

# Empowered Communities in the 2020s

## IVAR Research Briefing 1 – Issues Dialogue

### Work with communities: exploring the issues, Sept 2017

#### Introduction

This is the first in a series of short reports where we will share what we have heard and learned from people that have taken part in the research so far. The report has been written against the background of a series of appalling and devastating terrorist events in Manchester, London Bridge and Finsbury Park and the Grenfell tower fire in Kensington. All but a handful of the conversations we are reporting on took place before these events.

In this report, the findings are interim and not exhaustive. We have not covered all the material we have collected and we will be coming back to it in due course. We have more people to listen to and more questions to ask. That is why, at the end of each section, you will find 'Questions we want to ask next' and we invite you to comment on those in our next survey. If you are not already on the mailing list to receive surveys, you can sign up [here](#) and you can read more about the research [here](#). Our conversations also brought a number of ongoing dilemmas to the surface – hard choices that communities and community workers have to make – and we will be exploring these further too.

#### About the research

This research looks at the current and future value of community development in the UK. Funded by Community Development Foundation (CDF) legacy money and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), this research will inform Local Trust's future work on community empowerment. IVAR's research is concerned with disadvantaged communities and we are working in depth with four local communities as well as talking with people in communities across the UK.

IVAR is facilitating a series of dialogues exploring the past, present and future of support to communities. The dialogues will overlap but will be loosely organised around 'Issues', 'Nations', 'Places'.

The questions we were asked to address are:

- How can communities become more empowered and vibrant in the next ten years?
- How can communities identify and articulate issues and take collective action to address them over the next decade?
- What might help people imagine what the future will look like, especially given the uncertainty ahead, and give them the tools to shape that future?

- What needs to happen for communities to become more empowered in the future?

The Issues Dialogue has concentrated on hearing from people with a single issue interest in communities and community work; with a particular way of approaching community work that they want to discuss; and finally with a small number of 'generalist' community work commentators. We will be talking to others with an interest in the research at a later stage.

## Findings

In this report, we present and analyse the data we have collected under three headings:

1. What motivates people to get involved and what gets in the way?
2. What does it take for communities to become powerful?
3. Is community development still relevant?

### 1 - What motivates people to get involved and what gets in the way?

There is nothing very surprising in our findings but people felt that motivation was an important foundation for understanding community empowerment.

*'Care and consideration for other people and the future'*

#### What motivates?

##### Drivers - What makes people want to take action/get involved?

- **Injustice:** Wanting to correct an injustice or take action about something that is going wrong
- **Aspiration:** To make life and the place you live in better for yourself and the people around you
- **Purpose:** Having a sense of purpose makes people feel good about themselves and their lives
- **Emotional response to an event or issue:** Feeling angry, sad, passionate or excited
- **Values** Rooted in faith, politics or family; inherited because it is what your mother or grandmother did
- **Responsibility:** Feeling a sense of responsibility to care for others in the community.

*'Something people feel is going wrong, a gap or a problem'*

*'People want to make their place better or the lives of people like them better'*

##### Enablers - What helps people to take action, get involved?

- **Relationships:** Being encouraged to get involved and shown how by someone you trust; and the opportunity to meet people, to be social
- **People:** Having role models, hand-holders or help with making connections
- **Resources:** Having the money and time to volunteer
- **Confidence or hope:** Believing that you can make a difference
- **Ownership:** Community in the lead and driving the process.

*'Somebody you trust says ... this is going on, why don't you join in, you've got something to say'*

## What gets in the way?

### Internal constraints

- **Fear:** Fear of drawing attention to yourself, of being 'found out' by authorities (For example, this was raised in relation to some refugees)
- **Money:** Worrying about paying bills, living in poverty
- **Time:** Working long hours or having other responsibilities that make it difficult to get along
- **Caring duties:** Looking after grandchildren and elderly parents
- **Culture:** In some areas, the women take on the caring duties while men dominate town and community councils
- **Health:** Poor health can be a barrier
- **Disability:** Stress and anxiety brought on by punitive benefits changes are 'time consuming and draining, they sap resilience down to nothing'.
- **Confidence:** You go along and do not feel able to contribute
- **Despondency:** Thinking that community action does not make a difference.

*'It's very hard for them to do community work because they are struggling to meet the absolutely pressing needs pouring through the door'*

### External disincentives

- **Format:** Unfamiliar or off-putting way that meetings are conducted; not understanding how a local system works
- **Culture:** The language and tone of events, activities and meetings; includes male dominated meetings and/or ego driven individuals holding power at local level
- **Issues:** Feeling that the issues being put forward are not those that are relevant or interesting to you
- **Institutions:** Statutory agencies that do not understand how to work with communities
- **Experience:** You go along and do not feel heard. Outsiders may have fantastic ideas, but communities are tired of being surveyed, consulted and still not having a voice.

*'Many Somalis locally are struggling, going out early in the morning and coming back late in the evening. And what could a single mother do trying to bring up young children on her own? They might want to engage but would they have the time and capacity? They have to feed their children. They may be working Saturdays and Sundays. Everyone is struggling'*

### Dilemma 1 - Identity or place?

The focus of this research is on communities of place. However, our responses showed that people often have multiple identities of geography, identity and interest. This is positive: people draw strength from their involvement with multiple communities. If they do not feel supported in one community, they may draw strength from having roots, heritage or connections elsewhere. We know these things. However, a focus on place risks excluding some people, especially those for whom place is not their primary identity. What we also learned was that people who have few opportunities to make links beyond place are less likely to have these multiple or alternative identities to call on and can feel trapped in a 'place'. Alternatively, people may be labelled and stereotyped in ways that do not 'allow' them to hold multiple identities. This may be because of where they live, their ethnicity, or their faith. For example, one contributor said it was problematic that religion has become the 'principal identifier' in the way some communities are perceived.

*'One of the many problems is being seen to have different identities. It's seen as negative when a group of Somali young people raise money to go on a tour of Somaliland, and then come back and raise money for sports kit for the local Somali kids they've met ... to many ... in the North London community that's seen as deeply suspect. There's lots of work to do here – if people are interested in their homeland community it does NOT mean they are terrorists, and ... being transnational citizens is very positive'.*

**Question:** What does this mean for community work?

**Questions we want to ask next**

- Does everyone in a community have to get involved?
- How can work with communities of place take into account the other identities that are important to people?
- What motivates power holders to get involved with communities?

## 2 - What does it take for communities to become powerful?

Many of our contributors talked about community 'power' rather than community 'empowerment'. Why was this? Firstly, empowerment implies a distinction between the 'empowerer' and the 'empowered', i.e. it is still about 'doing to'. Secondly, while enabling and encouraging people to come together, organise and improve the quality of their lives is one component of changing power relationships, contributors said that these are not enough on their own. Not without also:

- Altering the power relationships between communities and powerful institutions. For example, ensuring that communities have a say in decisions or changes within their community that will directly affect them. A contributor in Wales said that the fallout from pit closures was *'a good example of what happens when you don't have a seat at the table to negotiate and determine your destiny'*.

*An empowered community is one that has access to employment that pays well, access to services within the community and where people have control over the process of managing change within their community'*

- Thinking about how an increasingly 'individual' culture might make us less likely to be aware of what we could achieve collectively, as a community.
- Tackling the structural things that inhibit community power. Contributors stressed how essential this was if work with communities was to address poverty and the impact of austerity.

*'Poverty is huge and endemic. It won't be solved with a couple of big events. It will be a long hard slog ... things like allotments all play a role but you need political power, economic power, formal or informal.*

*You have an economic strategy about growth and a set of alleviating policies about mitigating poverty that sit alongside. And often they're about helping people to cope with the system. I'm not sure that it [community development] exacerbates [poverty]. But it props up a system that is a very damaging system.*

*Community development brings people together to get to know their neighbours which is good but it won't alleviate poverty. That requires challenging the power structure, building grassroots structures that can force change, working with the trades unions'*

Our contributors talked about three kinds of power: personal, collective, political. Later in the research, we will look at the most appropriate existing framework to help explore our data.<sup>1</sup> Here, we focus on three themes that have emerged so far from our analysis: education, spaces and power relations with government.

## Opportunities to learn about political and economic power

We did not ask people directly about education and learning but it has emerged as an important theme in their responses:

- Communities can only become powerful if they have access to the right information about the issues that are disempowering them in the first place. This might include knowledge about how to navigate complex local systems, e.g. planning or the NHS.
- Many people felt that there is a particular need to educate young people about power relationships, politics and the economy. Responsibility can and should spread beyond youth work and school citizenship programmes. Global and community learning can and do play a role in educating people about the source of their powerlessness and how they might achieve changes.
- In Scotland, people often talk about community education and community development learning. We will be exploring further, how this approach compares with other parts of the UK in our 'Nations Dialogue'.
- Much of the political education that existed in the past has lapsed. These forms of education were about 'understanding the power dynamics that are operating around you'. For example, working class people may have had their political education through the chapel, miners or mechanics institutes, social clubs, the Workers Education Association and the unions. Much of this has disappeared with de-industrialisation. We need to look for the opportunities today for people to make that journey.
- Community development programmes, in some cases at least, start with an ideology or a preset idea about what needs to be done. This skips over questions about how power works and instead jumps straight to action.

*'I think we are not going to cure poverty by community development on its own, but community development could be one of the routes into that, as could anywhere where people can associate and get together. [It will] only have that wider effect if we allow community development to be a tiny bridge across the canyon to some form of political awareness'*

Contributors also talked about other kinds of learning that can be empowering – learning a skill, a language. For example, offering ethnic minority women the opportunity to meet together in sewing classes may not on the face of it seem very exciting or even empowering, but it can also provide an opportunity for them to talk about, say, health concerns in a safe environment.

*'That's what, unfortunately, has gone out of community development ... Consciousness raising, political education, understanding the power dynamics that are operating around you. You can't*

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the idea of power within, power to, power with and power over in <https://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/expressions-of-power/>; or related theory about public, social and political participation <http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2009/09/Briefing-paper-1-What-is-participation1.pdf>

*expect people to turn up at a meeting – they can see there's something wrong, but they need something else to engage with that issue. That's what's totally out of fashion, all 'do, do, do' not reflect from a collective opinion of what we can all agree on. I see that in local community workers that I've come into contact with – it's all about programmes, what we need you to do. Not to facilitate that reflection'*

## Spaces for encounters and discussion

- Contributors have talked a lot about the importance of 'spaces' in communities. By 'spaces' they mean places (community centre, library, café, etc.) and opportunities (meetings, events, etc.) for people to encounter one another, share, discuss, reflect on and debate issues that affect them.<sup>2</sup> Several people talked about space for 'spontaneous encounters' with people you would not normally meet; one contributor wondered if this happens less often because of, for example, post office closures and the way much of our shopping and communication now takes place online.
- We could add 'virtual' spaces to this, although so far there has been little mention of this.
- Free public spaces are being eroded, privatised, redeveloped and commercialised, and cuts mean those that remain can feel abandoned and uncared for. There are fewer public places where people can congregate without having to pay and without feeling stigmatised, under constant surveillance or unsafe.
- There is a need to create 'open' spaces where tough conversations can take place, where critical thinking and reflection is encouraged and where people can express their own views about difficult topics like immigration and Brexit.
- This has to include space for people to express views that may be unpopular and/or distasteful to the majority of people who work in communities. Only such bottom up approaches to dialogue in communities can lead to the redistribution of power.
- Many of the spaces that do exist for communities to engage with one another are 'invited' spaces. They are created through a community development programme or a managerial approach to community development; or they are imposed as part of top down empowerment initiatives designed to address a crisis (e.g. in local government funding).

*'We can't ensure spaces are inclusive, we're exhausting ourselves and may be in danger of shutting down all conversation'.*

*'At meetings, people [local government] need to be clear about their stance, then people can make choices about whether to take part. [They should] build people's confidence to make that choice'.*

Finally, one contributor said, in relation to communities that are divided or experiencing tensions between different groups: *'It's just a troubled time. If there's one thing we should try to do each day, it's [to] talk to someone who you wouldn't otherwise talk to'.*

*'I've just been to a workshop on libraries. They can be a non-stigmatising place where lots of people come, [and] can have information sessions and debates on topical issues. A whole range of activities can be organised at very low cost. That's the thing about space for meetings – it has become hugely problematic, as community places have to charge market rates in order to survive. Public*

<sup>2</sup> Gaventa describes 'spaces' in the context of citizen action and participation as 'opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests'. See Gaventa, J. (2006) 'Finding the spaces for change: a power analysis' in *IDS Bulletin*, 36 (6), IDS

*organisations like our local authority are very relaxed about different groups such as pensioners groups, etc., being able to meet in a public building without charging them the earth and it makes a huge difference. There are still some libraries, particularly the bigger ones, that still have a remit to have this kind of networking, although they are getting squeezed'*

### **Dilemma 2 - Was Brexit a moment of empowerment?**

Brexit was a big democratic event with a tangible impact. So, it could be regarded as a big moment of empowerment. However, it also showed the weakness of the current democratic system. As one contributor put it, it was a 'finite moment' and communities were not supported to participate in an informed and engaged way, to have conversations, air differences in a safe environment and reach consensus. Others talked about *'the lack of democratic opportunity [for people] to talk about their problems in a convivial open-ended way*. In reference to Brexit they also said it *'turned them against themselves. They didn't have the information and were not able to express their alienation any other way'*.

Brexit also links to wider issues, such as the impact of austerity and whether money is going to the right places. The Brexit settlement will be another opportunity for individuals to look at what gains can be made for local communities.

**Questions:** So, can we learn anything from the Brexit vote?

Can community development address these issues? One idea is it can help to open up opportunities for dialogue.

Can community development make people feel connected if they are not?  
It can perhaps help them express their dissatisfaction, explore ways to tackle this.

## **Working on both sides of the equation<sup>3</sup>: the state and community**

Many of our responses were about the relationship between government and communities. This appears to be because, first, *'cuts have forced local authorities to engage with communities about the future of services'*; second, this has caused the idea of community engagement to morph into preparing communities to take on responsibility for things central and local government can no longer do for them; and, third, because not too long ago, a great deal of community development was supporting communities in partnerships.

In this section, we summarise points raised and what people think needs to happen.

Our responses acknowledge the efforts made to enshrine participation and democratic engagement in government policy and programmes. They also raise a number of barriers or difficulties with this:

- You cannot 'deliver' democratic engagement or participation 'top down' – that takes away from it being a political process.

<sup>3</sup> We have borrowed the idea of 'working on both sides of the equation' from John Gaventa. See, for example, Gaventa, J. (2004) 'Towards participatory governance: assessing the transformative possibilities' in S. Hickey and G. Mohan (eds) *Participation: From tyranny to transformation*, London: Zed Books, pp. 25-41.

- **Lack of expertise:** *'We have a national, central government with a strong sense that it needs to happen but no clue how to do it. So, they don't help local authorities'.*
- **Lack of resources:** *'Local authorities have fewer resources so less can be done at the local level. Devolution means responsibility without resources, so less power'.*
- **Lack of follow through:** *'Letting go of power, genuinely putting citizens at the heart of some decision-making. It has to be genuine. An awful lot of rhetoric up here ... but it goes so far and then the foot comes back down again'.*

So, what needs to happen? Our contributors made two main observations:

- Decision-makers have a responsibility to engage and take informed decisions with communities. To do this, they will need to help create spaces for *'grown-up conversations'* that make *'allowance for difference of opinion'*.
- This change has to be politically led by government, by councillors and by leaders in the community.

The equation does not just concern the relationship between the state and communities but increasingly between other power holders – independent service providers, employers, business – and the communities who are affected by their decisions.

*'It's ... about starting from issues that people are concerned about. Not being told – this is the issue! If you come to this group, that's what you have to do, can't say anything political – immediately the whole structure is already bounded by what you can and can't do. A lot of the way Community Development has been degraded is that there is a particular end goal, already decided. Need you, the community, to validate that or get it to that point'*

#### **Questions we want to ask next**

- Where does political education live on? Where has it begun to appear in new forms or spaces?
- How do communities influence non-state institutions – businesses and independent service providers – who affect their lives?
- What would empowering institutions look like?
- Do we need to rehabilitate the concept of the political?
- Do new forms of communication offer new ways of connecting and new routes into community power? What can people do now that they could not do before? And in the future?



### 3 - Is community development still relevant?

While no one questioned the relevance of 'community work' – broadly understood – there were strong opinions about what a more formal 'community development' approach should consist of and how it should be organised. Here we set out these opinions and invite further debate.

Community development is an important, relevant practice with a set of values, skills and knowledge<sup>4</sup> that together promote the wellbeing and the authority of the most disadvantaged communities, in order for them to exercise power over their lives. So, there was widespread agreement that it needs to be sustained – but not as the only way to secure a redistribution of power. Other approaches such as health and youth work can make an important contribution and it is always important to be open to other energy and ideas: *'Lots of people bring those values and not just community development workers. It's a bit exclusive. There are a lot of people who hold similar values'*.

*'Community Development is ... the facilitation and mobilisation of people to bring about change. Within that, there are principles and values. And there is a vision for what you're trying to achieve'*

A number of issues were raised in relation to this question. The main ones were: first, whether or not it needs to be preserved as a distinct 'profession' or 'practice'; second, whether and how it connects to other fields or professions; and, third, how and by whom it is organised, paid for and held to account. We found little evidence of hostility, defensiveness or unwillingness to entertain change among those people who carry out community work, but there were tensions around branding within the field. Where they exist, such tensions – defensiveness, unwillingness to collaborate, critical – were perceived as detrimental and requiring attention.

A number of themes have emerged.

## Learning

Where community development values, skills and knowledge are being deployed in communities, it is because they are *'ingrained'* in the minds of people who themselves went through transformative experiences in their personal, voluntary or professional lives that left them with a powerful and lifelong legacy. Our contributors believe that there is currently not enough investment going into community development learning – theory, practice, people – to ensure that community development will be there in the long term ready for the *'long slog'* of tackling poverty and disadvantage.

## Branding

Contributors described as unhelpful the way different community development programmes and approaches have become increasingly 'branded'. First, the idea of fidelity to a particular branded model, programme, or manual, flies in the face of the old adage 'form follows function'; it works counter to adapting to local context. Second, it could lead to a failure to learn and build on lessons from the past because of a perceived tendency for standard community development approaches to be presented by their promoters as *'social innovation'*.

*'We just thought we were running lunch clubs. Now it would be called ... social innovation'*

<sup>4</sup> There are many useful analyses available, including the Community Development National Occupational Standards <https://www.fcsl.org.uk/app/download/18739655/CDNOS+mar2015.pdf>

There does appear to be a need for greater cooperation between organisations and programmes. However, having a variety of approaches is important. Indeed a degree of tension and disagreement can also be helpful: *'community development is at its best when it's contested'*. For our research purposes at least, rather than see these programmes and organisations as alternatives or competitors, we recognise that each has something to offer to the overall picture of what needs happen for communities to become powerful in the future.

*'The tools and methodology will change but the principles are the same - it's about how to open up a dialogue'.*

## Co-option

Some people suggested that transformation in communities has to have a political and an economic edge in order to bring about a *'redistribution of power'*. Some felt that community development had lost its way in this respect: *'community development has lost its edge. It has turned into advocating on behalf of a profession. It should be a political process'*.

Given public spending cuts and policy change, everyone we spoke to was aware of the increasing need for local government and other power holders to work with communities. However, they came at this in slightly different ways:

- **Policy:** There will be a need for community-led solutions to local problems, so let us work out how to get there. Communities and people who work with them need to adjust their expectations of institutions.
- **Partnership:** Communities being involved with public services can work, but *'it's not just going to happen. It needs to be a partnership between the local authority who need to release some control and the community who need there to be [someone] to support them'*.
- **Power:** There is a risk that community development is being used to teach people to cope with austerity or coopt them into substituting for the state. This is an issue that has been raised in relation to community rights and we will explore this further.

**Dilemma 3 – Where can communities step in? And where should they?**

We asked people whether community empowerment could alleviate poverty. This led to some conversations about food and food poverty. There was a feeling that poverty is not created locally and therefore cannot be resolved locally. Current debates around food poverty were used to illustrate this point leading to questions around whether groups should be providing food, or whether this just adds to the problem:

*'Food banks do nothing to help people figure out how to save money on food and eat better.'*

However, according to one interviewee, people are cautious of critiquing food banks because they are seen as a lifeline for some of the most vulnerable people in society (e.g. according to the Trussell Trust, 436,000 three day emergency food supplies were given to children between April 2016 and March 2017 <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/>).

Access to fresh, high-quality food is also an issue for poorer communities. High quality produce is available in markets in wealthier areas, while produce in markets in poor areas is sometimes not only of lower quality but closer to going off, so, even if people do buy fresh, cheaper produce, it does not keep. One of our responses said that this is linked to other pressures on people living in poverty that mean they are less likely to have the chance to think ahead and plan meals. Eating is more likely to be unplanned, which can lead to take-away or ready meals, or more expensive produce that does not need much or any preparation.

Work with communities might support people to develop food preparation skills, form healthy eating habits or provide food in a crisis, but it is not a solution to the problem of food poverty. Food banks can therefore be seen as a symptom of a wider structural problem and can only ever work at the margins.

**Question:** Should communities be expected to play a role in helping to tackle and/or raise some of the wider structural issues that are contributing to food poverty in their area? If yes, how can this happen in a way that is linked to broader efforts to tackle these issues? For example, Clinical Commissioning Group’s commissioning of health services.

**Sustainability**

Real change in disadvantaged communities takes time, it takes resource and it needs community work and community infrastructure to be stable, long-term and to be accountable to local people.

This creates a challenge for community development programmes that are of fixed duration. Some of our contributors commented that funders have to think about exit and legacy; communities do not: *'community development works for communities to be sustainable. Governments and programmes come and go'.*

*'There's high expectations on activism to burst from nowhere. But you need someone to give people a hand up'.*

These were the dominant views among those to whom we spoke. Many thought that real change needs an approach to funding that concentrates on processes, not outcomes and that provides a variety of funding streams to cover: community work education; core costs and salaries for community work; and small pots of money that can be handed directly to groups and even individuals to pay for room hire, refreshments and small-scale initiatives.

**Questions we want to ask next**

- Does branding get in the way of community work?
- Does teaching people to cope equal empowerment?
- When is it appropriate for communities to do stuff themselves and take responsibility locally and when is it not? How can communities negotiate this boundary?
- What does community look like when there is no money coming in?

**Next steps**

Over August and September we have been hosted by organisations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to hear from them about what’s needed for communities to have power and authority in their areas and what happens there.

To respond to the latest survey or to keep up with the research by signing up to the mailing list, visit the [‘Have Your Say’](#) page on Local Trust’s website.

**At a glance data summary**

This document draws on 40 interviews and conversations as well as 10 workshops and events that we observed or facilitated as part of our ‘Issues’ dialogue which took place between April and June 2017. It also reanalyses a further four interviews and six workshops and events carried out as part of the scoping stage in the research. As the research progresses, we are identifying others to whom we will be speaking.