

Community Development on the margin? The arrival of community organising in Britain (2012)

Authors: Rob Gregory, GYBC Group Manager Neighbourhoods and Communities, Holly Notcutt GYBC Community Development Manager

Contact: info@cosocial.org.uk website: www.cosocial.org.uk

This reflective paper has been written to illustrate the strength in Community Development approaches embedded in grass roots initiatives. The examples are shared to promote the spread of knowledge and experience in this field of work.

CoSocial is a team of specialist practitioners working in the field of social and community development. We believe that a community development approach to addressing the needs of people across the globe is vital in shaping healthier, prosperous, more sustainable and resilient communities for the 21st century.

Community Development on the margin? The arrival of Community Organising in Britain

Introduction

In early 2011 we attended a meeting of the outgoing Community Development Network in Cambridge. The network had been funded by the previous New Labour government in an attempt to share community empowerment good practice around the east of England. This meeting received an impassioned presentation from a concerned Nick Beddow, Chief Executive of the Community Development Exchange (CDX), about the arrival of the new coalition government's Community Organising scheme. Practitioners in the room, many of whom were about to lose their jobs as a consequence of public sector cuts, appeared both frustrated and perplexed by the ambitions of the scheme. At face value, this new initiative sounded very similar to existing practice, and the lack of any reference to existing community development activity in Britain prompted a stir of negativity amongst the audience.

Travelling back from the event we pondered the information we had received. Was the 'Community Organisers' scheme an attempt by the new UK Government to step away from what had become the norm for 'community work', towards instilling the traditionally more radical approach of organising? Or, due to the woolly information available about the proposed scheme, was this merely recycled and repackaged rhetoric presented to us under a new label?

As UK based community development practitioners our main concern was to understand whether different approaches to 'community work' could be complementary in a changing political environment with dwindling public finances. Drawing on our experience from a neighbourhood development programme in Great Yarmouth, in the east of England, we argue that ambiguous definitions and interpretations of organising puts it's coexistence with community development at risk, jeopardising practice to the detriment of those it is intended to serve.

November 2012

A New Vision of Community Organising?

US President Obama's electoral campaign during 2008 brought global attention to Community Organising. Influenced by the writings of Alinsky in the 1950s, the approach focuses on a community organiser bringing communities together to strategically gain power, based upon a combination of mutual values and shared interest. From strikes and demonstrations, to negotiating legislative change, organising has led to the establishment of new institutions and services in neighbourhoods across the US.

During a Churchill Travel Fellowship to San Francisco in 2011, we noted much of the same methodology still in existence today. The organising efforts were about igniting angst and agitation amongst citizens, wholly focused on issues of social justice where the state had failed to address (or negatively impacted upon) the needs of those most vulnerable. The key to this success was not only the tactical navigation of political systems to effect change but the strength of community self-determination, fiercely independent of the state and ultimately resourced by communities themselves.

Across the Atlantic in Britain, this had captured the attention of the main political parties, grappling with low voter turnout at elections. Whilst organising has traditionally been associated with left-wing activity the appeal of community self-help and independence from the state was particularly appealing to the centre-right. It was therefore understandable that it went on to form part of the Conservative manifesto pledge in 2010.

Community Organising is not a new phenomenon in Britain: for example Trade Union movements, particularly during the miner strikes of the 80s, drew significantly on the tools of organising to champion social justice against the state. During 2011 the Cabinet Office funded Community Organisers Scheme launched in Britain as a part of the government's 'Big Society' vision. The scheme pledged to recruit and train 5,000 organisers to 'identify local leaders, bring communities together, help people start their own neighbourhood groups and give communities the help they need to take control and tackle their problems' (Conservative Party, 2010).

We were soon to learn that the organising scheme would not be based on the traditional Alinskyan model, but on a more consensus-type approach. This sought to facilitate dialogues and collective problem solving rather than radically challenging power bases. This was also seen as a vehicle for delivering the government's 'Big Society' agenda reducing the role of the state and enabling greater community self-help. For Alinsky advocates this manipulation was criticised as a departure from a genuine bottom-up organising approach (Third Sector, 2011). Such an approach also created ambiguity. There was uncertainty as to what it actually was and how it would actually engage with existing community development models in places like Great Yarmouth.

Great Yarmouth's Community Development Journey

Over the past 10 years Community Development has resonated strongly within Great Yarmouth's social policy framework. Learning, from a number of regeneration initiatives in the early 2000s, highlighted that physical regeneration alone was insufficient in improving life chances for communities suffering deprivation. Where community development approaches had been incorporated, eg. wide participation in planning and delivery of schemes, social outcomes were better, and importantly more sustained.

The 'Make it Happen' neighbourhood programme, launched in 2009, sought to build on this experience. In recognising the important link between people and the micro-communities in which

November 2012

they live, this initiative embedded a Community Development approach to addressing issues of social inequality in a distinct neighbourhood within the town. A Community Development Worker (CDW) was commissioned via the Voluntary Sector and the agenda was to support local people to address their priorities, whatever they might be.

Initially, bonds were formed through meeting people at natural gathering points across the neighbourhood- outside the school gates at pick up time, the pub, skate-park, bus shelter, with conversations focussed on 'getting to know you'. The interactions in the following weeks, months and years gradually went beyond general neighbourhood chatter, to involving individuals, their friends and neighbours in creating a trusted environment within which to explore more deep-rooted issues, those which perhaps had been less likely to be brought to our attention otherwise.

This was not the first attempt at 'community work' in the neighbourhood. Previous consultations and engagement exercises had raised expectations but upon failing to deliver on promises, heavy scepticism remained. Disillusioned by 'here today, gone tomorrow' experiences of the past, local community leaders were doubtful about the longevity and integrity of this new programme. However these dialogues were central to actually shaping our community development practice, reinforcing the need for a long-term commitment.

The Make it Happen programme is governed by a Partnership Board, led by residents. Under no illusions that any such board will be able to represent the views of everyone in the neighbourhood, and in recognising these limitations, it is surrounded by a network of individuals and both formal and informal groupings supported by the CDW. This is further reinforced by street based engagement activities. Such dedicated engagement work has helped to identify and build upon community strengths, establishing new creative partnerships. For example, local parents supported to tackle anti-social behaviour by starting a youth club have now gone on to develop an award winning family life-skills scheme, supported by local statutory and voluntary service providers. Importantly, these groups received almost daily CDW support, particularly in the initial months. This support continues 3 years on.

Through this Community Development approach, a growing awareness of social justice has become apparent. As local residents have engaged in the programme, they have in turn awakened or deepened their knowledge on rights, equality, and solidarity- coming together to challenge issues of service delivery and resource allocation, such as youth play provision in poorer neighbourhoods, or levels of policing in crime hotspots. Gradually, residents have also gone on to recognise and tackle more covert and emotive issues, such as mental ill-health and embedded discrimination within communities.

Skills and Definitions

Critically, the programme has supported the capacity building of individuals, often in addressing things not directly associated with a project, e.g. unemployment and financial worries, relationship tensions, and issues of low self-esteem. Telling someone *they can* is relatively easy. However, supporting people over time to navigate a labyrinth of public services, develop self confidence, and explore uncharted waters of new initiatives takes patience, empathy and critically a complex and enabling interpersonal skill-set. This remains vastly un-recognised.

The UK Community Development National Occupational Standards were refreshed in 2009, (Lifelong Learning, 2009) and along with various further education courses Community Development work has become more professionalised in recent years. New practitioner networks have also allowed for the

November 2012

exchange of dialogue and experience-based learning. Amongst practitioners however, it is often still felt that it is yet to be substantively recognised, or perhaps really understood, in a wider setting. In Great Yarmouth we have had regeneration officers, grant administrators, and self employed consultants all assuming the label of 'CDW', definitions created by the bid writer. Limited understanding of the facilitative skills sets required has resulted in inconsistent and dubious practice, seeing some workers advocate rather than enable, direct rather than support, self-promote rather than empower. Most may be well intentioned, but diluted interpretations and occasionally some questionable bottom line agendas leave the door wide open for Community Development work to be de-valued and reputations undermined.

Appreciating the value of the profession will have been a challenge for an incoming government, whereas Community Organising provided a fresh terminology and neat methodology to community empowerment. Since the rhetoric emerged some 'development workers' have attempted to rebrand themselves as organisers, attempting to capture the political sentiment of the moment. Their practice, however, has done very little to change.

Concerns and Opportunities

The arrival of a national Community Organising scheme brings a number of local dilemmas to programmes such as Make it Happen where long-term commitment is essential. How do we engage with nationally managed initiatives with no local interface? How do we facilitate conversations around practice? How do we plan the necessary support for those communities likely to suffer the most in the coming years as Britain attempts to resolve its national deficit?

One must also question the validity of a government funded organising scheme which fails to invest in existing infrastructure, is short-term (funding has been committed for 1 year) and is directed by a national bureaucracy with few local checks and balances. The scheme has a clear mandate not to engage with existing community work practice, which in our view wastes resources, duplicates effort and disregards the time it takes to build 'trust' within communities. This immediately obstructs cross-pollination between approaches, limiting the possibility of an organic model of Community Organising in Britain.

Community Development in the UK could well benefit from learning from Organising methodology e.g. understanding how best to manipulate power-bases and mobilise whole communities into action. Similarly Organising practice might learn from the smaller-scale and intensive capacity building as noted through the Make it Happen programme. But to do this we need to be able to try it out. We need an arena that respects different approaches, allows dialogue to be shaped locally, and explores compatibility. This could enable the development of practice which best supports communities to address issues of social justice according to their own needs, rather than needs perceived by the state.

But the Cabinet Office's ambiguous approach to Community Organising does more to further blur the already clouded distinctions. This diluted representation of what is a fiercely independent organising model in the US maintains the murky generalist definition of 'community work', retracting attention and consequentially value from existing Community Development models. Without a clear understanding of the distinctions in policy-making circles, we risk a healthy co-existence of the two approaches.

We have fortunately been able to continue to resource Community Development in Great Yarmouth for a further 2 years, funded through the Big Lottery. Through this we aim to continue to build on the

November 2012

progress Community Development has made to date, increasing collaboration between public agencies and local people to deliver meaningful outcomes for our communities. We are not starting from a blank canvas. So much distance has been travelled it would be detrimental to disregard it.

As we move through 2012 we are still waiting for the national organising programme to make its mark on Great Yarmouth. We are, however, pro-active in our efforts to embrace it within existing community-led infrastructure as we believe that there is real benefit in reassessing the right tools and methodology to truly empower communities in Britain in the 21st century.

References

Conservative Party (2010) *Invitation to Join the Government of Great Britain: Conservative Party Manifesto 2010*. Accessed at

<http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Activist%20Centre/Press%20and%20Policy/Manifestos/Manifesto2010> (24th November 2012).

Lifelong Learning UK (2009) *National Occupational Standards for Community Development*, Lifelong Learning UK, London.

Third Sector (8th March 2011) *Why Alinsky's Supporters Lost Out*. Accessed at <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/news/article/1058293> (24th November 2012).

About the Authors

Holly Notcutt is Neighbourhood Manager for the Make it Happen programme. She has an academic background in Social Psychology, and in International Development. Her professional experience lies in community and voluntary sectors, and in local government.

Rob Gregory manages the Corporate Strategy, Communities and Partnerships service at Great Yarmouth Borough Council and has a Masters degree in Applied Anthropology and Community and Youth Work. He undertook a Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship to explore the role of Community Organising in the USA in 2011.

Great Yarmouth Borough Council has recently launched its Centre of Excellence in Social and Community Development – CoSocial www.cosocial.org.uk