

Community Involvement in the Thames Regional Development Project

By Abena Sackey

The Thames Gateway Development Initiative (TGI) is one of the largest revitalization developments in the world today, directly affecting over forty miles of waterfront properties and indirectly influencing the socio-economic future of modern day London. The Thames Gateway covers a wide and diverse area and therefore faces varied and deep-rooted environmental and social characteristics. The biggest challenge of this initiative, not unlike many other large-scale developments, is in bringing the many stakeholders together and meeting all their needs equitably. Since its announcement, many documents on the project, official and unofficial, have emerged to capture the vision and policies. To their credit, professional planners and policymakers have acknowledged an impressive breadth of details concerning the scope of the project and its implementation. Published plans include important buzzwords such as *economic growth*, *sustainable communities*, *diversity* and *social inclusion* which certainly appease many groups. But how will all the rhetoric become reality in London and who shall see to its end?

In the era of new urbanism, several "best practices" have emerged in an attempt to standardize the success of good urban designs. Many practitioners have come to agree on at least ten basic criteria of superior urban design: excellence in architectural design, character, legibility, quality public realms, connectedness, enclosed spaces, mixed-use developments, environmental sustainability, inclusiveness and added value. Communities should be at the heart of the Government's work if they are truly committed to social justice - driving social mobility and promoting economic inclusion. Through them, individuals should feel empowered to participate and directly affect quality changes in their communities. Together, community members and local governments define their social behaviors and needs while maintaining climate change in an equitable fashion. The Thames development area has been historically disconnected, spatially and socially, and now is at the threshold of reconciliation. The strategic implementation of the project could revive old ghost towns and bring the economic and social prosperity long anticipated in the area.

Thames Gateway Stakeholders & Participants

Though public funds have traditionally helped to fund many of the physical change within Global Cities like London, private developers seem to have maintained power. Unfortunately, this powerful private-sector force, being very profitable, has restructured the demographics of the cities through job losses, gentrification, public institution disinvestments and the likes. But more and more, these cities are grappling with issues of affordable housing and community building initiatives. As government priorities shift from a social welfare emphasis to economic bolstering, private investments have indeed come, but at the expense of a diminishing local authority. It is only until the mid 1990's that there began a return to a more equitable approach of demanding more cross-stakeholder participation.

By virtue of its size alone, the TGI is understandably expensive, beyond what most governments and public agencies can finance and execute alone. This definitely makes the case for a public-private partnership. And so from the very beginning, the project has been led by high central government officials who, with their aims and agendas at the forefront, have "partnered" with relatively new and overlapping agencies to create a "strategic vision" the entire region. The main advisory group is the Thames Gateway Strategic Board of high government officials and ministers. The English Partnerships is the government's national regeneration agency with an overall view to lead the delivery team in a long-term partnership with the private sector. However, the English Partnerships typically do not develop their plans internally. Instead, they hire private consultants from the likes of WS Atkins and JPM Consulting. In addition, there are three Regional Development Agencies (London, East of London and Southeast) who are charged with turning the vision into a reality in their respective regions.

Unfortunately, there is no explicit affirmation in official documents of any actual local community members' involvement. In examining the role of the various stakeholders, the important questions to ask are how the governing body is structured and how do they communicate and implement the project. The current listing of "partners" and their interrelationships are complex and vague. Attempting to understand each player's role is even more frustrating for the average citizen unfamiliar with the politics of such urban design. Many offices appear to overlap and responsibilities are blurred across political and private agency territories. Thus far, the main mechanisms in place to facilitate the

limited community involvement are the online London Thames Gateway Forum, voluntary community representatives on the Local Authority Partnerships and local campaigns. In May 2006, the Department of Community and Local Governments was formed under the leadership of the Secretary of State, Ruth Kelley. According to Kelley, the *"vision is of a Department on the side of people who want to make a difference, where everyone has the opportunity to fulfill their potential and to build a stake in society for them and their families."*

However, more time will reveal whether this new formation will actually promote proposed community involvement or rather add to the confusion of the current governance structure.

Now, more than halfway through the proposed timeline, the project is struggling to meet financing needs to implement phased developments on schedule.

While the government maintains a rhetorical commitment to "community involvement" and "sustainable development," there seems to be a scrimmage run largely by the central government. If the governance structure of the Thames project is indicative of this commitment then the prospects of this urban regeneration is bleak. The voices of the already under-served communities are all too often silenced in the discourse of developments and revitalization. The development planners and designers seem to be at least aware of these issues by acknowledging them in their written development frameworks. But rhetoric is not enough when people's livelihoods are on the line. Just as the central government took the lead in early development of the project, they must also proactively engage the local communities in their policy approvals and plan implementations to ensure a truly equitable project delivery.

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