Rapid Research COVID-19:

Community resilience or resourcefulness?

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SYNOPSIS: This research briefing builds on an initial review of the literature around community responses to disasters (Briefing 1: April 2020). Whilst being informed by some of the academic literature, it focuses directly on community responses to the COVID-19 pandemic on the ground. It aims to develop understanding of ideas about 'resourcefulness' as an alternative to narratives about 'resilience,' through specific examples of community responses to the current crisis.

Key points

- Discussions around community responses to COVID-19 often use the concept of individual or community resilience. Yet this idea implies 'coping with' or 'managing' difficult situations or the capacity to withstand shocks to the status quo.

- In contrast, resourcefulness suggests the more pro-active capacity to develop creative solutions to those systems shocks which are inherent in *de-stabilising macro-events like COVID-19*' (Briefing 1).

This briefing is the second in a new series seeking to understand how communities across England respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

Future briefings will be published throughout 2020 and 2021 to share early findings and learn from others exploring similar questions.

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- Communities have been resourceful in developing creative ways of (1) bringing both financial and human resources together to respond quickly and appropriately to community needs; (2) using skills and technical knowledge to implement alternative ways of working; (3) applying local/cultural knowledge to meet immediate needs whilst maintaining alternative visions for communities being even better places to live; and (4) promoting community groups' acknowledged role in mobilising, attracting and managing new resources.

Introduction

Briefing 1 (May 2020) ended with three questions for initial consideration, the first of which focused on the question of community resilience and the alternative idea of resourcefulness:

'How should we think about how different communities are responding to COVID-19? Is it a case of demonstrating and building community resilience, or is it highlighting something else, such as resourcefulness, or collaborative connections with other stakeholders and public authorities?'

This briefing explores this question in greater detail, drawing on the academic literature, but also the emerging findings of the Third Sector Research Centre (University of Birmingham) research for Local Trust into Big Local and wider community responses to COVID-19.

Resilience or resourcefulness?

The concept of resilience focuses on the ability of individuals, organisations or communities to prepare for, withstand and recover from adverse situations or significant shocks. It has long been used across a variety of fields, including ecology and ecosystems, child development and psychology, and mental health (Adger, 2000; Luthar et al, 2000; Mohaupt, 2009). It has also gained traction in broader community settings – though here with more of an emphasis on the importance of resilient 'places' and social networks rather than individuals (Zwiers et al, 2018; Gilchrist, 2019).

In policy terms, the UK government published an updated 'Community Resilience Development Framework' (Cabinet Office, 2019) as a tool for providing a strategic approach to community resilience. The document is, at least in part, a technical planning resource, but it acknowledges the role of 'empowered communities' in inter-agency Local Resilience Forums and introduces the policy language around responses to COVID-19: the three stages of prepare, respond, recover.

In one definition community resilience is seen as *'a coping system of a community to survive effectively in times of stress, crisis and emergencies'* (Doron, 2005: 184). The critical words here are '*coping*' and '*survival*' rather than any more positive concepts of agency, control or change. This can be criticised for placing the expectation on individuals and the community to adapt to adversity and crisis, rather than addressing either the circumstances which give rise to those challenges and difficulties in the first place, and the unequal resources available to respond to them. These are often assumed to be natural or inevitable, or left as unquestioned silences.

An alternative model of 'resourcefulness' offered by two academics aims to highlight *'both the uneven distribution of material resources and the associated inability of disadvantaged groups and communities to access the levers of social change'* (MacKinnon and Derickson (2013: 263). Instead, resourcefulness promotes the idea that communities have the capacity to engage in dialogue, develop alternative agendas and challenge existing

power relations. They also argue that resourcefulness should be seen as an ongoing process which *'cannot be understood as something communities possess to varying degrees. It is the act of fostering resourcefulness, not measuring it or achieving it, that should motivate policy and activism'* (ibid, p.264).

Resourcefulness appears to have particular relevance to the principles, ethos and objectives of capacity building and agency underpinning the Big Local programme:

'rather than being externally defined by government agencies and experts, resourcefulness emphasizes forms of learning and mobilisation based upon local priorities and needs as identified and developed by community activists and residents' (ibid, p.263).

Community resourcefulness

Mackinnon and Derickson identify **four elements of resourcefulness: resources, skillsets, knowledge and recognition**. These are used here to reflect on emerging findings from the research into community responses to COVID-19 in 25 study areas.

1. **Bringing financial and human resources to bear**, such as, for example, time, organising skills, grass roots relationships, and broader resources coming into the community from the voluntary and community sector and local authority.

The research indicates that the most common response in communities to the pandemic has been to mobilise people – in Big Local areas this has been the decision-making group of residents (the partnerships) and Big Local staff delivering the programme, to delivery partners who have been 'seconded' to local food banks, and to the wider (and previously not engaged) community. One of the study areas, for example, has signed up over 60 new volunteers and another around 40. Big Local capacity has been enhanced through organising and negotiating with others, but also through support via regular wellbeing calls to volunteers and active residents.

A number of Big Local areas have used their financial resources from the programme to support other community organisations in their response to COVID-19. The small grants process operating in one rural area, for example, has been streamlined to release money quickly to organisations working with vulnerable families. The flexible use of 'closed down' assets, such as Big Local community hubs, has also been significant – as a base for food storage, distribution and the co-ordination of volunteers.

Some local partnerships are using their resources and relationships to respond quickly to community needs. One has contributed its building, donated money and redeployed one of its paid workers in support of the local foodbank. Another is matching a donation from the local Round Table, working with local businesses and providing worker time to enable delivery of a hot meal seven days a week to the many homeless people now living in bed and breakfast accommodation. As a partnership board member stated: *'I think our history of showing up and being present allows us to really negotiate or strategically come alongside other key stakeholders at this time'.*

The community response to the crisis has been grounded in a web of existing relationships and trust between organisations and individuals. This has been led in one area through a 'triangle' of support: the Big Local partnership, the community centre and the Parish Council. The human resource here is both paid staff and community volunteers who are part of the Big Local partnership. There is also strong linkage with the local authority as a result of a locality-based community development worker who is part of the Big Local partnership and runs activities from the community centre.

2. **Using skills and technical knowledge** to facilitate the adoption and implementation of alternative ways of working.

One of the biggest changes, and challenges, brought about by the COVID-19 lockdown has been the need to think creatively about communication mechanisms. The speed with which many Big Local partnerships, for example, have moved their discussions and decision making online through video conferencing illustrates great adaptability. Communities are also re-creating their regular activities through online platforms. There are many examples of coffee mornings and knit and natter groups now meeting through Zoom. In one area this has been extended to weekly Facebook-based interactive youth clubs, with widespread appreciation from children and parents alike.

Some communities in the Big Local programme have made use of access to free subscriptions alongside tireless digital support from Local Trust, whilst others have called on people locally to get all partnership members online. For most this is a new way of working and it may have benefits beyond the immediate crisis. In one area a local 'connectivity' scheme will enable active community members to move towards becoming paperless – documents will be uploaded to a members-only webpage - and people can join in meetings via a large screen if they cannot attend in person.

Some partnerships in the Big Local programme have also tapped into locally available technical knowledge to ensure that responses have been legally compliant whilst not becoming 'bogged down' in procedure. One local project was able through the technical skills of its Director to put in place a safe and secure platform for its young people to participate in theatre rehearsals, productions and webinars by the time that schools closed down.

Community groups, partnerships and key individuals are harnessing and using their knowledge for the benefit of local communities. A faith-based worker in one area described how they have responded with online financial and emotional support for communities – alongside developing a session on how to manage finances, *'we're concerned about emotional health and wellbeing. We've done some training on mental health and the emotional implications – setting up a WhatsApp group and pulling people together'*.

3. **Applying local/cultural knowledge** to meet immediate needs and consequent alternative visions for communities being even better places to live.

Local knowledge has been significant in responding to the needs of vulnerable groups not covered by central or local government emergency schemes, seen, for example, with homeless people in one area and families with young children in another. Further, a number of Big Local areas have used that knowledge to act as a conduit between local authority provision and community access to that support.

One Big Local area has enabled informal neighbour-to-neighbour support to meet needs across its diverse communities. Its model of recruiting street/community connectors has helped in responding to information needs of those for whom English is not their first language and who may be particularly vulnerable.

Areas in the Big Local programme are already beginning to think about the need to re-prioritize their plans based on current developments, and what they know now. For one this has highlighted an immediate need to push on with online training. Another is considering the potential need for investment in employability and skills, alongside wellbeing support.

Several Big Locals have talked about how COVID-19 has unearthed a local community spirit, as illustrated by volunteers coming forward and the new friendships formed just while waiting in a queue at the supermarket. However, COVID-19 has also illustrated tensions in

communities. In one of the non-Big Local areas, there are real concerns around community cohesion and the need for work to bring people together to start now.

One Big Local partnership member reflects on whether the crisis will lead eventually to different approaches reaching new people: *'I think that current COVID responses are an opportunity actually to kind of kick-start new ways… because our method of work and engagement has to change in this moment, our audience also has changed….So, I think a wider reach is definitely an exciting thing'.*

4. **Promoting recognition** of communities' right to mobilise, attract and manage new resources.

The crisis has broadened the group of actively involved residents. In many areas there is hope that those who have 'come out of the woodwork' will recognise their value and stay involved. There is evidence of a new self-confidence amongst many groups, often helped by the status conferred by others. For example, in one area the Big Local and its Locally Trusted Organisation are seen as the key points of connectivity for the community and for broader voluntary sector infrastructure, the District and the County Councils: *'[they]* **are** *the infrastructure – everything down to them…wouldn't be like this if not for Big Local'.*

This may also be happening in areas not involved in the Big Local programme. In one urban area, a community group observed that: *'Since COVID-19 [the local authority] are sitting up. The council have also sent some of their workers to help with food packing and things like that. They would never have done that before… They know the value'.*

The extent to which the recent activity at community level continues and levers in further resources of people and money is not yet known. But the 'Big Local experience' may provide some starting points for re-imagining what this might look like:

'We've got literally hundreds of volunteers in all sorts of working groups who, while we speak, are networking and giving help to other people that they wouldn't perhaps have been able to do before … because they've got the tools and the wherewithal and we've given them the confidence to actually do it. And I think that's been the strength of Big Local all the way through this'.

There is thought to be an urgent need to demonstrate explicitly to policymakers this ability to mobilise resources. Local authorities are already planning their recovery strategies in terms of, for example, economic development and mental health. Yet there is no evidence that any of the 25 communities in this study are part of such planning processes.

Implications for learning about community responses to COVID-19, and further questions

This briefing has used the idea of resourcefulness to explore how communities are proactively drawing on their strengths and resources to respond to the effects of COVID-19 at a grass-roots level. The concept is useful in highlighting the agency to mobilise and take action within communities, but also in understanding this in the context of wider structures of power and resources.

The briefing has highlighted the different ways in which resourcefulness is being demonstrated. Many of the groups in the research have built upon the knowledge skills, relationships and infrastructure put in place through Big Local support over the last eight or more years. They have adjusted their working practices and have reprioritised their activities. They have also developed new learning, not least about the more hidden and intractable needs within their communities. As the research proceeds, it will be interesting to observe the extent to which this experience shapes future priorities. As one Big Local partnership member commented, prefiguring thoughts about longer term recovery: *'I don't want to return to the old normal. I want a new normal that is more inclusive'.*

Issues to be explored in future briefings will continue the discussion by focusing on:

- the nature of, and relationships between, 'informal' and 'formal' approaches to making things happen at community level,

- the possibilities for collaborative connections with the wider voluntary sector infrastructure and public bodies in the months ahead, and

- different understandings attached to volunteering vis-à-vis community action.

References

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We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place

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