Third Sector Research Centre

Discussion Paper B

Community engagement in the social eco-system dance

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Abstract

This paper identifies two distinct types of organisational arrangements, which need to be recognised to achieve effective policies and programmes for community engagement. The differences arise from the nature of relationships in the institutional and organisational world, which are primarily **vertical hierarchical,** as distinct from the informal community world where the relationships are primarily **horizontal peer**. Lack of attention to these distinctions adversely affects the interaction of the public agencies and the community, and the community's organisational governance and working arrangements. Using a complexity perspective, the '*social eco-system dance*' model identifies some issues and new ways of thinking about them and of handling some of the practical challenges. This is leading to a set of managerial and organisational tools to develop new ways of working for policy making, managing, operating and participating in the community engagement process across all the sectors involved.

The author

Eileen Conn, MA (Oxon) FRSA MBE, worked for many years in central UK Government, Whitehall, policy-making on the organisation, management and development of government systems and subsequently in developing systems of business corporate social responsibility. In the 1990s she established 'Living Systems Research' as an umbrella for her study of '*Social Dynamics and Complex Living Systems*', and her work in the field for *'Sustainable and Cohesive Communities'*. As an RSA Fellow she founded the RSA Living Systems Group in 1994 looking at companies and other human social systems as complex living systems. In parallel, she has been an active citizen in London community organisations. She was Southwark Citizen of the year in 1998, and in 2008 was Community Activist of the year, Active Citizen of the year, and Southwark Woman of the year. In the UK's New Year's Honours of 2009 she was awarded the MBE for services to the community.

She has had a long-term interest in the dynamics of communities and the emergence of community organisations which interact with the structures of public agencies and commercial companies. She has found that complexity theory provides a rewarding approach to understanding these complex social systems. Eileen is an informal associate in the LSE Complexity Research Programme and a TSRC Associate Fellow. She is facilitating and studying the emergence of community networks and other community engagement processes in London. She was co-editor and a co-author of *Visions of Creation* (1995), and is currently working on a new book with the Living Systems Group. She received an MA in philosophy, politics and economics from Oxford.

Contents

Introduction

UK Government policies over the last few decades aimed to increase civic engagement - to enhance the democratic process, and to make public services more effective and reduce their cost. On the other hand, election voting decreased, and the cost of public services has risen alongside continuing dissatisfaction. The UK Coalition Government, which took office in May 2010, has continued the focus on civic engagement by its 'Big Society' policy (Prime Minister, 2010; UK Government, 2010). Meanwhile for their own reasons, millions of people engage together in a wide variety of collective activity on a multitude of human mutual interests, from the personal to the collective and from the social to the political, called 'civic' or 'community' engagement, or 'civil society'.

Through a dual experience, as an active resident and in parallel in government (unconnected) policy making, I have developed the social eco-system dance model. It is rooted in practice, and informed by complexity theory which provides an additional way of thinking and of seeing the human world (Mitleton-Kelly, 2003). The model illuminates in a new way some of the nature and organisation of community engagement. The conventional approach assumes there is, overall, a simple system in operation, with mechanistic attributes; but it is in reality a multiple complex dynamic system. The lack of understanding adversely affects the interaction of the public agencies and the community. Using the model is helping to develop some basic policy and organisational tools to clarify the issues underlying this, and to improve some of the arrangements. This paper outlines the model and takes a preliminary look at some of its practical applications.

The Two Systems Approach

A complex system consists of a large number of elements which interact with each other. The many interactions in a system form clusters of elements, and interact with other clusters (Cilliers, 1998). These clusters are also nested complex systems. Individuals can be simultaneously in several different systems in different roles, and the individuals can change in the systems but, as Cilliers points out, a repeated pattern of system relationships will remain. These human social activities create complex social systems. In community engagement, there are also two different dominant modes of relational behaviour and dynamics. These also can be seen as clusters, as differentiated sub-systems or worlds within the overall social system, operating separately but interacting. Practitioners working at global level in international development (Dove, 2006) and in UK community development (Pitchford and Higgs, 2004) have observed these relational distinctions, and noted that they appear to be largely invisible to the academics, policy makers, decision makers and professionals in their fields. This evidence from the field is supported by social philosophy (Table 1).

The depths of these philosophies, and the differences between them, lie beyond the scope of this paper, but their analysis provides some evidence to the existence and nature of the two relational systems. The impact of this in community engagement is also being explored (e.g. Barker, 2010b, Bakardjieva, 2009; Jackson, 1999). The distinctions, summarised in Table 1, illuminate some of the characteristics that play out in practice. These relate to inherent differences in the nature of human relationships and behaviour in the two social sub-systems:

- where there are ordered authority hierarchies, with structured power and rule based instrumental relationships, in the world of organised activity – public, commercial and 'voluntary[1] worlds;
- where relationships are based on free and voluntary association, often referred to as the 'community' – in neighbourhoods or mutual interest groups, networks and ad hoc associations.

Table 1: Two Systems Philosophical Distinctions

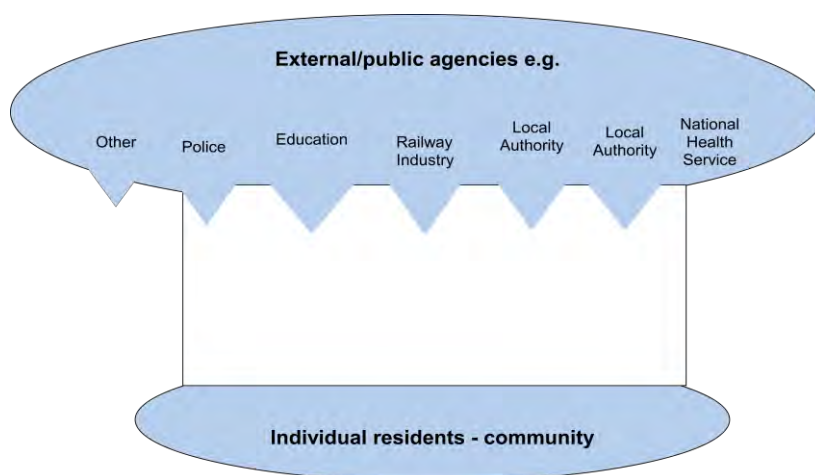| Philosopher	Ordered authority system	Free association system
Ferdinand Tonnies 1855 – 1936 German sociologist	*Gesellschaft* = society groups sustained to be instrumental for members' individual aims and goals	*Gemeinschaft* = community groupings based on feelings of togetherness and on mutual bonds
Martin Buber 1878 – 1965 Austrian/Israeli philosopher	*The political principle* = the necessary and ordered realm, of compulsion and domination	*The social principle* = the dialogical, i.e. the realm of free fellowship and association
Jurgen Habermas b1929 German sociologist and philosopher	*The system* = institutions and governing bodies	*The lifeworld* = societal and individual-level attitudes, beliefs and values

The one system approach

The colloquial way of referring to these two different areas of life, in the community engagement world, is to talk about 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches, with the public agencies at 'the top' reaching out to engage with the community at 'the bottom' (Figure 1).

This approach, used widely also in organisational management, transfers to the community the instrumental approach which is at the heart of the ordered authority system. It reflects an idea that the 'bottom-up' and the 'top-down' are like two parts of a machine to be fitted together.

Figure 1: The one system approach

That often leads to an approach that the 'bottom-up' needs to behave, and have governance processes, like the 'top-down' system, to help deliver services. So the community tends to be used instrumentally by the public services, rather than treated as an independent participant. Strenuous efforts are sometimes made to avoid this by focusing on 'bottom-up' development (e.g. Nikkhah,

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[1] Note: 'voluntary' in this paper includes charities, non-profits, NGOs, social enterprises.

2009; Larrison, 2000; Citizen First, 2008), but these often fail to overcome the problems resulting from the idea that both parts are organisationally similar.

The different nature of relationships results in different organisational dynamics in the part called 'bottom-up', giving a false symmetry. The two relational systems cannot be fitted together as one machine-like system, but continue to co-exist alongside each other interacting and co-evolving in a shared social eco-system. There are different theories, models, views and positions, from different managerial, political and ideological perspectives, used to explain defects in the current systems and process, especially power relationships and organisational management. The two relational systems' perspective is relevant to each and all of them. Seeing it through this additional new lens can remove some of the significant blocks to effective community engagement.

Two systems: forms and processes

In the authority systems of work, commerce and power, the nature of the relationships is primarily *vertical* and *hierarchical:* tightly regulated to ensure compliance with organisational policies and constraints including employment and contract laws, and financial and managerial governance. They are generally divided into segments, subjects and topics. The organisation structures, and management and governance systems, have co-evolved with the *vertical hierarchical* system of relationships. Other forms of more flexible, informal and boundary-spanning human relationships co-exist alongside; there are strong arguments for management systems to respond to these as a more prominent form in the *vertical hierarchical* world.

However, even if there were more of these changes, there would remain the fundamental difference that civil society is not like regulated organisations, where people are recruited to particular defined jobs. Instead, individuals, when they come together voluntarily through their shared interests, connect to give each other mutual 'peer' support in some way. These personal connections are the source of nourishment for the *horizontal* relationships between *peers*. They have their roots in life and death experiences in the community, not in contractual hierarchical relationships, nor in the needs of public agencies to deliver their services.

Figure 2: Grass Roots (Miller, C. painting)

To be healthy and strong, the roots for these social relationships need to be appropriately tended. The way grass roots grow, illustrated in Figure 2, is an instructive image for this.

Grass that grows strongly and healthily, and is difficult to uproot, has a strong and intertwining mat of roots. These are like the strong interconnections in a community, all giving strength and support to the whole. If the grass is separated from its mat of roots it loses its strength and its intrinsic nature. These social networks, and the need to nurture them, are fundamental to resilient communities (Gilchrist, 2009; Rowson, et al., 2010).

The dominant **horizontal peer** nature of the community produces its own managerial and organisational challenges of a different nature from those in the **vertical hierarchical** world. My preliminary analysis, summarised in Table 2, shows some of the fundamental distinctions between the two systems.

Table 2: Two Systems: Summary of Some Different Forms and Processes

| Public and voluntary sector agencies *Vertical Hierarchical* system	Community organisation *Horizontal Peer* system
Organisation Organisations incorporated Limited liability Command and control systems	*Organisation* Organisations unincorporated Unlimited liability Free association systems
Management *Vertical hierarchical* relationships Authority/line management	*Management* *Horizontal peer* relationships Personal links
Employment Contractual Paid staff, and managed volunteers Employment law context	*Employment* Social informal Not-paid volunteers, not 'managed' General civil law
Resources Recurring annual income External sources – taxes, grants and fees Commissioned contracts Permanent physical locations	*Resources* Unpaid voluntary work Donations, ad hoc grants In-kind services Domestic + ad hoc locations

Two systems in reality

Because of these differences, organisational dynamics in the **horizontal peer** world are as dissimilar from the dynamics of the **vertical hierarchical**, as different as are oil and water. This has a significant effect on how they are experienced and managed. Reflecting on our personal experiences, we can sense this. Working as an employee, in a line management chain, is not like being a resident working with neighbours, or other local residents, on a matter of mutual local interest. The way we relate to co-workers in the detailed structured regulation of the **hierarchical** world of work and business, is mainly replaced by fluid informal free association forms of **peer** relationships in the 'community' world. It is important, therefore, to name and visualise them (see Figure 3), to shine a light on the effects of the differences.

This naming is an abstraction; the systems do not have impermeable boundaries. But to understand differences we need initially to focus on them (Cilliers,1998). The distinctive natures of the relationship patterns and associated organisational systems in **vertical hierarchical** and **horizontal peer** systems are captured as a snapshot in Table 2, but it is a snapshot that has continuing relevance to organisational, management and governance of community engagement in all forms. Differences between the nature of relationships and working arrangements in the **vertical** and **horizontal** worlds are also identified in work arenas not confined to the community engagement world

– for example in communities of practice (MacGillivray, 2009, 2011), and social entrepreneurs (Goldstein, et al*.,* 2008). In the *social eco-system dance* model however, the individuals in the **horizontal** world do not simultaneously occupy work roles in the directly interacting **vertical** systems, and some of the issues are therefore different.

Social Eco-System Dance Model

Figure 3: Two distinct co-evolving systems sharing an eco-system
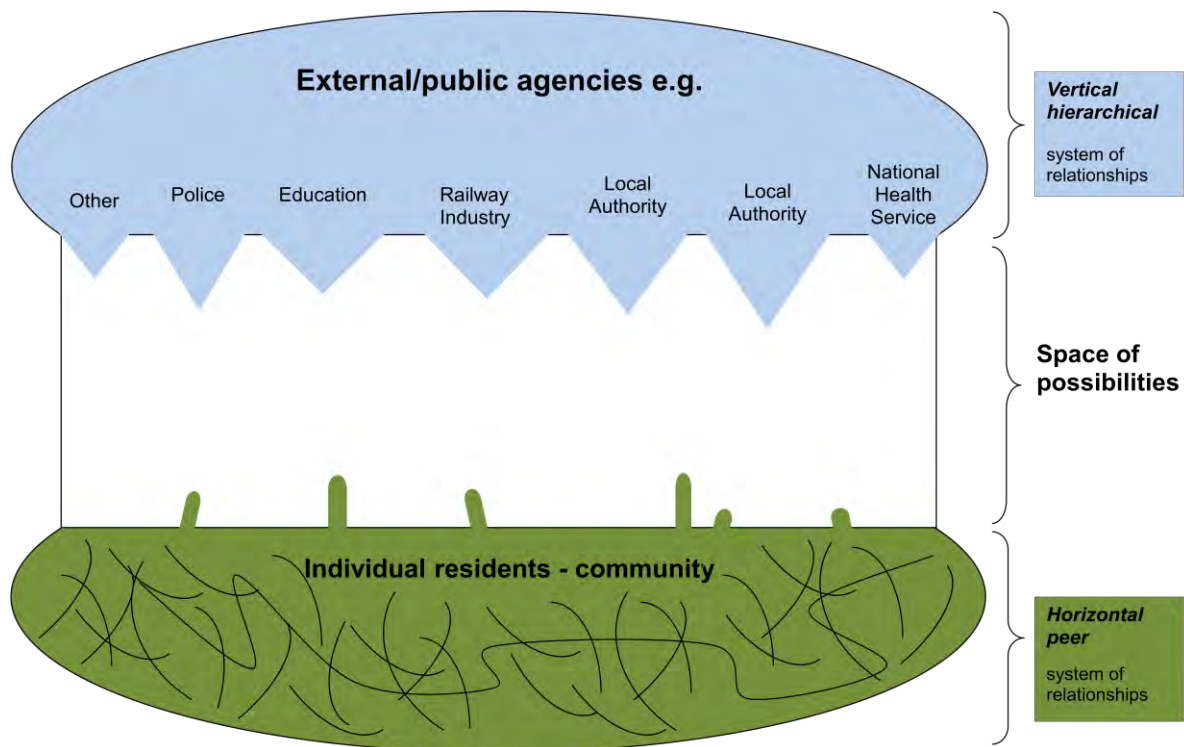
Two co-evolving systems

In the world of community engagement, the differences between the community and the work worlds cause familiar difficulties, as the troublesome 'community' fails to behave as the public agencies wish it would behave. The tendency is to try to cope, or to pay lip-service to community engagement, or to put it off, or attempt to mould the community to be acceptable to the world of the **vertical hierarchical**. But none of these are likely to work well.

Taking a complex systems view, the two relational systems can be seen as two differentiated systems inhabiting a shared social eco-system. They are in continuous interaction, in what complexity theory calls the *space of possibilities* (Figure 3), and are co-evolving. Understanding this offers more scope for appropriate governance in the **horizontal peer** and in the *space of possibilities*. Acknowledging the systemic differences is to see that the organisational forms, processes and relationships, which will work effectively cannot be just a replication and imposition of those which work in the **vertical hierarchical** world.

In this shared social eco-system the two complex systems have their very different internal dominant dynamics, for which they each need appropriate governance approaches. In addition, their continuing interaction creates further dynamics in the *space of possibilities*, which also needs its own governance. As Mitleton-Kelly points out (2003), the logic of complexity suggests that appropriate approaches for organisations need to be facilitated - nurturing *enabling environments* that facilitate learning, emergence and self organisation. This needs to be applied consciously and deliberately to the other two areas of the shared social eco-system – the governance within the **horizontal peer** which has its own different needs, and also the interaction of the two systems in the *space of possibilities*.

The Social Eco-System Dance

The two systems are locked into a perpetual coupled relationship, within the shared social eco-system (Figure 3). Social entities – individuals, groups, organisations – interact in identifiable rhythms, in a continuing set of moves as in a dance, even though it is often uncomfortable. According to Kaufmann (1995), this is co-evolution which "is a story of coupled dancing landscapes", "deforming landscapes where the adaptive moves of each entity alter the landscapes of their neighbours" (Kauffman in Mitleton-Kelly 2003). The idea of *fitness landscapes*, arising in the study of natural eco-systems, is described by Geyer and Rihani (2010), in applying the ideas to public policy on social issues, as "capturing well the symbiotic relationship between multiple interacting actors and units". That is, everything they do affects (deforms) the social context (environment) in some way, so the other entities adjust their actions and behaviour to restore their own *fitness landscape*.

Some dynamics

Life can be tough at the interface between these two relational systems: discordance from the different systemic dynamics; local State power meeting the citizen; and the **vertical hierarchical** system driven by a *'contagion of inwardness'* and *'organisation-first'* (Crockett, 2008; Barker, 2010b) from the imperatives of organisational survival, exacerbated by short public expenditure timescales. So that system reaches out (*'outreach'*) to the 'community' to pull parts of it into its own dimension to help it achieve its own aims, objectives, programmes and service delivery. To engage, individuals in the **horizontal peer** often have to detach themselves from their natural soil and roots, defeating the purpose of community engagement. The weaker **horizontal** system can have, however, a severe negative power in hindering the successful achievement of the **vertical** system's objectives.

There are successful and positive interactions: they flow from a recognition and accommodation of the different natures. But this happens in a fragmented way, without appreciating the underlying reasons for success. So, 'successful' initiatives are 'rolled out', mechanically, often inappropriately in the **vertical hierarchical** command and control managerial style, paying little attention to the different **horizontal peer** dynamics and particular local conditions which may have been a pre-requisite for the original success.

Emergence in the *Space of Possibilities*: a local case example

In Figure 4 the *space of possibilities* is populated with emergent organisational forms. These represent some of the different forms that have emerged over a period of years in my local area of inner south east London.

Social Eco-System Dance Model

Figure 4: Emergence in the *Space of Possibilities*
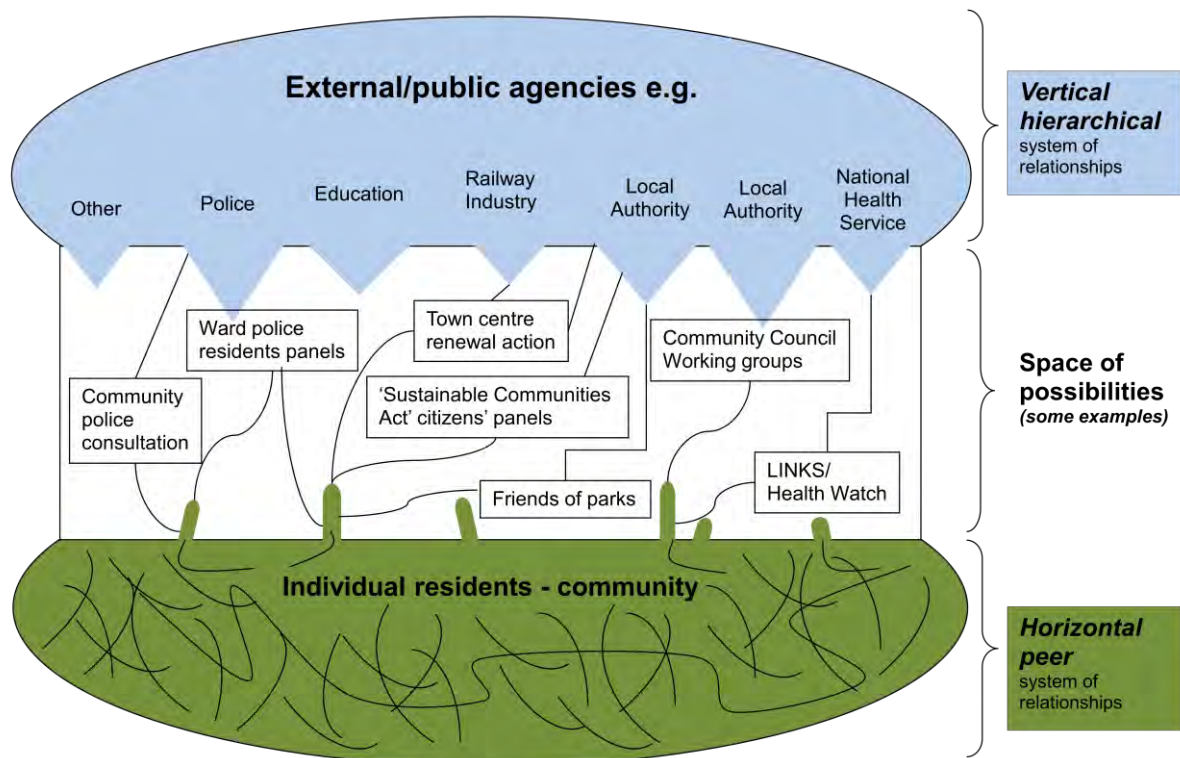
They reflect a variety of degrees of openness to the *adjacent possible*, of permanence or impermanence, formality or informality, fluidity and flexibility. They provide attempts with varying degrees of success or failure for enabling citizens to be collaborative problem solvers (e.g. Olcayto, 2010). Local people become active in the *horizontal peer* in a number of ways and link by a variety of resident-led local groups and loose networks, now enhanced by web-based media. The town centre renewal action for example is underpinned by a loose network of some 1500 local residents (Peckham Residents, 2011), over an urban area of about two to three miles, giving rise to an informal consortium of local interests (Peckham Vision, 2011) linked with other local groups. Figure 4 is like a map, another snapshot, of the interactions between the systems, from the *horizontal peer* perspective of one participant, of part of this particular local social eco-system dance. The experience has contributed to the development of the model and typologies outlined in this paper. Each participant in a locality can produce their own map and together they portray some of the richness and complexity of life in the civic grassroots and its interaction with the local state.

Adjacent Possible in the *Space of Possibilities*

In *the space of possibilities* where individuals from each system come together, there are many opportunities for change by the use of the *adjacent possible* (Kauffman, 2000; Mitleton-Kelly 2003). These need small adjustments from recognised forms and processes, leading to the emergence of new ones. In the local case, for example, a local council planning officer has been collaborating with new flexible approaches in a resident-led town centre forum, to contribute to planning policy and town centre management (Southwark Council, 2011). The small process and attitude changes, to enable this, are essential for individuals from the two systems, with their dissimilar systems with different structures, processes and dynamics, to work together effectively. In practice it becomes a collaborative problem solving approach, which enables local knowledge and expertise to complement the professional, technical and managerial contributions to the policy making process. This kind of approach is essential for solving modern complex, multi dimensional problems (Battle, 2010; Peters, 2010; Barker 2010b).

Often, the **vertical hierarchical** approach to community engagement is a tick box exercise, or dominated by their agenda and way of working that kills off real engagement, or it can be disrupted by stressful reactions from the **horizontal peer** world. Because there are significant challenges in operating in this world, where the two systems interact, intentional good-will from the actors in both systems, able to nurture **trust**, is essential. Trust leads to greater awareness of the 'other' and their differences, helping to create less risky conditions for careful *adjacent possible* movement outside normal practices and comfort zones. This encourages mutual exploration of methods and approaches. But citizens' trust, and social networks and social capital that are rooted in trust, cannot be generated overnight (Savage, et al*.,* 2009). Trust emerges in safer zones, which are an example of the *enabling environment* needed in managing complex systems to nurture the "co-evolution that can produce new orders of coherence" (Mitleton-Kelly, 2003).

Nurturing the *Space of Possibilities*

These safer zones need supportive culture, especially in the **vertical hierarchical** system, and they need to be sensitively nurtured. This in many instances requires a cultural change (Lurie, 2010; Morse, 2006). USA research supports the view that 'active listening by bureaucrats' and 'deliberative approaches' are needed to develop citizen trust in government which in turn can develop government trust in citizens (Cooper, et al*.,* 2006). This would be an example of a positive outcome of the co-evolution of systems and adaptations in their *fitness landscapes*. Action research in the Netherlands for planning water management showed that new processes to encourage *interactive governance* 'needed constant maintenance' and failed to survive, because of the resistance of some elements of the **vertical hierarchical** system (Edelenbos, et al*.,* 2009).

Keys to the success of relationships, and organisational processes, in the *space of possibilities,* and the nurturing of trust, can be found in values and practices that are intrinsically in tune with how people can live and work together humanely and constructively. These include encouraging and nurturing cooperative human relationships where there are different perspectives or different modes of operation or there is potential for conflict. The knowledge and skills for this can be found in

abundance in the community development approach (Gilchrist, 2009), deliberative dialogue (Carcasson 2010, Battle 2010, London, 2010) and also in others such as community organising, mediation, group relations, peer mentoring and so on.

All of these methods and skills are relevant for those who navigate the *space of possibilities*, in the engagement process between the **vertical** and **horizontal** systems. Their training should reflect the distinct natures of the two systems, and their interactions. Table 3 indicates some of the topics to include in developing policy for creating and nurturing an enabling environment, and for training participants from both systems.
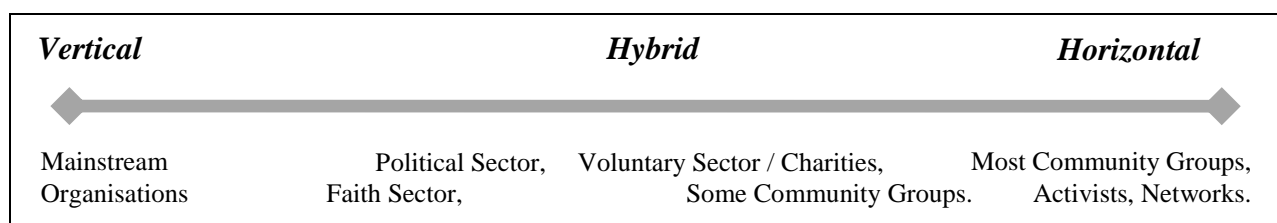
**Table 3: Facilitating an *Enabling Environment* to Nurture and Navigate the S*pace of Possibilities.*
Starter Checklist for Policy and Training Development.**

Encouraging *adjacent possible*	Nurturing *Horizontal Peer system*
• Moving beyond habitual routines • Resisting fixed design in advance • Enabling new structures to emerge	• Social gardening • Facilitating networking • Nurturing relationships
Collective efficacy: • Creating potential connections • Enabling loose connections • Sustaining connections	**Facilitating the process** • Nurturing informal fluid processes • Growing from the roots • Creating support systems

Hybrid sub-systems

The political sector and faith/religious sector each have large numbers of organisations intertwined alongside very large numbers of volunteers. They are therefore hybrids of the two sub-systems, **vertical hierarchical** and **horizontal peer**: see Figure 5. Neither of the two relational systems is dominant.

Figure 5: Continuum of Organisations in the *Vertical* and *Horizontal* Systems

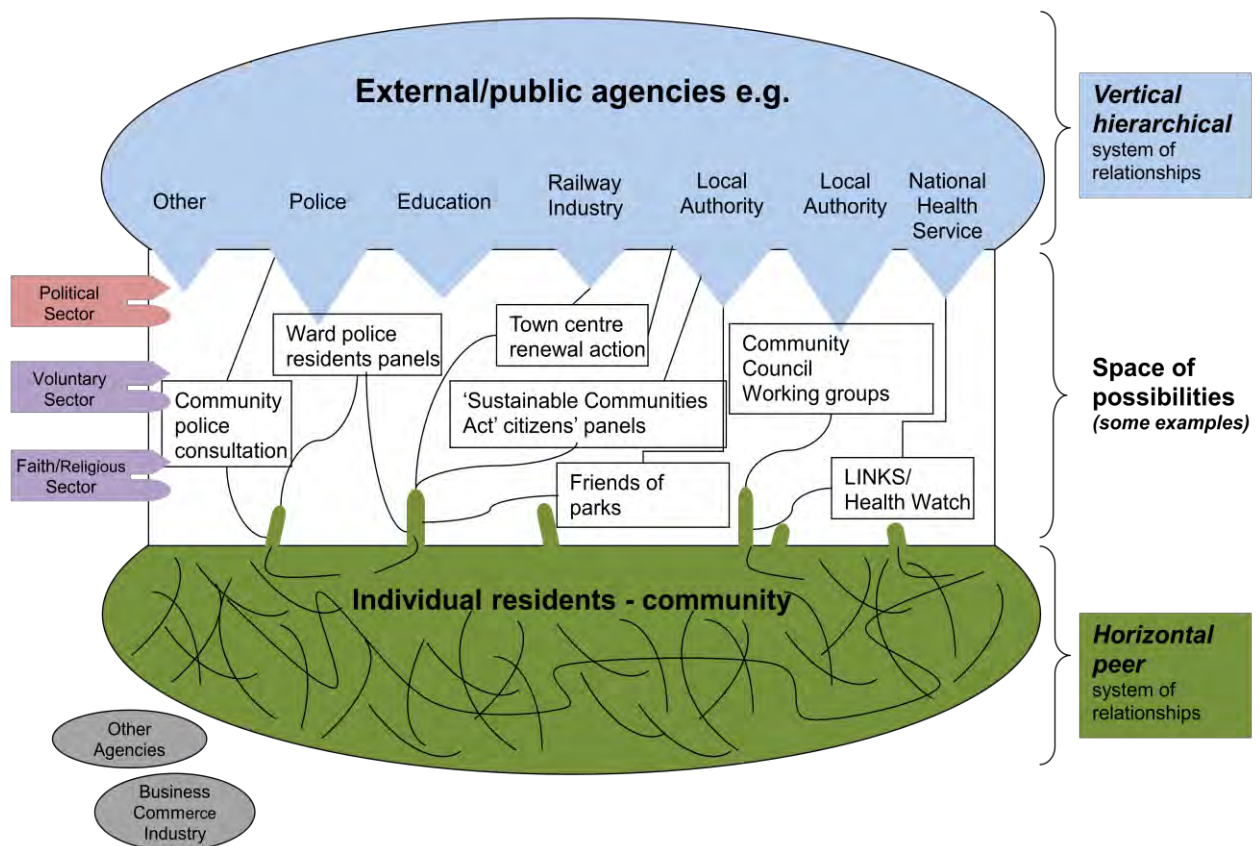| *Vertical*		*Hybrid*	*Horizontal*
Mainstream Organisations	Political Sector, Faith Sector,	Voluntary Sector / Charities, Some Community Groups.	Most Community Groups, Activists, Networks.

A combination of numerous political organisations and thousands of volunteer activists constitutes the political sector. It has major intentional and unintentional effects on the macro and micro details affecting the *fitness landscapes* within the overall social eco-system for community engagement. The faith sector, containing all religious faiths, is increasingly engaged in civic activities, and it too is a hybrid through the combination of its religious structures, and the very large numbers of volunteers who freely associate with each other in their chosen religious or faith group. The sectors interact in

significant ways in the *space of possibilities* alongside and between the public agencies and the community, as indicated in Figure 6.

There is not the space here to detail this further, but because of their hybrid nature the two systems lens can illuminate many aspects of the roles of these sectors, in the working of community engagement.

Social Eco-System Dance Model

Figure 6. Hybrid systems in the shared social eco-system

It is worth noting that aspects of the *vertical hierarchical* and *horizontal peer* distinctions may find some expression also in the world beyond community engagement, with some similar and some dissimilar effects:

- Interactions between commercial organisations and their customers.
- The fluid free association networks at *horizontal peer* levels within corporate organisations in both public and commercial sectors.
- Communities of practice, transcending organisational boundaries, as noted earlier.

The professional 'voluntary' sector is also a hybrid of the relational ***vertical*** and ***horizontal*** systems because of its historical roots. But the ***vertical hierarchical*** system is now dominant in the organised professional 'voluntary' world with vertical and rule-based relationships, where the thousands of volunteers contribute their time and skills to structured roles in those organisations. However, the informal community sector, comprising a sub-system of small and informal groups of local activists and active citizens, is primarily a ***horizontal peer*** social system based on free association: "Voluntary sector players have different interests from them [community sector], usually function in different ways, and often fail to understand these differences..." (Pitchford and Higgs, 2004).

The nature of the ***vertical hierarchical*** system in the voluntary sector results in a mismatch in policies and programmes for the community sector (Barker, 2010b), and "though many civic organisations… use the language of civic engagement, their routines appear to be misaligned with citizens who seek a sense of agency" (Barker, 2010a). The misalignment reinforces the failure to perceive the difference between ***vertical*** processes for service delivery and those for strengthening ***horizontal*** citizen capacity. The summary in Table 2 shows some of the underlying reasons for these differences in the two systems which lead to different managerial and organisational challenges.

There is increasing awareness that the formal voluntary sector is just 'the tip of a large iceberg' with most of the community sector 'under the water', 'below the radar (BTR)', or to use a living image - the teeming micro-life revealed under a stone in a garden. This out of sight and poorly understood activity is the missing element named in this paper as the ***horizontal peer*** system. The scale of the issue is shown by the estimate that there are 600,000 to 900,000 'below the radar' groups in the UK, three quarters of the total in the 'voluntary and community' sector (Phillimore and McCabe, 2010). Yet they are generally grouped together as if they were largely the same, reinforcing the inability to see the differences.

Community organisations' spectrum

The distinction between the relational sub-systems within the voluntary and community sectors can be seen in my preliminary analysis of the variety of organisational forms (figure 7). The diagram focuses on the small end of the spectrum. It magnifies and shines a light on some of the organisational variety in what is out of sight. Some small community groups that employ no staff and are very informal are aspiring to become formal staff employing groups, and need traditional 'capacity building' support for this. They are however the minority of groups in the informal community sector, yet there is a tendency in the ***vertical hierarchical*** world to assume incorrectly that all groups should aspire to such growth and focus their support for that (Foster, 2010): another misalignment.

Figure 7: Voluntary and Community Sectors – organisation types: size and formality spectrum chart
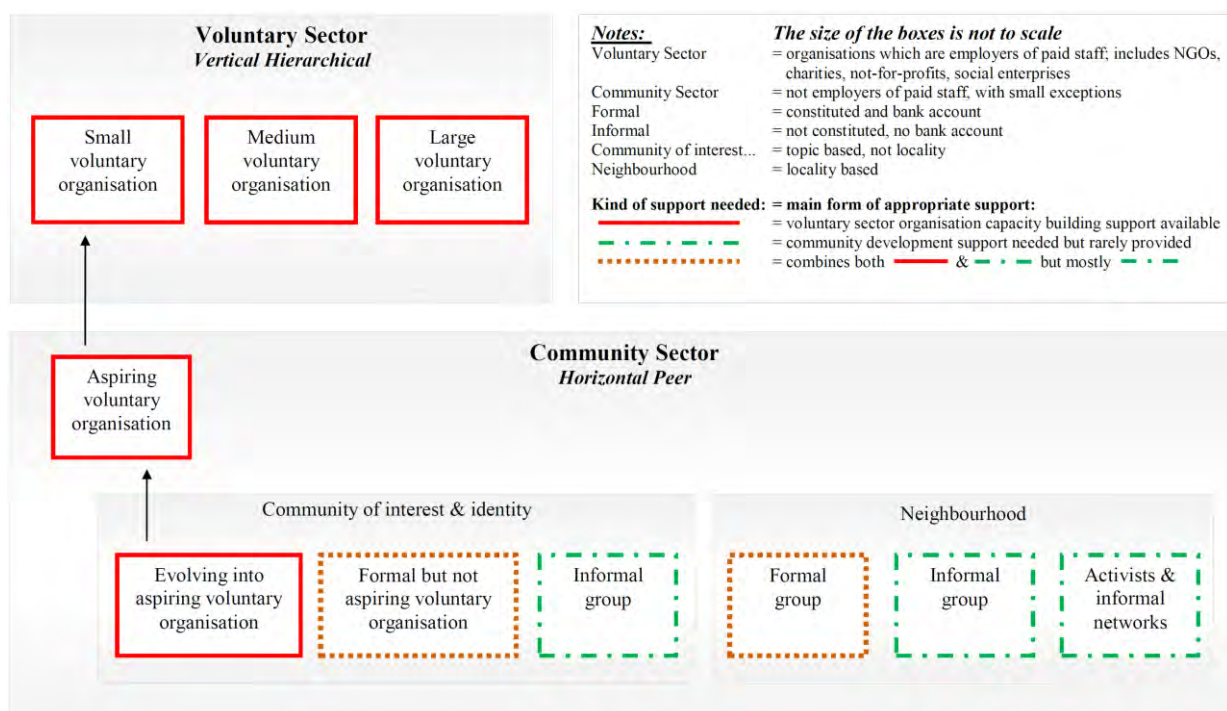

But small community groups whether wanting to grow or not, employing staff or not, whether formal or informal, all need governance support tailored specifically for their *horizontal peer* needs. Some of the characteristics that make up their various structures are indicated in the Notes in Figure 7 which is the beginning of a set of diagnostic tools to distinguish between different forms, to match the different forms of appropriate support. Recognising the distinctions between the *vertical* and the *horizontal* is essential to see clearly enough the informal community sector – the *horizontal peer* world – to achieve a better balance between support systems for the organised voluntary sector and those to meet the needs of the much larger but out-of-sight community sector, as recommended recently (NSG, 2010).

Typology of active citizen roles

Thousands of volunteers work in the voluntary sector alongside employed professional staff. These volunteers occupy well defined roles within the structured voluntary organisations (Figure 8, type 2). However there are several other different kinds of volunteer shown in the typology in Figure 8.

Some are part of the *vertical hierarchical* system, and others interact with it from the *horizontal peer* system. Each role has different kinds of support needs. Using the typology, an analysis of the needs of the different types, and the existing support, begins to indicate where the gaps are, and how they might be met. In my experience, gaps relate particularly to the roles identified in Figure 8 as activists, community group members and 'consulted citizens' and their related small groups and networks (see Figure 7). This London experience is supported by reports from elsewhere, for example in NW England (NWCAN, 2010).

Figure 8: Typology of Different Active Citizen Roles[2]
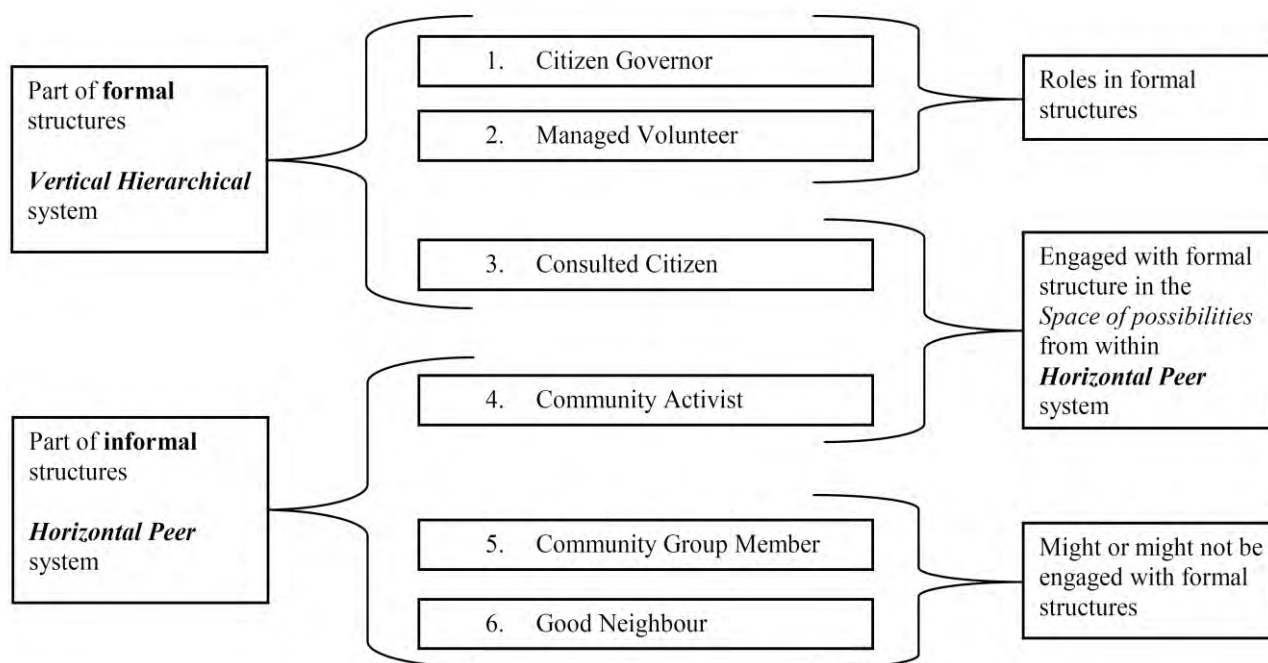
Strengthening the *Horizontal Peer* system

The voluntary sector already provides a broad range of support in local areas for voluntary activity. This is an essential underpinning for informal community action, but traditional ways of providing it need adapting to give a more appropriate response to the different needs of the **horizontal peer** world. The NSG (2010) study recommends some ways of achieving this. Distinctive characteristics include peer-to-peer relationships creating their own support, and strengthening citizen capacity as distinct from developing alternative forms of 'service delivery' (Barker, 2010a, 2010b). Gaps need to be identified with local activists. If something is already provided for the voluntary sector, an adjusted form may need to be tailored to meet the **horizontal peer** needs. Starting with existing forms is an example of collaborative *adjacent possible* work between the voluntary sector and local activists. Preliminary indications of some adapted and new forms of local systems and structures, reflecting the nature of **horizontal peer** relationships which need to be explored, are summarised in Table 4.

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[2] These roles can be fluid and without fixed boundaries, and the same individual may switch between roles and fulfill more than one role at once, while some individuals may carry out only one role at a time. The types do **not** indicate progressive pathways in activism. The original typology was devised within the Southwark Active Citizens Hub (SACH) Steering Group. It was further developed, © Eileen Conn 2006, to show relationships with the *vertical* and *horizontal* systems. For type descriptions see leaflet (SACH, 2006).

Table 4: Some preliminary indications of *horizontal peer* forms of local systems and structures

Management and organisation	Peer support systems
• new advice, support systems and training on management and organisation reflecting ***horizontal peer*** dynamics. • reflecting needs of informal groups, residents' networks, and community activists.	• nurturing of local residents' networks • action learning sets for activists • peer and mentoring support systems for activists • using digital social media
Local neighbourhood based systems	**Citizen collaborative problem solving**
• new organisational systems for access to local physical practical resources. • advice and information systems for active residents, incorporating local peer advice with local voluntary sector systems.	• creation and support of activists' reference panels for engagement with public agencies. • enhancing community engagement processes through linking informal residents' networks in the ***horizontal peer*** system

There is more to be uncovered to provide appropriate support systems for the invisible community life. Greater understanding is needed of the links between personal life and experiences and peer-to-peer networks (Battle, 2010) that are part of what Mary Parker Follett called 'neighbourhood consciousness' (Nielsen, 2010; Morse, 2006). Recent UK research (Ockenden, 2008; Phillimore, 2010; Hutchison, 2010) is beginning to shine light on this micro life in the informal civic sector, confirming its differences from the organised voluntary sector and the need for more detailed research. A current research project (Pathways, 2011) is investigating why people are involved in different forms of social and civic participation. Another is exploring the 'Civic Commons' as a model for supported citizen-led contributions to problem solving (Norris and McLean, 2011). The practical tools in the *social eco-system dance* model, and typologies outlined in this paper, can help in such research to understand the informal world whose processes have been in the shadow.

The UK Coalition Government's Big Society policy is unfolding (Prime Minister, 2011), and will have significant effects on the ***horizontal peer*** world (Chanan, 2011; McCabe, 2011), affecting its *fitness landscape*. There will be a loss, from public expenditure cuts, of some local support systems, and the policy to train 5000 new 'community organisers' (Urban Forum, 2010; UK Government, 2011) will have a direct impact. It will be essential that policy and training illuminate the distinction between the ***vertical*** and ***horizontal*** systems. Otherwise, the new programmes risk repeating the mistakes of relating not to the real needs from within the informal community sector, but to the needs as perceived by those outside it to deliver public services.

In the US, attention is being drawn to the increasing technical and professional natures of public and civic organisations ***(vertical)*** which have created a growing gap between them and citizens ***(horizontal)*** and the loss of citizen contributions to shaping their collective future (Barker, 2010a). The consequence of this gap at its extreme was seen in Cairo in January 2011 where ***horizontal peer*** informal civil networks, developing slowly out of sight, strengthened by digital social media, found their voice (Alexander, 2011). A similar phenomenon is reported in Russia where civil networks,

supported by digital social media, emerged from the free association of individuals with shared personal experiences (Loshak, 2010). These examples display organisational dynamics and relationship patterns familiar to those with inside experience of the *horizontal peer* world in liberal democracies. This indicates that the two systems' relational experience and impact may be a social phenomenon in modern technocratic societies across the global complex social system.

Conclusion

Human social affairs create a complex evolving system. Within that, for community engagement, there are two differentiated sub-systems, each embodying distinct relational experiences. Naming these sub-systems *vertical hierarchical* and *horizontal peer* helps to identify them as different interacting systems. Perceiving this reality can enable more effective policies and programmes for encouraging community engagement, and breathing new life into democracy in the global technocratic age. Attention must be paid to the ways the two systems interact and engage with each other, and how the community system can be strengthened and supported for that engagement.

Complexity theory's understanding of the nature of complex systems has a liberating effect in thinking about some of the repetitive problems in community engagement. The ideas of *eco-systems, co-evolution, fitness landscapes*, the *space of possibilities* and the *adjacent possible* have a particular resonance with the reality of the experiences in this world of community engagement. The *social eco-system dance* analogy captures the close-coupled repetition of systemic behaviour patterns that need to be recognised and accommodated.

These ideas provide the basis for further research to apply complexity theory to community engagement, as well as developing management and organisation practical tools:

- to help strengthen resilience in the *horizontal peer* world; and
- to nurture the *space of possibilities* for effective interactions and community engagement between *horizontal peer* civic society and the *vertical hierarchical* institutional world.

The issues to be tackled span a variety of worlds – research, policy, management, and front-line workers in public sector, voluntary sector and community development, and activists and other active citizens. The model has been used in many discussions with practitioners in these various worlds, and the model and tools evolve and develop through this continuing interaction. This paper, using the model, indicates some of the areas that need to be addressed to develop new ways of thinking about the *vertical – horizontal* interactions, and new ways of managing and nurturing them, so they can work together more constructively for the greater whole. There is rich material here for complexity analysis, and still much work to do. I invite those interested in that, or community engagement from these perspectives, to contact me: complex.community@gmail.com

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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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