structures and processes of the relevant organisational systems is, in addition to empowering citizens, a requirement that our model for transparency makes apparent for citizen's participation and influence. It is this systemic complementarity between multiple government policies providing services to communities and the policy to strengthen them and their citizens that we want to illustrate next.

### **The case of social services**

Though diagnosing the structure for a particular policy is beyond this paper, we illustrate below some of the aspects of such a diagnosis for the social services policy in the UK. The organisational system for this policy includes a wide range of institutions and institutional parts, such as the health services, education, police and local government. Also, national and local regulatory bodies are involved checking the delivery of the related services. But, it is the *influence of the people in the communities*, who experience in a daily basis the *achievements* of social services that we are interested in. Their influence, possibly structured in non-governmental organisations, is *stretching* these services to challenge and improve their effectiveness. The focus of the ALAC hubs was, and of the current Take Part Pathfinders is, to strengthen these local groups by promoting people's learning and increasing their *strength* and *independence* to stretch operationally and strategically policy makers in service areas such as social services. Building up effective relationships of achievement and stretching is difficult and sometimes counterproductive. For instance, a *local authority's initiative to build up partnerships with third sector voluntary organisations by making resources available to them or inviting these organisations to join their initiatives, with the expectation of strengthening their long-term viability is risky*. The question is how far might this also be at the expense of civil society's independent role, including its role of advocate and/or critic of local service providers? (Mayo *et al.*, 2010). Might this be about reducing their independence and therefore their will to *stretch* local services? This is an instance of possibly well-meaning initiatives, but ones that in the longer run can reduce the influence of local groups.

In general, the most common situation is of citizens with a perceived limited influence on decisions. The situation is similar whether we talk about members of communities affected by the decisions of local or national authorities. Their views as stakeholders, however powerful might be the programmes aimed at strengthening citizenship have a limited influence on the decisions taken by policy makers. Our transparency model suggests that this is not surprising in situations where the structure of the organisational system is weak. The case of social services in England helps to visualise this problem of transparency.

People in general and politicians in particular are often uncomfortable with additional structures; they increase bureaucracy in an already bureaucratised administrative system. Politicians take decisions under pressure but fail designing effective structures to reduce the risks of experiencing the same undesirable outcomes

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that triggered the decisions. The cost of not designing effective structures can be high as the example of “The tortured life of baby P” tragically demonstrated in the London district of Haringey (*The Economist*, 2008). This case illustrates that local influence in global policies inescapably goes through the complex, and often ineffective, structures of existing governance.

Not long ago headlines of newspapers in the UK were focused on the death of a one and half year old child in the hands of his mother and two others. The child was in the list of the children “at-risk” of social services in the London district of Haringey. In the last six months of his life, the child had been seen not less than 60 times by doctors, social workers and others. In spite of that, the child had a cruel death. An *earlier public inquiry triggered by a similar event in the same locality* had recommended yearly *performance reports* from all social services in the context of an overhaul of social services in the whole country, which was duly carried out. However, sadly, this response was not good enough to avoid the recurrence of a similar event. Not long after baby P’s death, the UK’s children’s protection regulator issued a report. The new tragedy was making apparent the inadequacy of the earlier response; in the future *visits* by the national agency to every children’s protection unit in the country were to take place once a year to assess performance on the ground. This seems fine however, from the perspective of the organisational system for children’s protection in England, the regulators were again off the mark; children’s protection services are part of local authorities and not directly of a national agency, thus in terms of structural recursion it should be expected that the monitoring of their activities is done by their respective local authorities and not by a national body. The reason for this is simple, one must assume that corporate managers in local authorities negotiate with children’s protection services (as with all other service departments) the allocation of resources for their programmes and therefore that they should be the ones assessing their capabilities and monitoring over time, and not once a year, their performance. In the end, it should be the responsibility of each local authority that services’ performances are adequate. Local authorities where this resources bargaining is weak are more likely to experience poor performance. In particular, it should be more difficult for citizens, however empowered they might be, communicate service achievement problems to their own local authorities, let alone to national policy makers. Unfortunately, the recurrence in one authority of such dreadful events points the finger to that authority. Yet, at the time no one was asking publicly for a revision of the Haringey District Council’s processes and organisation structure. Even if the local people experiencing day in and day out the achievements of the children’s protection services were empowered to influence the local authority, it can be argued that this authority had limited influence in children’s protection services since monitoring of these services was carried out by the national level. From a structural perspective, to have a national regulator monitoring the performance of hundreds of local social services suggests a poor complexity management strategy (i.e. micromanagement), but more significantly, it suggests a lack of appreciation of what monitoring should be all about. It should not be a means of hierarchical control, but a means of building up trust and cohesion within the local authority (See cohesion relationship). Trust and cohesion are unlikely to happen with a well-rehearsed annual visit of the national regulator. Here is where we can appreciate more strongly the difference between receiving information and maintaining communications.

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This example illustrates several aspects that are relevant to our argument in this paper. Visualising a recursive structure helps seeing communications that are necessary for an effective communications between citizens and policy makers. An effective operation of these communications is a requirement for people to influence policy processes at the local and global level; if they are left to happenstance the chances are that the most significant influence will take the form of indigestible reports or occasional, often unrepresentative, conversations with local politicians or lobbying biased towards the interests of the most organised groups in the community (Walzer, 2002). Indeed, the transparency model suggests six interrelated communication channels for local influence; through the “baby p” case we have only illustrated problems in understanding the *cohesion relationship* within a local authority and between this and national regulators. It is through cohesion communications that people’s views of the achievements of local services can be transmitted to local and global levels of policy making.

The above discussion is an instance, albeit limited by access only to public knowledge, of the application of the framework of this paper and our argument is that effective strategies to manage complexity depend on increasing local influence in policy processes but also shows the value to underpin ALAC/Take Part with a holistic approach. Trained observers of organisational systems usually recognise that policy makers and managers are unaware of principles for managing complexity let alone that their infringement may cause so many painful, but avoidable, consequences.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we have first offered a framework for transparency to visualise the task of increasing the influence of people’s values in policy processes of all kinds of enterprises. In particular, we have illustrated structural difficulties in aligning stakeholders’ values with the values of local and national policy makers. These alignments are the outcomes of relationships that not only want to assert belonging but also respect and solidarity.

The framework highlights complexity as a fundamental construct to understand relationships and to work strategies to manage this complexity. People experience significant difficulties in connecting with local and global organisations. We have argued that increasing local competencies is hugely significant but it should be reinforced with a systemic view of social policies. In the language of internet and social networks, we are arguing for a sort of transparency 2.0 (Tapscott, 2009). The challenge is making possible communications in between people experiencing very different realities. Practically, this requires visualising communications beyond direct dialogues and interactions and making effective the multiple communication channels in between large numbers of stakeholders and relatively few policy makers operating through organisational systems.

For citizens and stakeholders in general, these communications require enhancing their competencies to enable their organisation and overcome isolation and powerlessness. Isolated, unrelated, efforts of the community to influence organisational structures and processes are likely to fail. Not surprisingly, those with organisational capabilities tend to be resourceful individuals with an appreciation of the public sphere, while the less organised tend to get less (Walzer, 2002). Increasing the strength of local voices requires that people understand how to overcome communication barriers and for this transparency 2.0 is necessary. This is the intended contribution of our conceptual framework in this paper. Policy makers should appreciate the challenges of hearing local voices and stakeholders should appreciate the implications of leadership.

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Epistemologically, we have reinforced that these processes are the outcome of structural couplings in the operational domain of moment-to-moment interactions and to a lesser degree in the abstractions of however powerful descriptions we might offer of human processes. Furthermore, the self-reference of structure determined, autonomous organisations, such as those delivering public services and those in their environment stretching them increases the difficulties of communications and this is in itself an issue for further studies.

The framework of this paper applies equally to public services, market-oriented enterprises and all kinds of third sector social enterprises. All of them share, at the abstract level of this framework, the same challenge of finding strategies to manage the complexity of their purposeful activities. Aspects of this framework have been used to study nuclear waste management and other industries in Europe (Andersson *et al.*, 2006; Wene and Espejo, 1999).

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