Street Knowledge: Residents as Experts in a Global American City

Tia Sherée Gaynor
Assistant Professor of Public Administration
Marist College
3399 North Road
Poughkeepsie, NY USA
845-575-3000 ext. 2149

Barber (1984) argued that, “a people that do not set its own agenda, by means of talk and direct political exchange, not only relinquishes a vital power of government but also exposes its remaining powers of deliberation and decision-making to ongoing subversion” (p. 181). Far too often, residents’ power has been diminished by the actions of government officials. Ideal forms of engagement decrease the distance between residents and policy issues, and allow stakeholders equal access to the issue. Through deliberation, residents and public managers/officials have equal responsibility in (re)defining the issue and developing strategies to address it.

Coproduction - the collaboration of stakeholder efforts in order to achieve a defined goal – may serve as a more ideal was to engage residents. According to Ostrom (1996), coproduction represents the juxtaposition of complimentary inputs by residents and officials to obtain desired outputs. The process of coproduction serves as a method to create “synergy between what a government does and what citizens do” (Ostrom, 1996, p. 1079). Government agencies who are less interested in business as usual and more interested in reinventing themselves and resident perceptions, may find coproduction a valuable avenue of exploration.

The Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) (United States) - recognizing the negative perceptions held by residents and the impact these perceptions had on the agency’s ability to meet the communities’ needs – embarked upon a coproductive relationship with the unlikeliest of partners, former gang members. The LAFD has partnered with the Professional Community Intervention Training Institute (PCITI), an organization of former gang members now serving as gang interventionists, to build bridges between the fire department and community residents. This partnership has equipped emergency responders, law enforcement personnel, and social service employees with ways to understand, interact, and deal with the presence of gangs, community violence, and crisis-related situations.

Ultimately, this innovative case study demonstrates how public management requires the incorporation of resident expertise. By seeing residents as experts, public organizations can develop (in some cases) and strengthen (in other cases) the cultural competence and awareness of public managers. Research findings indicate that coproduction positions residents to aid public organizations in meeting the needs of their community.

References