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Published online: 04 Apr 2023.

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Facilitators as culture change workers: advancing public participation and deliberation in local governance

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ABSTRACT

Practitioners who facilitate public participation in governance operate at the interface of three policy agendas: public service reform, social justice and democratic innovation. Scotland offers a paradigmatic site for studying this interface through the role of officials who work as facilitators of public participation. Reforms in the last two decades have generated new spaces for engaging citizens and communities while challenging official facilitators to reconcile grassroots community action with institutional engagement. This article draws on empirical research from the What Works Scotland dataset (2014–2019), which is the first to examine the nature of this role across Scotland. Our analysis unpacks the tensions of interactive modes of governance and explores facilitators' agency in responding to cultural practices that are resistant to change. The paper argues that official facilitators are more than process designers and discursive stewards; their work involves challenging and changing the cultural practices of the state at the frontlines of democratic upheaval and renewal.

Introduction

Democracies around the world are undergoing a period of both upheaval and renewal (Elstub and Escobar 2019). Local governance is often the frontline where much of this contestation and experimentation is unfolding. The drivers of this phenomena range from necessity (financial crisis) to aspiration (active citizenship) and materialise differently across national and local contexts: from institutional reforms in Scotland to grassroots municipalist movements in Spain (Bussu et al. 2022; What Works Scotland 2019). Interactive

governance encompasses collaborative, participative and deliberative processes that entangle local actors, such as organisational stakeholders, community groups and citizens, in new ways of making policy and developing public services (Edelenbos and van Meerkerk 2016; Escobar 2017a). These modes of interactive governance across diverse sectors, organisations and interests, are opening up new spaces and relationships between citizens and institutions.

Recent literature reviews have examined the barriers to successful participation in governance (Ianniello et al. 2019), how to increase public participation (Schafer 2019), and the attitudes of public managers (Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2022). In this context, officials skilled in the professional field of public participation and community engagement are key agents. We use the term 'official facilitator' to refer to a particular type of participation practitioner. Official facilitators are given various names in the literature – public participation professionals (Bherer, Gauthier, and Simard 2017), public engagement practitioners (Lee 2015), professional participation practitioners (Cooper and Smith 2012), deliberative practitioners (Forester 2009). The etymology of 'facilitation' means 'to make easy'. Narrowly defined, facilitation refers to discursive group work that aims to be inclusive and productive (Escobar 2019), but it can also refer more broadly to intermediation practices carried out by organisers, brokers, and policy workers (Molinengo, Stasiak, and Freeth 2021). The role of official facilitation involves supporting collaboration between policy stakeholders; organising participation across communities of place, identity and interest; and fostering dialogue and deliberation within those processes (Escobar 2019). Studies of interactive governance have proliferated since the 1960s, expanding in the last three decades following the deliberative turn in participatory democratic theory (Escobar 2017b). However, the role of public officials as facilitators has only attracted substantial scrutiny more recently (Blijleven, Van Hulst, and Hendriks 2019). Their profile and facilitation approach are shaped by the socio-political context where they operate and the idiosyncrasies of the various professional fields that anchor their practices such as community development, organisational change, conflict mediation, urban planning and public policy (Bherer, Gauthier, and Simard 2017; Forester 2009; Lee 2015).

Official facilitators are public servants, and their professional context is public administration (Escobar 2017a). As institutional insiders, they are immersed in the everyday practices and politics of local government. In their work to engage various publics, they may undertake a range of activities – commissioning, designing, planning and organising strategic processes, working as intermediaries and brokers across services and institutional silos, and facilitating various types of groups and forums. In seeking to support interactive governance, they face similar frustrations to

consultant participation professionals working outside the bureaucracy (see Bherer, this symposium; Cooper and Smith 2012), yet their insider position offers greater potential to 'get things done' and achieve impact from participatory processes. Despite their insider position, this role remains difficult because it often entails challenging or subverting existing 'rules in use' in local government (Lowndes, Pratchett, and Stoker 2006). In practice, this means bumping up against cultural and institutional barriers, which in some contexts can lead to official facilitators being marginalised within their own institutions (Escobar 2022, 2017a).

Official facilitators thus offer an important focus for the study of agency in interactive governance. Extant research pays attention to how facilitators organise processes and the variety of formats, approaches and techniques they deploy, including how their work is being professionalised and institutionalised (e.g., Cooper and Smith 2012; Moore 2012; Lee 2015; Bherer and Lee 2019). There has been less attention, however, to their role as agents supporting culture change to enable new forms of interactive governance. This role is often implicit in the nature of the work they are expected to do, rather than explicit in their formal job descriptions (Escobar 2017a). In this context, culture change refers to shifting beliefs and practices in public administration and public services, from top-down government based on hierarchical forms of command and control, to networked forms of governance driven through participation and collaboration (What Works Scotland 2019, 12).

To address this gap, this article studies official facilitators as culture change workers in the context of local governance in Scotland. The Scottish context is well suited to provide insight because of its long tradition of community organising as well as a new wave of democratic innovation (Emejulu and Shaw, 2010; Lightbody and Escobar 2021). In Scotland, a new cadre of official facilitators has emerged with a focus on engaging stakeholders and communities – public and civil society organisations, community groups and individual citizens (Weakley and Escobar 2018). Analysing their perspectives allowed us to explore four areas of culture change work (political, bureaucratic, civic and professional), and sheds light on the longstanding pressures that official facilitators continue to negotiate. These pressures include the tensions between representative-bureaucratic and participatory-deliberative approaches to local democracy.

This article illustrates how official facilitators play a crucial part in supporting the transformation of local institutions towards more interactive forms of governance. They do so by navigating the strategic challenges of culture change work through approaches that are both aspirational and pragmatic. The paper therefore addresses the central question that guides this symposium: *what are the main pressures that facilitators face in interactive governance and how are these negotiated?* The structure of the paper is as follows.

We first describe what is already known about official facilitators and how they work as insiders within public administrations. We then introduce study's context and mixed methods research, which included a two-wave survey and a case study. We conclude discussing implications for the key questions raised by this symposium.

Official facilitators: what they do and why it matters

Our focus is on public participation in governance as a distinct area of facilitation. As Dillard (2013, 231) notes, facilitation is not 'a single stylistic category', but rather encompasses varied practices shaped by different traditions and contexts. Studies of participatory democracy tend to focus on facilitators involved in community organising and activism (e.g., Polletta 2014). In turn, deliberative scholarship tends to focus on facilitators as process designers and discursive stewards (e.g., Moore 2012). Recent research investigated the blending of these two paradigms in the increasingly professionalised and institutionalised field of public participation (e.g., Christensen 2019; Lee 2015; Bherer, Gauthier, and Simard 2017). Officials operating across these paradigms must reconcile potentially contradictory approaches – the emphasis on social justice and community activism that characterises participatory democracy and the emphasis on procedural justice and communicative rationality foregrounded by deliberative democrats. This blending can be problematic, particularly as the burgeoning public participation industry expands across the public, private and civic sectors (Bherer and Lee 2019; Cooper and Smith 2012).

Working between these two paradigms means that official facilitators do a great deal of coordinating, organising, mediating and negotiating, so that all the key elements align. For example, scoping the purpose and designing the format for the process; securing the necessary resources; mobilising or recruiting participants; overcoming bureaucratic or political barriers; and trying to make the results of the process count (Kadlec and Friedman 2007; Escobar 2017a).

As they organise interactive governance, official facilitators are often challenging (directly or indirectly) longstanding practices and beliefs which influence who is included and excluded; what level of power is being shared; how issues and agendas are framed; what types of knowledge are valued; how a given process is connected to other processes and institutions; and so on. Their agency as officials has the potential to challenge and change traditional policy-making practices, which are usually skewed towards the involvement of people with higher socio-economic status and formal education (Ryfe and Stalsburg 2012).

The analytical framework we apply to our data draws on approaches aligned to public administration, including practice theory, critical social

policy, and relationality (Bartels and Turnbull 2020). They hold in common a critical and reflexive perspective, interest in individual actors and agency, and normative orientation towards the value of citizen participation. These approaches align in their rejection of the idea of the state as a single entity, structure or system. Bevir and Rhodes (2010, 1) argue that the state can be understood as 'a series of contingent and unstable cultural practices' which result from the interplay between traditions, beliefs, contradictions and dilemmas. Key to understanding the practices of the state is to understand the beliefs that inform practices, although this perspective has been critiqued by Wagenaar (2012) for privileging belief over action. Taken as a whole, an interpretive approach to studying local governance draws attention to actors, agency and interaction; and how meanings are constructed, contested and enacted through practices.

We apply this interpretive theory of the state by examining how official facilitators construct practices of public participation in governance. In doing so, we understand the role of official facilitators through their situated agency within a particular background of traditions and beliefs. Our research contributes to the evidence base on how these cultural practices form relatively stable patterns over time and across bureaucratic, professional, political, and civic domains. We argue that a core belief of official facilitators in Scotland is their understanding of themselves as agents of culture change who are working within entrenched traditions.

In this paper, we do not seek to represent official facilitators in simplistic terms – as heroes or villains (Matthews 2021). Our aim is to understand the actions and struggles of these public servants as they seek to fundamentally change the cultural practices and beliefs embedded within their working contexts. Our contribution is to apply an interpretive 'cultural practices' perspective to institutionalised processes of public participation to illustrate how official facilitators engage in culture change work. We conceptualise local governance as a set of relationships embedded in cultural practices, traditions and beliefs that shape the diverse actions and narratives of institutional and community activity and, in turn, shape the context for local governance. Therefore, we examine the actions official facilitators take to challenge traditions, beliefs and taken-for granted 'ways of working'. Our findings show that official facilitation practices can challenge the political, bureaucratic, professional, and civic traditions of local governance. By introducing new experiences or ideas, facilitators create dilemmas, and challenge other public servants to alter their beliefs about local democracy and governance. Analysing facilitation thus reveals the evolving beliefs and practices that shape local governance.

Taking cues from Bevir and Rhodes (2010), we argue that official facilitators can be understood as culture change workers, insofar they are trying to change the existing traditions, beliefs and practices of local governance. As

later argued, they must renegotiate and reshape ways of working that are often entrenched in bureaucratic, political, civic and professional conventions. Accordingly, official facilitators are not there just to do the technical job of 'delivering participation' but also to do the political work that creates wider conditions for public participation and political inclusion (Escobar 2017a, 160). We examine this facilitation role, drawing on empirical research from Scotland.

The Scottish context

In Scotland, interactive governance is delivered through Community Planning (CP) - a model 'designed to improve services and deliver better outcomes for communities' (Audit Scotland 2016, 14). CP policy, via the 2015 Community Empowerment Act (CEA),[1] mandates that local authorities develop partnerships with various sectors and organisations to deliver local governance through participatory and deliberative policy-making. This approach to governance has a long history of development in the UK that stretches back to the urban renewal policies of the 1960s and 1980s (Matthews 2012). Public participation has become central in debates about good governance and local democracy in Scotland (What Works Scotland 2019, 6–13). Recent legislation and policy frameworks (e.g., CEA) strengthen citizen rights to participate in local democracy by formalising their role in planning and scrutinising public services, including powers to deliver services if communities can do so more effectively than public bodies (What Works Scotland 2019). Central to this agenda is the involvement of citizens and communities through participatory processes such as local area forums, mini-publics, and participatory budgeting. For example, at least 300 participatory budgeting processes have taken place across the country, where citizens decide how to spend some public funding at local level. There have also been various deliberative mini-publics, where citizens are selected by civic lottery.[2] These democratic innovations are evolving and challenging existing traditions, beliefs, and practices of local governance in Scotland.

Opportunities for official public participation are often criticised for their limited citizen influence, as well as lack of inclusion and diversity, insufficient resources, and so on. These issues have been documented in the context of CP in Scotland through case studies and small sample research (Cowell 2004; Sinclair 2008, 2011; Matthews 2012). We contribute to this research by providing a systematic analysis, drawing on a mixed methods dataset including a two-wave survey and case study.

The official facilitators carrying out this work in Scotland are called Community Planning Officials (CPOs). These public servants are usually employed by local authorities, and their role is to implement the duty of the authority to lead and facilitate legally mandated collaborations between

multiple stakeholders. The work of the CPO entails process design and facilitation within formal and informal contexts for collaboration, participation and deliberation. Much of their time is spent trying to create liminal spaces that support communication and action and break down silos, so that more participatory forms of local governance can take hold (Escobar 2022).

Our research builds on previous studies of Community Planning in Scotland (Sinclair 2008, 2011; Cowell 2004; Matthews 2012). In some studies (Escobar 2017a), CPOs spoke of their role in culture change, partly as a way of making sense of the challenges they faced and partly reflecting the prevalent language of public service reform. Our interest in cultural practices is therefore derived directly from the narratives of these official facilitators rather than presupposed.

Research methods

The rationale for the main case selection of Scotland for this study relates to the nature of policy reforms instigated by the Scottish Government in the last decade (What Works Scotland 2019). These are characterised by aspirations for more participatory and deliberative forms of local governance embodied in the Community Empowerment Act (2015) and the Local Governance Review (2018–2023). This policy context has generated new spaces for engaging communities in decision-making about local priorities, policies and services, as well as a new cohort of official facilitators located inside public institutions tasked with enabling public participation. As such, Scotland offers an insightful context for the study of official facilitation practices and practitioners.

The What Works Scotland (WWS) research programme included an investigation of facilitation practices in a variety of contexts in Scotland. In this paper we utilise evidence from a two-wave survey of Community Planning Officials (CPOs) alongside interviews and focus groups from a case study of one local authority where CPOs were developing new public forums. Through these methods we seek to study how official facilitators understand public participation in local governance and how this influences their practices.

The Community Planning Officials (CPO) survey

In 2016 and 2018, WWS undertook two waves of a survey of CPOs, including both officers and managers, based on a repeated census. The non-probability sample was recruited via Community Planning (CP) managers. Inclusion criteria for respondents specified that at least 50% of their time was spent on CP, thus constituting their core job. While these surveys tried to reach all CPOs working in Scotland, this was limited by high staff turnover and the inclusion criteria described below. We therefore describe both sets of

respondents as samples. We compare responses between the samples, but we exercise caution when interpreting differences because of the changing nature of the CP field and the slightly different recruitment strategy undertaken in 2018.[3]

The questionnaire was developed by drawing on previous research (Audit Scotland 2016, 2014,2013; Sinclair 2011; Escobar 2017a; Cowell 2004). New questions were developed in collaboration with stakeholders from public and civic sectors and piloted with CPOs for both surveys. The findings presented here focus mainly on the second survey undertaken in 2018, with a sample of 95 CPOs 41% response rate. In 2016, 105 people responded to the survey (62% response rate). There are two primary limitations of the survey data. The CPO workforce in Scotland is relatively small. 230 CPOs were identified as meeting the criteria to complete the survey in 2018, with a 41% response rate, ($n = 95$). Therefore, it was not possible to undertake more complex statistical analysis. Second, the inclusion criteria excluded officials who fell below the threshold of 50% of their time on CP activities yet have a role in facilitating public participation. The samples discussed here cannot be considered a full census of practitioners actively engaged in facilitating interactive governance, however, the survey is valuable as an exploratory study of an underresearched group of official facilitators, and is the largest of its kind in Scotland.

Qualitative case study of a single local authority

In 2018, we conducted a case study of democratic innovation in a local authority area. The local authority and its partners had recently developed local public forums which involved citizens working in partnership with locally elected representatives and public officials; and making decisions about local priorities for funding. CPOs working for the local authority, were in the process of setting up these new interactive spaces through five public forums, which covered the local authority population of approximately 150,000. The work of each of the forums included deliberating on funding priorities for the local area; responding to the needs of communities of place and interest; and developing and agreeing a local action plan.

In light of WWS' ongoing programme of research into CP, the local authority commissioned WWS to assess the development of the new public forums. This qualitative research offered an opportunity to deepen previous quantitative findings from the CPO survey and examine the situated practices and perspectives of citizens, locally elected representatives and official facilitators. The methodology for the qualitative case study built on the findings from the two waves of the CPO survey and a literature review. Both studies obtained ethical approval from the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, as part of the WWS programme.

The qualitative case study was conducted over one month and included semi-structured interviews and focus groups which explored practices of public participation and facilitation. The case study sampling strategy included three types of research participant: citizens, elected representatives, and official facilitators. Two focus groups were held with elected representatives (focus group 1, $n = 8$; focus group 2, $n = 6$) and one focus group was held with citizens ($n = 6$). This reflected the proportion of elected representatives and citizens involved in the local public forums. Complementary interviews were conducted with 3 official facilitators, 2 citizens and 3 elected representatives. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed.

On its own the case study has limitations, given the small number of participants and limited timescale. The purpose of using this data is to complement the survey findings by delving deeper into everyday contexts and practices as typical in a sequential mixed methods research design (Escobar and Thompson 2019). The case study elaborates on the survey data and provides further insights into the types of cultural resistances that official facilitators grapple with through innovating to develop more participatory forms of local governance. The case study findings are not generalisable to other contexts, albeit some insights might be transferable when placed in the broader context of the survey findings. The transcript data from the qualitative research and the survey data was analysed using a theory-led approach to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021). The analytical framework grouped practices in local governance into four domains – civic, political, bureaucratic and professional. Based on previous evidence from studies of practice in public administration these themes were theorised as potentially relevant to understanding governance practices and agency. The following section examines the 'how' and the 'who' of interactive governance: the agency of official facilitators; their everyday working practices; and the challenges they face while carrying out culture change work.

Facilitation practices and culture change

Facilitators of public participation may seek to devolve power to citizens, but that is not their only role. Facilitation, as conceptualised in this symposium, can encompass different levels or stages of public participation. This includes the political work of gaining wider support for public participation in the institution as well as the work of organising the technicalities of these processes and overcoming practical barriers. This section begins by considering four key areas of cultural practice within local governance. We then examine the contextual pressures and challenges facing this workforce as they strive to develop interactive governance in Scotland.

Doing the groundwork: changing civic cultures

Following the core practice of representative democracy, citizens are usually invited to participate by putting themselves forward as representatives of wider communities. This self-selection tends to skew political participation towards citizens who have higher levels of social status and education (Ryfe and Stalsburg 2012). Most respondents to the 2018 CPO survey highlighted social inclusion in civic representation as a key challenge. A common concern was that the input of these *'regular faces … does not give a true reflection of the views of the wider community'* (CPO survey 2018). CPOs in both the survey and case study believed that overcoming this civic culture of representation required more direct and proactive methods: *'we need to be better at going out and talking to those who do not tend to engage, going to where they are and not expecting them to come to us'* (CPO survey 2018).

In the case study, CPO facilitators sought to increase the diversity of backgrounds and perspectives. In practice, this entailed breaking with traditional approaches to recruitment by seeking participation outside established civic organisations or community groups and providing support to overcome barriers to contributing in public forums: *'the loudest voices don't always have all the answers. And the quieter voices get intimidated by the loudest voices and don't engage'* (CPO survey 2018). Recruiting citizens who do not normally participate was a time intensive and long-term process. *'It's about that groundwork, that initial engagement that we do with communities, the soft stuff […] getting to know somebody'* (CPO officer, case study interview). Accordingly, changing civic cultures entailed challenging beliefs about the legitimacy of traditional methods of recruitment, cultivating new relationships, and building trust with individuals who were least likely to select themselves to participate.

Encouraging citizen leadership: changing political cultures

In the 2018 CPO survey, an indicator of culture change was when local politicians and officials indicated that they were *'more willing to hand over power'* to citizens, signifying a move *'away from a risk-averse culture'*. One of the political challenges for CPOs is the limited interaction they usually have with locally elected representatives. In the 2018 CPO survey, 78% indicated that this interaction was seldom or not at all. The development of new local public forums in the case study area provided a valuable opportunity for CPO facilitators to work with elected members towards power-sharing with citizens. These governance spaces were explicitly designed to support a more egalitarian and collaborative form of public participation. In practice CPOs expressed the concern that although citizens were included in the forums, the local politicians tended to dominate the meetings. To counter this, CPO

facilitators challenged beliefs about governance leadership by supporting citizens to lead the public forums, chair the meetings, and set the agenda.

The local public forums offered the opportunity for citizens to deliberate with local politicians on priorities for local services and to scrutinise funding applications. In interviews and focus groups, some elected representatives spoke of the value of these interactive processes, while others questioned the legitimacy of unelected citizens having this level of influence. CPO facilitators worked to counter the narrow understanding of democratic legitimacy as conferred through representative processes and elections. Instead, they promoted a new culture of legitimate decision-making through social inclusion and improving the quality of deliberation in meetings.

Inside systems: changing the bureaucratic culture

A majority of survey respondents in 2018 (56%) indicated that they believed CPOs should put more effort into encouraging culture change, and many identified culture change directly as a way to improve local governance. In particular, respondents highlighted the need to reduce bureaucracy and 'disrupt the silo-service culture' (CPO survey 2018). One of the challenges was that public participation was regarded as 'very much an add-on and seen as just another demand' (CPO survey 2018). This was compounded by a lack of understanding from public officials who did not have expertise in public participation, and yet were 'usually writing [the] policies' (CPO survey 2018). In one focus group, a citizen argued that for interactive governance to work 'the established management' needed to 'change their attitude to their job and to the concept of participation' (citizen, focus group). Nevertheless, there were signs of a cultural shift. A notable finding from the 2018 survey reflects a change regarding the importance given to public participation in local governance. Most CPOs surveyed (87%) in 2018 considered these activities to be an important part of Community Planning work, compared to 27% in the 2016 survey. The responses to these questions are not directly comparable but suggest a wider shift in opinion on the importance of public participation in local governance.

Practice and agency: changing professional cultures

Despite the burden of a professional role that contradicts the established top-down management culture (Escobar 2017a), most official facilitators in the CPO survey felt that they had agency to get things done. 76% of CPOs agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they feel empowered to do the things that were in their job description and 59% felt empowered to do things *outside* of their job description. 59% agreed with the statement 'I consider myself an activist who is trying to make a difference'. In the survey

responses and case study, CPOs saw themselves as having agency in persuading, convincing and encouraging public officials and local politicians of the value of citizens having a greater say over how their local services are run. The findings from both surveys also suggest that job satisfaction is relatively high among CPOs.

In terms of professional cultures and methods of public participation, the 2018 CPO survey found that the most common activities were consulting communities (70%) and providing information (60%). As might be expected, given the range of local services covered by Community Planning, more interactive forms of engagement occurred less often, such as: supporting communities to provide services (29%); working to jointly plan services (27%); and working to coproduce services (19%). These findings suggest that providing information and consultation remain important forms of public engagement. At the same time, it is becoming common for CPOs to design and deliver democratic innovations as part of their professional practice. In 2018, participatory budgeting (PB), was the third-most commonly undertaken public participation activity behind workshops and public meetings, an increase from the 2016 sample. While PB processes were becoming a common participatory activity, survey respondents nonetheless highlighted a lack of *'deliberative forms of decision making'*. The survey found gaps in the skillset CPOs needed to drive this agenda. Engagement skills, mediation and conflict resolution were identified as priority areas for professional skills development.

The context and challenges of culture change work

As illustrated so far, CPO facilitators drive public participation in interactive governance in Scotland and work to make strides in changing mindsets and cultures across civic, political, bureaucratic and professional domains. Previous research (Cowell 2004; Sinclair 2008, 2011; Matthews 2012) has highlighted the wider political and economic challenges of local governance reform. Our dataset, reaffirms the relevance of these issues drawing on the perspectives of CPO facilitators.

CPOs commented in both waves of the survey on the negative impact of the last decade of austerity policies in the UK. Many CPO facilitators conveyed a sense of powerlessness towards public spending cuts, which they believed were undermining their work. One respondent explained '*budget reductions are making things difficult, as community expectations are not in line with what is available in finance and resources to deliver*' (CPO survey 2018). Another noted that '*there is a fairly widespread fear of reduction in service as a result of reduced public sector spending*' (CPO survey 2018). The shortage of skilled facilitation professionals and the size of the workload was clearly illustrated in the case study. This is a service under significant strain:

"We are a key part of the transition because we are the experts in working with communities [. . .] but we are creaking at the seams because we have lost so many staff [. . .] We are really a small team for what we cover and what we deliver" (CPO officer, interview)

Other obstacles noted by survey respondents were the levels of '*mistrust and scepticism*' from citizens and the suspicion that '*the Council will do what it likes anyway*'. The public perception that previous public engagement initiatives had not achieved the anticipated policy impact added another pressure to the work of CPO facilitators. The survey highlighted the '*failure of public agencies to demonstrate how previous engagement activity has influenced decisions*' (CPO survey 2018). A few survey respondents reported the belief that public participation was being used as a means to achieve budget cuts– '*the public sector wants to involve communities to save money*'. One respondent noted that '*local authorities are cutting back on service delivery and expecting people and communities to pick up responsibility without adequate support or funding*'. Mistrust and suspicion of the motives behind public participation presented a challenge for mobilisation and may reflect wider trends of declining political trust (Foa et al. 2020).

A further challenge for CPO facilitators working in Scotland was the lack of clarity regarding the purpose of participation and how it may be explained to people who are not already involved. As one respondent in the 2018 CPO survey put it, '*we don't make it clear, accessible or understandable as to how or why people should or could get involved*'. Or more bluntly, '*it is absolutely not real*' to citizens. One survey respondent suggested that there was a problem with the language of public bodies: '*the language [. . .] leaves many cold*'. As a CPO in a case study interview explained, the aim of '*tackling inequalities and improving outcomes*' was too abstract to motivate participation.

Discussion – the work of facilitators as agents of culture change

This symposium asks a series of questions that frame the discussion of findings in this section. Firstly: *How malleable is local governance? Is there evidence of change?* Our research provides evidence of tentative change towards greater acceptance of democratic innovations and interactive processes, although this is challenged by shrinking resources and growing workloads. Public participation is now recognised as an important dimension of local governance. The role of official facilitators has increased, evidenced by the development of democratic innovations such as local public forums and participatory budgeting. Most official facilitators in this study saw themselves as activists in their work. Their desire was to spend more time and energy building relationships from the grassroots, reaching out to citizens who do not normally engage. At the same time, there were signs from our case study

research that these officials were struggling with increased workloads and reduced capacity. Budget cuts and the lack of resources made the task of engaging and involving citizens more difficult, which may have increased public cynicism, mistrust and the bureaucratic resistance to change. The survey also reflected some scepticism about whether interactive governance spaces represents a genuine commitment to public participation or a more calculated attempt to reduce spending. The overall conclusion: there is evidence of change with facilitators testing out democratic innovations but the change is patchy and slow rather than systemic and steady. As such, interactive governance in Scotland is still in the developmental stage, characterised by new political membership, competing perspectives on public participation and community empowerment, and a wider context of reduced budgets.

A key question in this symposium was *How do facilitators manage tensions, ambiguities and power struggles in practice?* The official facilitators studied in this article see themselves as internal activists that undertake culture change work from within local government. The focus of their activism is not on a single or specific set of policy issues but on changing decision-making processes so that they are more inclusive, participatory and deliberative. Their work involves taking a different stance on how decisions are made, valuing different types of knowledge, and forming different types of relationships, which runs counter to the established professional cultures and jurisdictions within which they work. This role challenges *'stereotypical distinctions between activist outsides and incorporated insides'* (Newman 2012: *p.189*). The experience and position of official facilitators illustrates that it is *'too simplistic to associate subversion solely with action outside the official sphere'* (Barnes and Prior 2009, 10). The internal activism of facilitators entails working within institutions to influence mindsets and ways of working. This kind of work makes visible a range of tensions and possibilities; as Goss (2001, 5) explains: *'The constant collision of different assumptions and traditions offers scope to challenge on all sides. The very messiness begins to break down old systems and procedures'.*

Our research highlights four areas of culture change work carried out by official facilitators. Firstly, they work to change civic culture. In the Scottish context, this means opening up forums and networks that have been traditionally dominated by established civil society organisations and community groups and creating new spaces that enable more opportunities for direct participation by citizens. Secondly, they work to change the existing political culture, in particular the narrow conception of democratic legitimacy that typically drives electoral democracy (Escobar 2017b) and the culture of traditional leadership usually adopted by locally elected representatives (Bussu and Tullia Galanti 2018). In this context, facilitators work to foster a political culture that

opens space for a fuller role for citizens – not just as voters, followers and protesters, but also as problem-solvers, co-producers and decision-makers. This shift, in turn, encompasses new forms of 'facilitative leadership' on the part of locally elected representatives (Sonia and Bartels 2013).

Official facilitators in our study also work to change the existing bureaucratic culture, that is, the set of beliefs and traditions that shape the administrative practices of the local state (Bevir and Rhodes 2010). Here they face a tide of convention embedded in traditional hierarchical procedures and practices. In contrast, their work seeks to foster horizontal ways of working and greater flexibility. Finally, they seek to change the professional culture so that existing and new staff can reimagine their roles as practitioners of participatory-deliberative approaches to local democracy.

This symposium also asked: *Are facilitators in this context powerful actors? How are they enabled or restricted by government policies?*

Official facilitators in Scotland navigate a liminal space between old organisational structures and new practices opened by the local governance reform agenda. Albeit nominally these new practices have been developing for two decades in Scotland, this is has not been a linear evolution and progression. These are constantly renewed spaces, structures and communities of practice, situated within broader changes to the roles and relationships between democratic institutions and communities. The local governance contexts explored here are far more fluid than they initially appear. They are not just a set of structures and institutions; they are cultural milieus. This is why actors such as official facilitators are potentially powerful agents and why it is important to understand their agency.

New legislation has helped to advance the public participation agenda in Scotland, but it is perhaps too early to see its full impact. As a CPO facilitator summarised: *'The Community Empowerment Act is certainly giving the public services something to think about and is slowly changing how we work but there is so much more to do'* (CPO survey 2018). Arguably the political narrative of 'doing things differently in Scotland' also provides some level of cultural support for challenging traditional practices and for the role of CPO facilitators as 'change makers'.

The mandated nature of interactive governance in Scotland is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there is the impetus for facilitators to engage citizens; on the other, longstanding civic, political, bureaucratic and professional cultures can inhibit the extent to which this engagement is meaningful and has impact. There is a tentative balance to maintain between the old governance practices, formats and formalities and the new interactive communication patterns and thinking that official facilitators seek to engender. Government policies that mandate new governance spaces and opportunities can empower official

facilitators in their work as internal activists, but much depends on the alliances and support that they can build locally with politicians and senior managers.

International research has highlighted the important role of elected representatives in enabling or hindering the impact of public participation (Edelenbos and van Meerkerk 2016; Lowndes, Pratchett, and Stoker 2006; Ansell and Torfing 2016). Most CPO facilitators surveyed in this study, had limited contact with elected representatives when organising public participation processes, which undermined their role as powerful actors. This disconnect between facilitators and elected representatives limits their agency and effectiveness. If the findings generated through public participation are not given meaningful consideration as part of the evidence base that informs elected representatives, then this is likely to increase public cynicism and mistrust of public participation processes.

Another limitation to the power of official facilitators is the highly demanding nature of their work. This includes the long-term, intensive work of building relationships with citizens, civil society representatives and various types of public officials, while at the same time organising the practical and technical side of public participation. In a context of reduced and restricted budgets, workforce capacity is likely to remain challenging. Given that public participation is now officially framed in Scotland as a core dimension of local governance, it is important that it is properly resourced with teams of facilitators who have skills as both deliberative practitioners and community organisers.

Conclusion: looking ahead

This article addresses an important gap: the role of official facilitators as culture change workers often remains invisible in studies of public participation. Invisibility undermines the prospects for advancing this field, and limits our ability to value, scrutinise and strengthen agency. Our research shows that to enable public participation in local governance, official facilitators must carefully navigate the unsettling confluence of belief systems, cultures and traditions and the dilemmas these create. A critical awareness of culture provides greater potential for official facilitators to understand resistances to change within institutional settings and take more effective action. Hence, facilitators must pay attention to the contexts, histories and traditions of local policy-making to understand the civic, bureaucratic, political and professional barriers to their work. Awareness of cultural traditions is crucial for facilitators to intervene in policy processes, navigate dilemmas and, ultimately, develop governance practices anchored on community empowerment and democratic innovation.

Participatory forms of governance are criticised for remaining at the margins of policy-making, rather than becoming embedded in institutions and civil society. Often, these approaches are disconnected from everyday public administration and democratic life (Bussu et al. 2022). Official facilitators are uniquely positioned within political institutions, with the potential to embed interactive governance, yet they often struggle to do so (Escobar 2022, 2017a). A lack of institutional recognition of the role and skills of official facilitators undermines the potential for new local governance spaces to become productive decision-making arenas.

The challenges and dilemmas discussed in this article are not unique to the Scottish context. They illustrate the nature of a global transition to more interactive modes of governance (Elstub and Escobar 2019). If interactive governance is to succeed it is necessary to create processes for the longer-term, seeking cross-party political support so that collaborative, participatory and deliberative processes can become embedded. More research is needed into the specialist skills, experience and capacity required by official facilitators, recognising that their role entails political work that challenges long-standing cultural practices. A useful exercise would be to develop comparative research of their work across different countries.

Our findings show that official facilitators are often committed to their unofficial role as agents of culture change. We find little evidence that they are becoming technocrats upholding bureaucratic cultures and conventions over participatory beliefs and practices. They work to subvert and reform local governance processes, directly and indirectly, when opportunities arise. In this new global era of both democratic recession and emerging participatory governance (Elstub and Escobar 2019), official facilitators are more than process designers and discursive stewards: they are a public workforce at the frontlines of ongoing democratic upheaval and renewal.

Notes

1. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 (CEA) placed new duties on public sector organisations to change the way they work both with one another and with local citizens. The Act embodies the expectation that Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) will improve public engagement in policy and decision making.
2. See for example https://pbscotland.scot/blog/2020/1/6/fraserburgh-pef-cld-mini-public-community-development-practice-exemplar; https://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/topics/mini-publics/.
3. For further detail about the recruitment strategy for the 2016 and 2018 surveys please see Weakley and Escobar (2018), Appendix A.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Funding

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials. The quantitative data is archived at the University of Glasgow: https://doi.org/10.5525/gla.researchdata.1346.

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