‘Creative disruptors’ or community development workers?: community organising in the north of England

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Abstract:

The UK Coalition Government introduced a Community Organising (CO) project, based on the work of Saul Alinsky, as a central plank in its Big Society agenda in 2011. This paper explores some of the contradictions and conflicts experienced through the implementation of the CO project, from the perspective of the only higher education CO trainee host organisation. The historical context of organising in the UK is summarised and the main features of the CO project in terms of its philosophical and practice elements are outlined. An interacting systems analysis, illustrated by two case studies, is offered as a means to explore the conflicts within the CO role and those inherent within the wider CO project. Attention is drawn to the isolated working practices of COs and the contracted timescale expected for delivery of the project. The individually focussed CO is contrasted with collective networking approaches key to other CO practices. The paper concludes by contesting the newness of the CO approach and suggests that in implementation the English CO project is a diluted version of Alinsky’s model of CO and a less effective process than other frameworks for CO.

This paper addresses a need to explore the processes of community organising, as distinct from the expanding commentary and debate around the issue (see for example, Bunyan, 2012). We have a number of aims, including a discussion of the narrative of our collective
experiences of hosting community organisers as part of the Big Society funded programme. Firstly, we contextualise community organising in the United Kingdom (UK) within a historical global frame linking it to understandings of social innovation. The UK Big Society community organisers programme is outlined, including the four stages of the ‘listening process’, the central tenet of the approach. We discuss our role as host and the ways in which our approach differed from others. Drawing on two case studies of Big Society community organising in the North West of England, we explore the potential for Community Organizing to be seen as a social innovation.

We take Mulgan et al’s (2007: online) definition of social innovation as a starting point:

innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organisations whose primary purposes are social.

This definition and purpose is very much part of the conceptual underpinning of the Community Organising. We acknowledge that whilst there is a trend toward social innovation and an understanding of it, much less is written on how social innovation works in practice. We consider how Community Organising fits this frame. Below we paint a brief picture of Community Organising.

**The UK context of Community Organising**

Community organising (CO) has not featured prominently within UK community practice and has not previously been directly by government. However, the Big Society programme is not without historical antecedents. Its UK origins can be traced to the efforts of Neil Jameson, a Quaker social worker who visited the USA in 1987 to carry out research on vandalism and self-help. Through his studies, Jameson came into contact with the International Areas Foundation (IAF) originally set-up by Saul Alinsky. His approach to community organising is centred around employing collective power for social change and justice (Chambers, 2003). Working in Chicago in the United States, Alinsky created a ‘backyard revolution’ to ‘restore dignity to poor communities by showing them how to organise’ against organisations with power (Ledwith, 2005:88). In 1988 the Citizen Organising Foundation (COF) was formed in the UK.
The COF initially established groups in Merseyside and Bristol expanding to Sheffield, Birmingham, North Wales and then East London by the mid-1990s. These early CO programmes were successful in implementing a number of Alinsky informed initiatives, campaigning for bus shelters in poor areas and traffic lights in dangerous areas, for example (Furbey et al., 1997; Warren, 2009). CO in a number of these localities drew upon large membership bases and were successful in identifying and developing new leaders, traditionally left out and marginalised within the public political sphere (Warren, 2009). However, by the late 90s the COF was plagued by a variety of issues, not least in terms of organisation, governance and funding. Reflecting on these challenges (e.g. Bunyan, 2010;; Furbey et al., 1997), it has been argued that too much was attempted too soon. Space precludes a fuller picture being painted of the development of community organizing but in 2010 Big Society thinking became a key plank of the Coalition government.

**The ‘Big Society’ Community Organising programme**

The government funded ‘Big Society’ community organising programme marks a distinct break in UK based community organizing. Traditionally a radical and left-wing approach (OPM, 2010) that operates outside of and unfinanced by governments, the coalition-funded programme is government-sponsored. It is the flagship programme of the Big Society and indeed one of the most central aspects (Rowson et al., 2012). Launched in 2011, the four-year programme has £15 million funding from 2011 until 2015 and is an England only programme. In 2010 David Cameron launched the programme as a ‘neighbourhood army’ that would be:

> Trained with the skills they need to identify community 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 (Cameron, 2010:online)

Taylor (2012:260) offers three possible means of analysing the current government’s use of community organising within policy: communities as service delivery agents and providers; an approach to equality between communities as community organisers support deprived neighbourhoods and; ‘unsettling the status quo’. This analysis is useful within this paper as we will discuss later.
Following a successful tender process, although in the midst of much criticism (see for example, Social Enterprise, 2011), the programme was developed and run by Locality (an organisation that involved the merger of the Development Trust Association and the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres1 in November 2010). Locality’s consortium of members work at ‘grassroots’ level within neighbourhoods in England (Locality, 2011). Indeed, this aspect of the programme is seen as a key strength of the programme (Imagine, 2013). Within the programme, the government funded community organisers work at neighbourhood level identifying local issues and leaders, and turn listening within neighbourhoods into action. Locality’s bid aims to deliver a ‘home grown’ modern version of community organisation for the twenty-first century. Their approach draws on the work of Alinsky (1989), Paulo Freire (1996) and Santos de Morais (Carmen and Sobrado,2000) and is situated at grass-roots level (Taylor, 2012). Before outlining the CO programme a brief introduction to Alinsky may be useful. This is a summary of his thinking.

Alinsky was inspired by Marxist philosophy and located social issues such as crime, inequality within the capitalist economic system. His view was that radical revolution was a necessity in terms of shifting economic, political and social structures. The revolution aims to mobilise those who did not have or want more into action, thereby working with the middle class who have some access to power and can align themselves with others, but see the need for change. Alinsky talked about infiltration and the need to use power to justify the ends. Community organizing could be seen as a step towards this revolution as community organisers could gain power for people through aligning interests of the community. Notable contemporary proponents of this approach include Barack Obama and it is associated with the recent Occupy Wall Street Movement.

In looking at the US model, there are clear differences in countries and we may question the usage of a CO model within a Coalition government. Within the UK programme, five hundred full-time paid community organisers continue to be trained and hosted by organisations across England. Community organisers are recruited in cohorts (a total of ten cohorts across the four-year period) and typically each host can recruit between one and five community organisers. Following a host led recruitment process, the community organisers embark on a training programme: a combination of a three day residential at the beginning of the employment, support from hosts and online training and mentoring.
The majority of the training is provided by Locality’s main partner in the programme, RE-generate Trust. This social action charity has developed an approach to community organising over ten years, and the training programme emphasises listening to people in the neighbourhoods, networking, dialogue and reflection. The training programme lasts for fifty-one weeks and is in two parts: Foundations of Organising and Go-Deeper. Foundations of Community Organising is accredited by the Open College Network (level 2 and 3) and is focused on the ‘Root Solution, Listening Matters’ approach (RE-generate Trust, 2012). The training includes the aims and practice of community organising, listening to individuals and groups, reflective practice and issues of power and influence. Go-Deeper is the second stage and the range of training options are delivered by Locality’s partner organisations and include social media training and a post-graduate qualification.

The Big Society approach to community organising is fundamentally based on RE-generate’s community animateur approach and works with a process of listening through to the formation of community holding teams. We provide detail of the process as it was undertaken by the MMU community organisers. The listening process involves asking a series of questions that are detailed on a ‘listening sheet’. These focus on an individuals’ loves and concerns about the community, ideas for change and a vision for the future of the community. The community organiser also asks the person if they have an ability or desire to be engaged in issues and voice their views, and then they would like to be involved in meeting others. Table 1 details the four stages of community organising as the community organiser begins with listening to individuals and this develops to group meetings, and then the establishment of a community holding team. We return to a consideration of the four stages of the process in the section on tensions.

**Our role as a programme Host**

Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) was one of the hosts within the first cohort (the Kick-starters). Other hosts in this pilot group were all Locality members and included St

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2 For more detailed information concerning ‘Root Solutions, Listening Matters’ please see the RE-generate Trust website, [http://www.regeneratetrust.org/](http://www.regeneratetrust.org/)
Peter’s Partnership in Tameside, Keystone Development Trust in Norfolk and Marsh Farm in Luton. MMU are the only university to have hosted community organisers to date and our approach differed in a number of ways. Firstly, we restricted the application process to students recently graduating from four undergraduate and postgraduate programmes with a focus on community practice.

The second difference in our approach was to give the community organisers a choice as to where they located their community organising role. For other hosts, who operate within a defined geographical area, this choice was not an option. However, MMU is part of the wider community of Greater Manchester and Cheshire. MMU forms part of a wider group of Universities in the North West, and is part of the Manchester Corridor positioned as delivering within the knowledge economy. The Corridor is a unique business location, at the heart of Manchester’s knowledge economy. Taking its role as a modern University seriously, MMU has a sustainable agenda and works in partnership with local communities, employers and businesses in the North West. The majority of students are drawn from this area and a key vision (to develop world class professionals) feeds back into professional practice in the region. Issues such as public health, community engagement and citizenship are key issues here. The university has campuses in Manchester city centre, south Manchester and in Crewe, Cheshire, and works in partnership with many networks and organisations in the region.

The third difference was our approach to the training. Rather than impose a linear training programme, the community organisers commenced the Go-Deeper element alongside the Foundations of Training. The Go-Deeper training for the MMU community organisers was a postgraduate certificate in either community psychology or youth and community studies. Furthermore, MMU directly employed its trainee organisers unlike the other hosts (with the exception of St Peter’s Partnership). Locality took the decision to employ the majority of community organisers in August 2011, and by this point MMU had already advertised the post on the previously agreed salary level. Two of the trainees had prior experience in community engagement, and all had studied some aspects of community practice.
Prior to the community organisers undertaking the training, we discussed possible locations for their work. Imagine is the learning and evaluation advisory team for the Community Organisers Programme. Their briefing paper based on preliminary findings identified value in the mixed approach of community organisers living in and outside of the host neighbourhoods (Imagine, 2013). However, for the first cohort there was significant discussion with Locality about whether community organisers should be ‘parachuted in to’ an area or already reside there. One of the MMU community organisers lived in the area where he worked, and the other three took the decision to work in areas away from their homes. Two MMU community organisers worked as a small team in one area, although this changed later in the year, as one found the commute difficult and re-located her work to the area where she resided.

Three of the MMU community organisers were based in Greater Manchester within Labour led local authorities. The fourth community organiser was located in a Conservative-led local authority in Cheshire. All of the areas where the community organisers worked have a history of previous and existing community engagement work and a strong voluntary and community sector. Manchester is increasingly a city of inequality and diversity. Recent census figures attest to the cosmopolitan nature of the city (143 languages spoken) which enrich culture but bring other issues to the fore (ONS, 2012). The city continues to have a significant number of neighbourhoods that are recognised as high deprivation areas (Manchester City Council, 2011).

The Cheshire setting is again an unequal setting with a rapidly increasing ageing population (ONS, 2012). Although predominantly an affluent and largely rural area, the data masks sixteen areas of deprivation that are within the twenty per cent most deprived neighbourhoods of the country. Like Greater Manchester, the area has increasing levels of diversity with a large polish migrant community (ONS, 2012). Having outlined the community organiser programme within England and our role within it, we return to an exploration of it in terms of social innovation.

Mulgan et al (2007) note the dearth of work exploring how social innovation can work. They describe a ‘connected difference’ theory of social innovation which emphasizes three key
dimensions of most important social innovations:

- they are usually new combinations or hybrids of existing elements, rather than being wholly new in themselves.
- putting them into practice involves cutting across organisational, sectoral or disciplinary boundaries.
- they leave behind compelling new social relationships between previously separate individuals and groups which matter greatly to the people involved, contribute to the diffusion and embedding of the innovation, and fuel a cumulative dynamic whereby each innovation opens up the possibility of further innovations.

Applying this framework to the CO programme based in England, we can see that whilst it was a hybrid of existing elements the work of cutting across organizational boundaries caused problems. Indeed, applying a system analysis to the project problematizes the nature of the relationships

**A systems analysis**

One way to think about the community organising project is as a series of interacting systems that each consists of various actors and social practices (Wandersman et al, 2008). These systems (summarised below in Table 2) work separately and together, exposing contradictions and inherent conflicts, which in turn have a direct impact on the experiences of the community organisers. The three systems are the State System, the community organiser Delivery System, and the Existing System of community development and engagement.
We experienced the interactions between the three systems (state, existing infrastructure and delivery) as collaborative, cooperative or conflicting at different times in the process. Conflict between and within each system made it difficult for the community organisers to work within their role revealed inherent contradictions within the overall programme.

A ‘new’ approach

The Big Society community organising process assumes newness – organisers mobilise through listenings and generate new connections. This approach may be criticised in the same way that regeneration professionals often do not live in the communities they are working with (Hoggett, 1997). The community organisers with no prior knowledge of a

Table 2: A systems analysis of the community organising project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System</th>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>• Office of Civil Society ministers and civil servants</td>
<td>Policy innovation, commissioning an monitoring of the community organising programme (and other place based policies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• MPs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Locality's Programme Management Team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existing community</td>
<td>• Local authorities and other public bodies</td>
<td>Resource allocation based on assessed need at neighbourhood level, community consultations, community development work focused on developing local groups and supporting capacity building, funding etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development infrastructure</td>
<td>• Voluntary and community sector organisations (local, regional and national)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Local community activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Local universities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>• ‘Locality’ programme lead</td>
<td>Facilitation of and support for implementation of the community organising project. Listening to local people, ensuring adherence to the approach, budgeting and evaluation of the model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organising delivery</td>
<td>• Lead training agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Host organisations (e.g. Manchester Metropolitan University)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Community organisers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Individual citizens engaged by programme</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Community may unknowingly making connections already in place or upset existing relationships and structures.

Community development approaches work explicitly in engaging and leveraging social capital (Gilchrist, 2009). A community development worker is engaged in supporting people to make new connections with existing structures, outside of the immediate community. This bridging capital is significantly important for the community members to build alliances outside of the community yet with understandings of history and context. Social innovation requires good connectors for success – an element missing here.

References


