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**Now you see it... ..now you don't:
a review of rural community organising in England**

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Abstract

This working paper provides an overview of Community Organising in England, in 2013. The research begins with a brief overview of the origins, and 'parallel histories' of, and approaches to, community organising and development, placing this within the context of continuity and change in UK Government policies for community engagement and social action. The findings and subsequent discussion provide a commentary on different community organising approaches and programmes in the 21st century.

The primary focus of the paper is on the relatively neglected subject of rural community organising (as the literature and practice has been predominantly urban) in order to trigger discussion on how to organise in rural communities in the current policy environment. 'Rural communities' are defined - using a long-standing criterion of areas with settlements of less than 10,000 population (Defra, 2004 and Commission for Rural Communities, 2007). Although the detail and focus relate to rural England, many of the principles and themes will be of broader interest to urban practitioners both in the UK and internationally.

Keywords

Community development, community organising, learning, rural communities.

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I welcome constructive feedback and further discussion on this paper:

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Introduction

“Across the UK there are the full-time equivalent of about 20,000 Community Development Workers, including many who use a Community Development approach as part of another job” (CLG, 2006: 4).

Community Development has a long history in the UK (Craig et al: 2011). Yet its value base and methods are contested. On the one hand there is a tradition (stretching back to its colonial origins) of promoting self-help (Twelvetrees: 2002) founded on an analysis of community pathology (Batten and Batten: 1967). Subsequently, through the short lived Community Development Projects in the 1970's, a more politicised analysis emerged (Curno: 1978), which stressed the importance of community engagement in political processes – and challenged the concept of community pathologies: arguing instead that poverty and inequality had fundamentally structural causes (Craig et al: 2011) which needed to be addressed.

Community Organising, as a particular model of working, has more radical origins (Alinsky: 1971) but equally is a relatively recent import from the USA. Early approaches to organising in the UK, whilst attempting to retain their radicalism, struggled to take root outside specific areas of this country (in particular the cities of London, Liverpool and Bristol) and transmuted into a concept of broad based organising: drawing on inter-faith action (Dinham et al: 2009) which included elements of more traditional community development approaches – rather than the ‘purist’ American model.

Debates on community development and organising are, however, a matter of more than historical and academic interest. Whilst the New Labour administrations promoted community development, or rather a more loosely defined ‘community engagement’ (CLG: 2006), the current Coalition – expressed an interest in social action and the Alinsky model for community interventions and has funded Community Organiser's and awarded the contract, following a bidding process, to manage this programme to Locality.

On the surface, this seems a radical, bold – and perhaps unexpected – shift in government thinking about citizenship and citizen action (Conservative Party 2010; Bingham 2013) – but one that has revived debates on models of working with communities.

This current paper places these debates in an historical context: drawing on both community development and organising literature, it explores debates on the values and principles which underpin each methodology and asks:

- Can models of working with communities be ‘imported’ from different cultural and political contexts (Durose et al: undated) without adaption to UK circumstances locally and nationally?
- Can community development and organising in the UK ‘learn from each other’ or, as seems to be inherent in current debates (McCabe; 2010) are their values and methods diametrically opposed?
- Further, much of the literature on both models has an urban focus (Minkler: 2005). Thus, the current paper asks can organising develop and be sustained in rural communities?

As noted, the paper provides a short overview of the history of both community development and organising and the current state of play in organising in rural communities. The final discussion explores the challenges confronting those engaged in rural community practice and the extent to with

community development and organising are in conflict – or opposition – as models of working or whether there is shared learning and synergies.

Methodology

The paper presents illustrative findings. The research is mainly in the form of a literature review of published practice, 'grey' and academic work. This is supported by feedback from some 20 key stakeholders, including Community Organisers and those supporting or hosting them. Individuals were contacted using 'snowballing' techniques and on-going discussion encouraged by the use of blogs and tweets. These conversations invited participants to explore the commonalities and differences between community organising and community development and to suggest – practically – how, or whether, each may inform the other. The primary and secondary data was analysed using thematic analysis methods (Braun and Clark 2006).

There are a number of issues which are beyond the scope of the current paper. For instance, Jupp (2012: 3031, citing Martin et al, 2007) hints at the role of women in organising; commenting that their activism and activities "create progressive change in the lives of women, their families and communities". Further, the contribution of women to volunteering is well documented as is their significant input to rural community development (Wright, in Buller and Wright, 1990; Moseley, 2003; MacDonald in Szakos and Szakos, 2008). However, whilst there is a long tradition of feminist community work theory and practice (Dominelli 2006), substantially less is known in terms of both the USA and UK on the gendering of community organising. It has not been possible, given time and resources, to explore the gender dimension in community organising although this would be a fruitful area for future research.

The origins of community organising

Bracht et al (1999: 86) offer the following definition of community organization (from an American perspective), that it is:

"a planned process to activate a community to use its own social structures and any available resources to accomplish community goals decided primarily by community representatives and generally consistent with local attitudes and values. Strategically planned interventions are organized by local groups or organizations to bring about intended social or health changes".

Community organising has its origins in the work of American reformers, philanthropists and the activities of "nineteenth century populist movements such as the Southern Tenant Farmworker Union and the Non-partisan League" in the United States (Hess, 1999 online). Lindeman (1921: p14-15) raised the possibility of democratic "community-wide organization through which the entire community might express its thought and see that its will is done". During the 1920s a number of influential thinkers (including Mary Parker Follett and Grace Coyle) came to the fore and were associated with the American educator, social critic and political activist John Dewey (1859 - 1952). In these early stages of its development Lindeman defined community organization as:

“those phases of social organization which constitute a conscious effort on the part of a community to control its affairs democratically, and to secure the highest services from its specialists, organizations, agencies, and the institutions by means of recognized interrelations” (1921:173).

Their ideas crossed the Atlantic and surfaced in UK in the early to mid-1980's as a result of “the influence of American literature” (Craig et al, 2011: 3).

Saul Alinsky “pioneered the first broad-based community alliance in the Back of the Yards neighbourhood of Chicago in 1939...which has subsequently been developed to foster longer-lasting, larger-scale urban alliances by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and related networks across the USA (Wills, 2012: 115). Fisher et al (2012: 194) contend that “dominant models of the era” – including Alinsky's approach – “were all characterized by militant strategies and tactics, a radical analysis of community problems, and expanded frameworks designed to mobilize more people in support of democratic and just solutions.” Stall and Stoecker (2012) highlight the centrality of self-interest and inevitable conflict; so that for Alinsky (1971: 116) community mobilisation resulted from rubbing “raw the resentments of the people in the local community”. Alinsky distilled his experience into the 1971 book - *Rules for Radicals: A pragmatic primer for realistic radicals*.

In any discussion about organizing it is important to record the continuing influence of the Brazilian writer and practitioner – Paulo Freire. According to Ledwith (2005: 53), Freire believed that community-based action around “education can never be neutral: its political function is to liberate or domesticate. In other words, the process of education either creates critical, autonomous thinkers or it renders people passive and unquestioning”. This echoes Derounian (1998: 43) that there are ‘winners and losers’ as a result of community-based action.

In the United States there is a second - parallel - tradition to organizing, of community building which is closer to UK community development models. Minckler and Wallerstein (2005: 26) differentiate community building from organizing in the following ways: “community organization is defined as the process by which community groups are helped to identify common problems or goals, mobilize resources, and develop and implement strategies for reaching the goals they collectively have set.” Organizing, in these terms, can be primarily conflictual and confrontational

In contrast, Minckler and Wallerstein (2005: 44) go on to argue that community building operates “within an overall approach that focuses on community growth and change from the inside through increased group identification; discovery, nurture, and mapping of community assets; and creation of critical consciousness.” Further, Fraser and Kick (2005: 38) believe that in reality “the new generation of community-building initiatives...are reliant on neighbourhood-based communities being able to develop acumen in working with the local government and the private sector.” Community building is, therefore focused more on attaining consensus, and the development of partnerships (rather than movements) to address issues.

Within this overall typology, Rothman (1974) identified three distinct types of organizing: First, Locality Development that “is community building through improving the process by which things get done” (The Community Tool Box online); in which change objectives are sought and identified through community consensus based on common interests. This, more consensual, approach is exemplified by the work of rural community development workers employed by English county-based Rural

Community Councils/ACRE (a national umbrella body), assisting with the development of community-led plans and, in 2013, Neighbourhood Development Plans. This approach is also evident in rural patch-based initiatives from the 1980s, for example the Leominster Marches Project, working in particular neighbourhoods in market towns.

Rothman (1974) presents a second type of Community Organizing related to Social Action: used by groups and organisations seeking to alter institutional policies or to change the distribution of power. US civil rights groups typified this approach and were often deliberately abrasive and confrontational, whilst practising non-violent direct action.

Social Policy, or Community, Planning is the third form of organizing cited by Rothman; whereby experts “design programs for communities” and “provide leadership” (Brieger, 2006 online). This is typically an agency-centred (expert) approach – for example the intervention of planning authorities to facilitate community regeneration. Professor Robert Chambers (1998: 131) has warned of the dangers of the “Professional Prison” in which a professional can become isolated to the point at which s/he “flatters uppers and flattens lowers” – that is professionals enforce their own reality, whilst local people are ignored or blamed. This is encapsulated in the following quote from an Informal settler Kwa-Zulu, Natal, South Africa ‘Developers just came overnight, they just arrived. They did not tell the people. They made us think that they were coming to save us’ (CRIAA, 1994: 16 cited in Botes and van Rensburg, 2000).

The origins of community development

In contrast to ‘indigenous’ organising in America, Wright (cited in Buller and Wright, 1990: 45) note the beginnings of community development in the context of British colonial administration in Africa during the 1940s, where “newly appointed community development officers were to work at village level”. One Colonial Office ‘Memorandum on Education in Tropical Africa’ (quoted by Brokensha and Hodge, 1969: p27-8) specifically promoted “the training of the people in the management of their own affairs and the inculcation of the ideals of citizenship and service”. Korten (1980) notes a Ford Foundation¹ funded pilot project introduced in Uttar Pradesh (India) in 1948, brought to prominence the idea of community-based work in the post-colonial era. Batten and Batten (1967) articulated the non-directive approach whereby a worker attempts to enable a community “to decide for themselves what their needs are: what, if anything, they are willing to do to meet them; and how they can best organize, plan, and act to carry their project through (cited in Craig et al, 2011: 34-35).

As noted, this ‘community pathology’ model of community development was challenged in the 1970’s by a more radical analysis, developed by the Community Development Projects of the structural causes of inequality and an emphasis on a politicised role for community development as both ‘in and against the state’. (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group: 1980)

What emerges, therefore, from the literature is an inherent tension between community building, organising and development, between the use of conflict and confrontation (on the one hand) conflict

¹ The Ford Foundation was established in 1936 to support “ scientific, educational and charitable purposes, all for the public welfare” <http://www.fordfoundation.org/about-us/history>

and consensus building (on the other hand) as tools for change. It is this tension and the potential learning across approaches that the remainder of this paper explores.

Community development and organising policy context

Community development and organising in the UK have not evolved in a policy vacuum. Whilst the transition, certainly at a rhetorical level, from community development to social action, heralded by the Coalition Government in 2010 (Cabinet Office: 2010) may seem seismic, there are continuities between New Labour and the current administration's approach to 'community'.

There are certain parallels between the current localism agenda and the previous Governments concepts of double devolution and 'Communities in Control' (CLG: 2008 a): moving decision making from central and local government to communities and neighbourhoods. Both administrations have had a shared concern that statutory agencies and government (both local and national) had become too removed: citizens/communities as part of the solution rather than part of the problem (Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy: 2001: Localism Act 2011).

There are other striking similarities: the emphasis over the last 15 years on asset transfer (Quirk: 2007), 'strengthened' in the Localism Act (2011) through new community rights: to challenge, manage or buy. There is a continued, if accelerated, emphasis on the role of social enterprise in the delivery of health, social care and other public services (DTI 2002; HM Government; 2012). The concept of participatory budget setting at the local/neighbourhood level has been retained (CLG: 2008 b) as has the emphasis on promoting volunteering: from New Labour's 'Building Britain's Future (2009) through to the current National Citizen Service programme for school pupils.

This sense of continuity, however, should not mask the changes that have happened post the 2010 general election. At an ideological level, there was a strong communitarian focus, certainly in the early years, within new Labour. The emphasis was placed, not on a fundamental change in the relationship between state and citizen, but on 'modernising' that relationship through 'community engagement' in decision making. The austerity driven agenda of the current administration is, more explicitly, focused on the role of the citizen – and communities – in 'rolling back the state' and transfer of responsibility, services and assets from the state to citizen (Conservative Party: 2010). At a very practical level, area based Initiatives and ring-fenced funding (much of which supported community development) have all but disappeared and the strategic partnership arrangements put in place by New Labour to facilitate dialogue between Government and the community sector have been phased out.

However, stepping beyond the political and policy agendas, criticisms have been made of the recent history of community development in the UK. It is all too easy to suggest that the Coalition's emphasis on social action is an attempt to distance itself from New Labour's interest in community development (or at least engagement) models. Yet, perhaps there is a more fundamental challenge. Community development has been seen as moving from the radical elements of its tradition to a co-opted approach to managing conflict between the state (both centrally and locally) (McCabe: 2010) and becoming a de-politicised tool for 'customer relations' in regeneration programmes (Powell and Geoghegan: 2004).

Indeed, there are those that have welcomed the change in language from community development to social action (Chanan and Miller: 2010). Community organising can be a means, as envisaged by Alinsky (1971), for affecting radical change and challenging existing power structures in ways that a consensual community development model never could (Coote: 2010). However, is this a challenge that can promote mutual learning between the different approaches – or one that has resulted in retrenchment into ideological, and potentially sterile, stances?

Community organising: transition to the UK

In understanding current controversies it is important to offer an overview of community organizing (USA) plus development of its UK variant, organising.

In this regard the importance of faith-based support for organising and the development of broad based movements clearly surfaces in the literature (Stokes and Knight, 1997). Furbey et al, 1997: 141), for example, note Church of England “financial support since 1990 for the development of Community Organising in several English cities” (e.g. Bristol and Merseyside). Whilst Bunyan (2010: 116), a former organizer in East London, states that “faith institutions constitute the foundation” of London Citizens...“one of the largest citizen-based organizations in the country” (ibid, 2010: 111). He goes on to show (ibid, 116) that of London Citizens 88 institutional paying members, 61% are faith bodies e.g. Buddhist, Pentecostal, Mosques, Methodists...and that of 14 types of member organisations 55% are faith based; with Roman Catholic parishes and groups far and away the most prevalent (31).

Whilst broad based movements have been predominantly urban, Faith in Rural Communities (2005) also noted “the important role played by the minister in visiting, organising and being there” (Farnell et al, 2010:7). Church goers expressed a clear motivational link between faith and action. In “rural England as a whole there are 9,639 Anglican churches, 2,690 Methodist churches, 506 Baptist chapels and numerous Roman Catholic, United Reformed Church and Congregational churches” (ibid, 2010: 15). That is a substantial resource – in terms of buildings, land, people and their skills – to harness for organising and organisers. More than 6,500 Church of England parishes now provide services for the elderly, schoolchildren, parents and new immigrants, a 2013 study by the Church Urban Fund shows. And 80% reported that parishioners give up spare time “to provide informal help to people struggling with issues such as isolation, family breakdown, drug abuse, domestic violence or spiralling debt.” (Bingham, 2013)

A DEMOS report Faithful Providers (2013) “found little evidence to confirm critics’ fears about faith group service providers: that their main motivation is proselytising, they are exclusivist and they discriminate. Rather, faithful providers are highly motivated and effective, and often serve as the permanent and persistent pillars of community action within local communities.” This suggests that, when funding runs dry and short-term programmes are no more, faith-based community action can persist and be sustained. A healthy reservoir of faith-based organisers and activists can help counter the problem identified by Bishop and Phillips (2004: 247) whereby “active participation” diminishes over time “to the stalwart few”.

In 2014 it is important to recognise that London Citizens carries on this tradition of broad based organising and “has more than a decade of organising experience under its belt...The alliance has grown considerably...and now includes 200 different member institutions including religious groups, trade union branches, schools and community groups.” (Wills, 2012a: 115). “Community organizing approaches understand community intervention primarily as a process of organizing aggrieved or disadvantaged groups to make demands on the larger community for resources, recognition, or broader social change.” (Sites et al, 2012: 40). Organisers have over time accused community development approaches and practitioners of rendering people dependent, “passive and unquestioning”. Which leads back to Freire’s concern that working with communities may lead to them becoming “passive and unquestioning”. Freire’s is a Marxist account, as opposed to Alinsky’s – that evolved into a ‘radical’ stance, of holding the powers that be to account rather than pursuing the overthrow of capitalism.

Setting aside such ideological debates, it is important to place rural organising in context and acknowledge the key infrastructure role played in rural development by three institutions: the Church, Rural Community Councils and Parish and Town Councils.

A history of rural organising

It is worth pausing to reflect on the way that English rural community-based work has evolved over time. The first county-based campaigning charity – Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (RCC) – came into being in 1921. There are now 38 RCCs/ACRE county branches under the umbrella of the umbrella of ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England). This federation is now known as RCAN (the Rural Community Action Network). All RCCs have employed Community Development Workers since the 1970s. Some (Cornwall, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire RCCs) have recently hosted Community Organisers (as part of the Locality-organised programme). This hints at a point developed later in this paper – that CO and CD coexist, cross-over, overlap and have fuzzy boundaries.

The Skeffington Report (1970) is generally viewed as a watershed in its encouragement of community contributions to town and country planning. And as a result of Skeffington, RCC Countryside Officers have worked alongside village groups to foster self-help since 1973. This approach exemplifies a self-help rather than political engagement model; something which is reinforced by the fact that, since they were established in the early 20th century, RCCs significantly depended on grants from the exchequer, distributed by the Development Commission, in all its iterations.

The trajectory of English rural policy has consistently promoted community-based approaches. The Conservative Government’s Rural White Paper (1995. 2) recognised that responsibility “starts with individuals, families and local communities. We will encourage local initiative and voluntary action and we will involve rural people in more of the decisions which affect their daily lives.”

New Labour picked up the mantle with their 2000 Our countryside: the future White Paper. This brought in funding for a Vital Villages programme and, again, emphasised people “in rural areas being fully involved in developing their community, safeguarding its valued features, and shaping the

decisions that affect them.” (ibid, 2000: 145). Thence to the UK Coalition Government’s 2012 Rural Statement: villages are “in many ways, the embodiment of the Government’s vision for the Big Society. They have a strong tradition of local people identifying their own needs and addressing these through their own locally-led action.” This point is supported by a (personal communication from an academic who argues that the Government’s localism agenda is driven by rural imagery and an idealised view of rural communities.

The notion of a Big Society has been operationalised in part through the 2011 Localism Act. Then-Decentralisation Minister, Greg Clark, on page 1 of the Plain English Guide to the Localism Bill (CLG: November 2011) argued “that the best means of strengthening society is not for central government to try and seize all the power and responsibility for itself. It is to help people and their locally elected representatives to achieve their own ambitions.” The English Community Organisers Programme managed by Locality grew directly from Government commitment to social action and localism.

The Community Organisers Programme, akin to many rurally based community initiatives, has gained cross party support. The Localism Act presents people and politicians alike, with a framework to advance positive community involvement in modelling the national decision making process. However - not all local problems have local causes – or therefore solutions.

This brief history of English rural community-based action can be neatly summed up in the title to Ian Scott’s 1985 book: *The periphery is the centre*; that is to say, (rural) community-based work has progressively moved centre stage....certainly in terms of rhetoric.

Historically, Parish and town Councils have also played a key role in supporting direct work with their communities in rural areas. Since 1894 some 9,000 parish and town councils have existed across mainly rural areas of England, and are able to precept (locally tax) to support community ventures. Some employ their own community development staff e.g. Bradfield Parish Council (Sheffield), Sedgefield Town Council in County Durham; Stirchley and Brookside Parish Council, Telford; and Oldland Parish Council (South Gloucestershire). The roles and responsibilities of parish councils have been extended through provisions in the Coalition Government’s Localism Act 2011, in particular; as well as, more broadly through the Big Society and localism agendas. As just one example: where “there is a town or Parish Council that is the qualifying body for leading a neighbourhood plan.” (Locality and Urban Vision Enterprise 2012: 2). Such community-generated plans can carry statutory force and determine types and locations of future development. Queens Park has recently become London’s first community/parish council, and Birmingham is also parished at the edges of the city; but the majority of urban areas are not represented by parish councils. There might also be an issue around (longstanding) rural infrastructure – such as local councils - to support community development and organising. Most official estimates suggest that “19.1% of England’s population live in rural areas” (Commission for Rural Communities, 2010: 16); it therefore appears that relative to population rural COs (under the Locality-sponsored scheme) are underrepresented. This then leads on to the question, “why”? GRCC (personal communication, 18.1.2013) suggest that rural capacity may be relatively high so that there is less need for COs than in urban areas. A staff member at Kirkgate Arts (personal communication, 2013) agreed, for example, that Cockermonth’s community is “already pretty engaged”.

However, an academic correspondent (personal communication, 2013) contends that many of the needs of rural people “are not met by existing forms of governance, partly because of the conservative approach to local government which does not allow ordinary people an effective voice. Good rural community organising - bringing people together around issues and needs which concern them at local level - offers them both the voice to express these needs and the organisational means to promote meeting them.”

Recent developments

Whilst there is a long history of broad based community organising, reflected in the history of Citizens UK, the Community Organiser (CO) programme is a more recent development. Originating in February 2011, coordinated by the national body Locality and funded by the UK Government. The Community Organisers initiative is “a national training and development programme in community organising. It will train 500 community organisers (COs) and support a further 4,500 voluntary organisers in neighbourhoods across England by May 2015.” (Locality, 2012). Locality (online) describe CO as “a form of LEADERSHIP that enables a NEIGHBOURHOOD to ORGANISE itself to turn its RESOURCES into POWER to make CHANGE”.

In December 2010 Locality successfully bid to the Government to become its national partner to deliver a CO programme. In the successful bid document Locality cited “unique nationwide practitioner knowledge and experience, extending deeply into rural and urban communities of every type.” (Locality, 2010: 2). To reinforce this they quote members operating “in urban (43%), rural (38%) and mixed urban/rural contexts (19%)”, and provide services for “communities ranging from under a hundred to over half a million inhabitants”. The tender includes “a rural and coastal proofing evaluation for the programme” (ibid: 3); in particular ‘kickstarter’ projects were suggested for Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and a deprived area of Cornwall; and these came about and are discussed elsewhere in this paper. Action with Communities in Rural England ACRE is listed as a partner in the tender (p.29), and Locality claims a network “of 400 local anchor organisations in England in urban and rural areas, which themselves provide local reach to thousands of community organisations, local businesses and over 20,000 volunteers.”

Community organisers are recruited and hosted by local organisations and RE: generate, Locality’s partner, trains the organisers “in the ‘Root Solution Listening Matters’ approach to help them build networks and create dialogue.” (Locality, 2012b). “Teams of volunteers, coordinated and supported by a skilled and trained “animator”, can deliver the listening matters system across a parish, neighbourhood, town or city”. According to Kaleta (undated) animation of local community development is fostered through “activities stimulating their inhabitants towards self-development”.

RE: generate comment (in Community Organising: Is it for me? Undated) that they incorporate the thinking of Freire and Alinsky into their work. A typical approach is based on door knocking. RE: generate (2009: 17) state that their records over a decade demonstrate how “1,000 listenings delivers network of 600; 200 will volunteer for short term undertakings; 30 over longer period”; furthermore, “3-5 people will lead, and be trusted with leading, a strategic change process in their neighbourhood”.

Of its 54 hosts (Locality personal communication, 2012), 7 (some 13% at the time of writing) may be considered rural in base, coverage or activities: Ashington CDT (Northumberland) operates in the town and surrounding areas; Gloucestershire Rural Community Council, Keystone Development Trust (working across the East of England), Cambridgeshire Community Foundation; Kirkgate Arts – “a not-for-profit social enterprise based in West Cumbria....runs the Kirkgate Centre in Cockermouth, and Arts Out West – the area’s rural arts touring programme”; Penwith Community Development Trust, Cornwall².

Beyond community organising as a Government funded programme, it is important (as noted) to recognise the continued importance in the field of London Citizen’s and, by extension Citizen’s UK. Both have retained an Alinsky influenced focus on independence (without state funding) and direct action campaigns including London living wage and, in terms of refugees and asylum seekers From Strangers to Citizens/Citizens for Sanctuary. However, this remains (almost exclusively) an urban movement – and no rural groups are included in their public domain membership data.

Findings and discussion

“Listen to the patient: she is telling you the diagnosis” (Quoted by Smith, 2004: 193)

Community development and organising are both contested in terms of their theory, values and actual practice. Yet, have the differences between these models of working been over-played? Is the dichotomy that has been created in some of the debate around ‘development’ or ‘organising’ a false one: created by ideology and entrenched positions – rather than a discussion based in evidence (Taylor: 2011)? Further, is it possible to ‘import’ models of working with communities into different cultural contexts: whether the adoption of colonially based community development or US community organising? Crucially, can predominantly urban models be transposed successfully into rural settings?

It is these questions that the following discussion aims to address: are organising and community development substantively different or do they address similar issues, face similar challenges and have the potential for shared – rather than divergent – learning?

Urban and rural community organising: a commonality of issues?

There are issues common to both rural and urban areas. London Citizens, for example, has campaigned on affordable housing and the need for a living wage. The need for affordable rural homes has been repeated in official reports – from Matthew Taylor MP’s review ‘Living Working Countryside (CLG 2008) and broadcaster Elinor Goodman’s Affordable Rural Housing Commission report (2006). Similarly low wages and rural poverty have regularly surfaced, for example in the 1994 Rural Lifestyles report published by the UK Government and the Channel 4 TV series Green and

² A short video about COs hosted by Penwith CDT, Cornwall illustrates their work: <http://www.cocollaborative.org.uk/study/pcdt-community-organisers>.

Pleasant Land (Humphries and Hopwood, 1999; Scott et al, 1991). Rural poverty also reared its head in the mass Countryside Rallies of the late 1990s (alongside protests from the pro-hunting lobby, and against petrol prices).

The fact that these issues represent a significant nucleus around which urban community organising has rallied, leads one to suggest that the same could be true for rural organising, and for combined action across rural and urban organising to address poverty and lack of affordable housing (Hansard, 16.1.2013; Jupp, 2012; Szakos and Szakos, 2008). Indeed, more than thirty years ago Moseley (1980: 97) noted the striking “similarity between...inner-urban and outer-rural areas” in terms of overlapping aspects of deprivation: including low wages and housing markets which lock-in the poor.

Official reports consistently point to 20-25% of English rural households living in or at the margins of poverty. The UK Government’s 2012 Rural Statement (Defra: 2) acknowledged that “poverty and deprivation exist in rural places” and that “one-fifth of the English population [nearly 10 million people] live in the countryside, but there’s no practical follow-through policy action? targeted at the rural poor. As recently as 2009 (Palmer for the Poverty Site: 3) stated that “19% of the population in rural districts (3.4 million people) live in households with incomes below the government’s main threshold of low income.” Furthermore, between “2004 to 2006, 11% of households were in ‘fuel poverty’, with this proportion rising to 22% in the most rural areas.” (ibid). As one academic (2013 personal communication) suggests “rural areas suffer poverty and “deprivation in differing ways than its manifestations in urban areas....the rural policy unit at DEFRA has no concern or appetite for promoting rural action.”

Given these shared concerns, it begs the question “why has rural community organising not taken off to any significant extent, and what has community development been doing about such entrenched problems in rural communities over a protracted time period?”

Perhaps this is a matter of history and focus. Organising – as already described – has a strongly urban pedigree (viz Alinsky’s organizing in Chicago; alluded to by Szakos and Szakos, 2008) and therefore rural CO barely registers in people’s consciousness. Craig et al (2011: 4) reinforce the image and heritage of “community organising practice, developing within the US’s (largely black) inner cities”; whilst Wills (2012a) notes a network stretching from London to other UK cities plus alliances with urban organising in Germany, Sydney, Australia and the United States.

Key findings in relation to English Rural Community Organising in 2014 are mirrored by the words of the United States Annenberg Institute for Social Reform (2011): There are few “models of rural organizing and little research to draw upon”. Rural CO in England seems to be below, off or under the radar. One correspondent (2013) characterised it as “below the radar, but emerging”.

A further challenge to rural community organising, certainly in the ‘pure’ forms of social action proposed by Alinsky (1971) is its emphasis on numerical strength: the importance of building a movement before taking action through marches, rallies and protests. Whilst this is not impossible in rural areas (witness the Countryside Alliance and action against the ban on hunting with dogs), the dispersed nature of rural communities makes ‘numbers based’ action problematic: at a very practical level, because of the cost and infrequency of rural transport systems.

There is also the matter of language. Wherever you find the words 'community organising', their focal point relates to 'neighbourhoods'; but whilst towns and cities have these, there is rarely talk of rural neighbourhoods; notwithstanding the contention by Durose and Richardson (2009: 49) that "the neighbourhood is an enduring site that citizens identify with", points to an inbuilt perception/assumption that: Neighbourhoods = urban = where community organisers operate.

As well as language, there is an issue of perception: "when is a rural CO rural"? For example, Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (based in Gloucester city) but covering the county, recruited 3 COs for a 1 year traineeship under the Locality programme. On closer inspection only 1 was operating in the rural market town of Nailsworth (population around 6,000); whilst the other 2 COs serve Gloucester's urban neighbourhoods of Tredworth and Coney Hill. Similarly Keystone Development Trust (operating across Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire), hosted 5 COs, and was one of Locality's original 'kickstarter' projects: 1 CO served Brandon (Suffolk, pop. 10,000+); and 2 in W Thetford estates – the town has a total population of more than 21,500. Community First (Wiltshire) recruited COs to operate "in local communities in either the Devizes or Salisbury areas" to be in place during 2013. These 2-4 COs are likely to work in urban fringe parishes struggling to gain an identity and subject to rapid growth. Interestingly the Locality organiser programme describes a rural neighbourhood (page 19 of their tender proposal) as perhaps "a market town, a rural district or an island community." These are relatively large units – in population terms – compared to villages and hamlets. Community Organisers (personal communication, 2013) report that Portland, near Weymouth, "has eight villages and arguably four separate smaller and somewhat isolated hamlets, the impact of three COs working collectively to encompass the entire Island has proved to be rather effective, whilst the total population is significant 12,000, the geographical divisions and predominantly rural setting does reflect and compare to smaller less populated areas"

In short, whilst there is an often fragile history of community development in rural areas, community organising in the UK remains a largely urban phenomenon – for both Citizen's UK and the Locality managed organisers' programme.

Reinforcement: what community organising and development can learn from each other

Organising is based on deeply listening rather than talking to people; "helping them to realise things, put them in touch with others who think the same way": acting as connectors and networkers (Community Organiser, personal communication, 2013). CO is about combining forces, solidarity and collective action. Whereas CD has more of a 'signposting' role; CDW's enable a community to do something, saying "I'll get in touch with..." Community Organising, by contrast, is deemed to be more animated, promotes self-reliance, and is based on "cajoling". Organising is built on the idea of seizing the moment, applying pressure; encouraging community members to act now, without delay. In brief Community Development and Community Organising represent different approaches which aim to achieve similar results.

As one respondent put it (personal communication, 2013) CO and CD coexist on a messy, diverse and overlapping spectrum. Some organisers “complain that the approach can be rather too “one-size-fits-all”, and there are questions about how far community organising differs from good, locally grounded community development, working to support people rather than just doing things for them.” (Edwards, 2012). This is a key point with regard to community-based work in general, and organising in rural communities, in particular.

Indeed, both community development and community organising have, as starting points, an analysis of power, and power inequalities, at their roots and a belief in the power of community to provide checks and balances to the misuse of power (community organising) or challenge the status quo. Again there is a long tradition of literature in this field. Alexis de Tocqueville in his 1835 book *Democracy in America* argues that the “strength of free peoples resides in the local community. Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within the people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it. Without local institutions a nation may give itself a free government, but it has not got the spirit of liberty”. Stokes and Knight (1997: 11) go on to proclaim that “we have a duty to exercise our power as citizens, thoughtfully and collectively. If we do not, who shall we blame?”

Therefore can Community Organising and Community Development be mutually reinforcing in pursuit of community-based action?

GRCC noted benefits from Community Development Worker-Community Organiser interaction; in that the former gained from organisers' emphasis on Asset Based Community Development³ and reflective practice. Chanan and Miller (2011:5) contend that “The big society's ‘community organisers’ would in effect be community development workers. The absence of any recognition of community development in the big society narrative cuts it off from a rich current of experience and threatens to repeat avoidable mistakes.” I would argue that this is akin to a sapling being unable to benefit from a water supply or nutrients. Was CD new Labour and CO a deliberate Coalition Government change of name and approach?

In the case of Keystone CDT's 5 Locality-funded organisers there were “minimal links” to other staff. There seems to have been a deliberate distancing of CO from CD, and a belief that organisers should not pick up pre-existing issues, opportunities or projects, but rather listen and then respond. In contrast, 2 of the Cumbrian rural CO posts were sponsored by community organisations concerned for children and young people; and funding required a focus on the (current) concerns of young people. Furthermore, the ‘Community Organiser Code of Conduct’ (Community First et al, 2012) advocates that COs build “on what already exists if that is what the community needs and wants”. Whilst Alinsky's model stresses the importance of organising beyond existing power structures and established (therefore potentially compromised) organisations, the potential (within the UK context) to build on what already exists is reflected in the words of one research respondent:

“We have experienced both new start projects and projects that attempt to address issues that other and often pre-existing initiatives have failed to satisfactorily resolve. On several occasions the community led projects supported by CO's have impacted more successfully than previous institution

³ Asset Based Community Development <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/>

led attempts. Our overriding impetus as fledgling CO's is simply the mandate which is created by our open minded listening within our community."

It is hard to see how this differs from "starting where the people are" – which is central to community development (Campbell et al, 2007). A key value expressed in the 2009 Community Development National Occupational Standards (FCDL: 2009) "Promotes the rights of communities to define themselves, their priorities and agendas for action".

Yet, antagonism between CD and CO advocates seems entrenched (Greenberg, 2012: 228).

"Proponents of consensus organizing hold that 'traditional' models of organizing, those which emphasize protest and divergent interests, are not likely to succeed. Proponents of other organizing modes, sometimes implicating community development practices, see consensus organizing as the manipulation of existing networks without changing terms of power."

A benefit claimed for CO is that "you don't need to be an expert to help people forwards" (RCC Senior Manager, personal communication, 2013). Or as Barnes (2009: 33) puts it, citizens "are learning the institutional rules they need in order to operate within public bureaucracies, they are entering different spaces as experts rather than as clients and they are building alliances with as well as challenging and opposing public officials."

"Organisers maintain there is no substitute for collective public citizen action as the essential substance of a democratic polity" (Stokes and Knight, 1997: 8)

Whilst such statements are offered as 'unique' to Community Organising, in reality they are remarkably similar to the core values of Community Development as expressed in the Occupational Standards (FCDL: 2009) link to collective action. Perhaps the only difference in practice may be the starting place for organising as the individual whereas community development focuses more on 'the group' and developing organisations.

Confrontation, consensus or compromise?

Organising emphasises confrontation (Gilchrist and Taylor, 2011); which goes back to Alinsky as a founding father: In *Rules for Radicals* he seeks "to create mass organizations to seize power and give it to the people..." (1971: 3). He goes on to quote Lenin "They have the guns and therefore we are for peace and for reformation through the ballot. When we have the guns then it will be through the bullet." (ibid: 37) Or page 100: "The job of the organizer is to manoeuvre and bait the establishment so that it will publicly attack him as a 'dangerous enemy'". Such pronouncements seem extraordinary given UK Conservative-led Government funding for an English version of Organising. Locality and RE:generate (online) describe an effective community organiser rather differently, as "an alchemist – through their work they turn 'apathy' into action and build a sense of agency, where people are clear that they are taking action of their own choice, for themselves, their family, their neighbours, their country." (Steele and Olsen, 2013). And a RE: generate member (personal communication, 2013) referred to "waking people up to their own potential and shared responsibility for the future, assertion" rather than collision.

Locality's Chief Executive argued for a Freirean version of CO in the UK, emphasising "community animation rather than organisation....It's a way of bringing out those things that are suppressed and hidden within the lives of ordinary people....we believe we can combine some community organising practices with...the positive, problem-solving, entrepreneurial, can-do approach of development trusts and other organisations....Community organising might involve challenge, but it will also involve finding solutions and working constructively with other agencies, service providers, people in power and people in local authorities." Ellis et al (2004: 49-50) highlight the "importance of improvisation, adaptation, flexibility and learning...this is analogous to jazz improvisation, involving the ability to think about an issue in a new light and to play with ideas, to 'make room' for dialogue and participation with others, and to respect others, even when they are different." Barr's review of Practising Community Development (1991: 166) positively embraces the "great opportunity for radical alliances of professional, political and community interests to promote redistributive, anti-deprivation policies and practices." So CD and CO can be seen to overlap, and incorporate a spectrum of approaches from radical and confrontational, to consensus-based and mediated.

With an intended workforce of 5,000 trainee Community Organisers through the Locality delivered government programme and a 2006 estimate of some 20,000 (full-time equivalent) UK Community Development Workers (CLG, 2006), there ought to be major incentives and value in combining forces. As former Community Development Exchange (CDX) director, Nick Beddow commented (NatCAN, 2011)

"CD has loads of experience in putting values into practice within complex situations. CD has, in the UK, a track record of supporting long-term change and networking across places and identities. But it has suffered in many cases from co-option into the system (through salary and managerialism and targets)...CO has proved its ability to inspire communities to become effectively active on common causes. But it struggles with limited training and no long-term focus on power dynamics and equalities issues within communities".

A (2010: 2) survey of CD practitioners and managers indicates an interesting parallel with the profile of volunteers in the UK: the percentage of respondents aged 44 years and over had "gone up to 62 percent from 37 percent in 2002....a fifth of the respondents were unpaid and were working in both practitioner and manager roles." A positive progression or potential bridge between CD and CO, however, is pointed out by the same report (2010: 6), namely that 42 percent of paid CD workers were previously volunteers or carried out unpaid activities".

Another ally in pursuit of galvanising community-based action comes in the form of Citizens UK (2012 online), "a powerful alliance of local Community Organising groups in London, Milton Keynes, Nottingham and Birmingham. We bring together churches, mosques and synagogues; schools, colleges and universities; unions, think-tanks and housing associations; GP surgeries, charities and migrant groups to work together for the common good." The Citizens UK collective came into being in 1988.....and can therefore draw on 20+ years' practical CO experience and expertise. As Locality observes, community development "good practice needs to be recognised and respected in return for being open to new ways of engaging" (2012: 2). The 2004 Survey of Community Development Workers in the UK (page 55) shows how "community development workers from within communities

were more readily seen to have connections, commitment and a ground level understanding that was valued". This is a further pointer towards combined CD-CO activity. Twelvetrees (1996: 172) concludes that "local community-based action (in its many forms) has to be central to any attempt to right...imbalances and injustices."

Southwark Community Organising (2012 online) offer an interesting analysis: "community organising has always been politicised and propelled by a concern for challenging the status quo. The possibility of collaboration with the state or of 'partnership' has always been anathema to community organisers" – this raises difficult questions about CO in Britain "drawing upon the resources of an established church" – the Church of England (Furbey et al, 1997: 148), or a government-funded training programme. Furbey et al (1997: 142) and Twelvetrees, 1998 contend that "community organising is fundamentally about pitching the power of the people against that of privilege." And that turning to CO represents a reaction to "long and often frustrating experience of established community strategies in Britain."

In short, the UK version of CO ranges across cooperation and conflict; which may also reflect differing institutional and individual CO views of its purpose and meanings. It brings to mind forcibly a statement made by Lord Vinson (a Conservative peer), then-chair of the Government's Rural Development Commission in the 1980s: as he saw it, rural community development was about mitigating the worst effects of the market; not an Alinskian view of "challenging the status quo" and fundamentally reordering society in favour of the have-nots. This also perhaps links to issues around the innate conservatism of English rural communities (Francis et al, 2001) and traditional perceptions of them as practicing self-help (a facet that came through in John Major's 1995 Rural White Paper and subsequent UK Governments' policy documents). If both in-built conservatism and self-help are accepted then this might be a cause for rural resistance to an idea that has deep roots in left-wing, radical-induced conflict and structural reform of society (Jupp, 2012). This view is backed by an academic respondent (2013, personal communication): "Most rural areas are very conservative (with both big and little C's). Building community organisations in rural areas offers an alternative perspective both in terms of bringing challenges to a rather deadening political context but also some outcomes which grow organically from local concerns...."

The blight of short-termism

Short-termism has dogged community development initiatives over many years and – unfortunately – the 1-year CO traineeships offered in the government's Community Organisers programme repeats this deficiency (Derounian and Fishbourne, 2009; CDF/SCCD, 2003). As a GRCC manager commented the "problem has been that they don't have enough time to get into it before they are looking to finish" or hunting successor work. "We would have preferred fewer CO trainees for a longer period, to deliver in depth..... COs don't really see the product of their labours". Respondents universally commended Locality for making the best of an under-resourced and time-limited job. Furthermore, Community Organisers (personal communication, 2013) argued that "the majority of Trainee COs are continuing their work further than the traineeship period".

Citizens UK – which unsuccessfully bid for the contract that Locality won - would say that they work to longer term agendas and can do so because they are independent of the state. They contend that the “government tender wasn’t worth as much as expected...This has led to community organisers being given living-wage posts and short-term contracts...the community organisers model just isn’t sustainable....” (Third Sector, 2013). Trainee Senior CO posts are for a 51 week fixed term (78 weeks part-time) and payment is £8.50/hour (calculated as a living rather than minimum wage). The Community Development Challenge report (CLG: 2008) emphasised the importance of giving “community development the time it takes to build genuine and sustainable empowerment” (See also - Bowles, 2008: xv and Henderson and Francis, 1993). Wills (2012: 1) illustrates this point in terms of organising linked to the London Olympics, requiring “hours of patient work to secure the chance to be heard long enough to start to build...relationships.” Furthermore, in a rural context, an academic respondent refers to the “difficult logistical context with a dispersed population and poor communications: everything takes longer.”

For community members potentially active in organising, a rural community consultant (2013 personal communication) highlights the costs (in time, fuel and money) of getting to places where organising occurs, and also the travel distances involved in getting advice and support from voluntary organisations. A former rural CO in Montana reinforces and extends the point that CO in rural communities is different on account of the scale and distances involved, the way in which meetings can be successfully run and how residents relate to each other in terms of levels of trust and frequency of connection (personal communication, 2013).

Organising is seen as a way of working that can achieve results in the long run. As a manager at Bristol’s Barton Hill Settlement observed (Third Sector, 2013) “it can be demoralising at times because it can be slow to get going.” In addition COs – within the 51 weeks – are to identify and train a team of active volunteer community organisers who will continue the work after initial funding has ceased. And as an allied point, there may be “pressures for immediate results: the accentuation of product at the expense of process” (Botes and van Rensburg, 2000: 50). Over 51 weeks what, realistically, can an individual or small team of COs achieve? To increase efficacy, Harvey (2013) argues for COs to be based closer together, in order to build momentum, effectiveness, mutual support and to address related issues. On the positive side Locality offers a traineeship as an opportunity to learn and gain practical experience.

Concluding remarks

The current review of community organising in England highlights that this remains a predominantly urban phenomenon. Even where formal community organising initiatives have been developed in mainly rural local authority areas, these have tended to be in larger population centres rather than smaller towns or ‘deep rural’ communities. In contrast, there has been a tradition, supported by Churches, Rural Community Councils and Town and Parish Councils of community development – albeit fragile in terms of funding, and unevenly distributed across England. Despite a commonality of issues with urban neighbourhoods (poverty, uncertain employment and poor access to affordable

housing), there appear to be a number of reasons why organising, certainly in its purest Alinsky form, has not taken root in rural communities. First, building 'movements' of up to 5,000 is problematic in dispersed rural areas. Second, by-passing existing power structures and adopting more conflict-based approaches to change in rural areas may be difficult where there may be an 'inbuilt' conservatism and a limited pool of activists. Finally there is the history of short-term funding for rural community initiatives. For both community development and organising it is, and has been, a case of 'now you see it....now you don't'.

Further, in the English context, a false dichotomy has been created not only around the issues faced in urban and rural communities but also between community development and community organising. The former (certainly in the guise of community engagement) became associated with New Labour and was replaced by rhetoric of organising and social action within the UK Coalition government. Both have radical, confrontational, and more consensual approaches. Both, certainly in England, operate within the state (with Government funding) and beyond the state – with independent resources (see Citizen's UK). Indeed, as Little (2011) points out much of the current organising in England resembles consensual models of community development rather than the conflictual approach of Alinsky. Further, many of the organisations hosting the Locality managed community organisers have a long history of practicing community development.

Both approaches, contested as they are, have the potential to learn from each other and, perhaps, in urban and rural contexts, both face the same challenge in the current political and economic climate. As Taylor (2011: 264) points out spending on engaging communities, despite the rhetoric of localism "is a drop in the ocean when set against the cuts in state support and services" with a real danger that those active in their community (whether from an organising or community development perspective) "are being sucked into substituting for the state".

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Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

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