

Briefing Paper 116

A review of rural community organising in England

James Garo Derounian

Introduction

This briefing paper provides an overview of Rural Community Organising in England, in 2013. It aims to trigger discussion and reflection on current debates on effective ways of organising in, and with, communities from a specifically rural perspective which has, to date, been neglected. Although the detail and focus is rural England, many of the principles and themes discussed will be of interest to urban practitioners in the UK and internationally.

‘Rural communities’ are defined - using a long-standing criterion – as places with up to 10,000 population (Defra, 2004 and Commission for Rural Communities, 2007)¹

Bracht et al. (1999: 86) define community organising as;

‘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.’

Origins of Community Organising and Community Development

¹ An extensive bibliography is given in the full report of this research, also published by the TSRC.

Community organising (CO) has its origins in the work of reformers, philanthropists and the activities of some rural ‘nineteenth century populist movements such as the Southern Tenant Farmworker Union’ in the United States (Hess, 1999).

Wright (cited in Buller and Wright, 1990) noted the beginnings of Community Development (CD) in British colonial administration during the 1940s. One colonial office memorandum (quoted by Brokensha and Hodge, 1969: 27-8) specifically promoted, ‘the training of the people in the management of their own affairs and the inculcation of the ideals of citizenship and service.’

The radical activist Saul Alinsky² pioneered the first broad-based community alliance in Chicago during 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 characterised by militant strategies and tactics, a radical analysis of community problems... designed to mobilise more people in support of democratic and just solutions.’

² Alinsky, S. D. (1971) *Rules for Radicals*. A pragmatic primer for realistic radicals, New York: Vintage.

Moving from organizing (USA) to its UK variant, organising, the importance of faith-based support clearly surfaces in the literature. Furbey (et al, 1997: 141), for example, note the Church of England 'financial support since 1990 for the development of Community Organising in several English cities.' The first Rural Community Council (RCC) supporting and enabling initiatives in rural communities - Oxfordshire RCC - came into being in 1921. There are now 38 RCC county branches under the umbrella of Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE). In 2013 this federation became known as RCAN (the Rural Community Action Network). RCCs have employed community development workers since the 1970s. Some (Cornwall, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire) have recently hosted Community Organisers. This hints at a point developed later – that Community Organising (CO) and Community Development (CD), whilst contested, coexist, overlap and have fuzzy boundaries. Similarly, English community-based approaches and rural policies have crossed over and vaulted party politics. For example, the Conservative Government's 1995 Rural White Paper (DoE and MAFF: 2) encouraged, 'local initiative and voluntary action...we will involve rural people in more of the decisions which affect their daily lives.' These sentiments are similar to those articulated in the Localism Act 2011, and Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government pronouncements on the Big Society. There are therefore community-based rural and urban policy continuities across successive UK Governments.

Coming up to date

In December 2012 Locality successfully bid to government to become a managing agent for the delivery of a CO programme between 2011 and 2015. Organisers, 'will listen to residents in their homes, on the street and where they gather... to help develop their collective power to act together for the common good' (Locality, 2012a). In the

original tender document Locality cited 'unique nationwide practitioner knowledge and experience, extending deeply into rural and urban communities.' Community organisers were, and are, recruited and hosted by local organisations; and RE: generate, Locality's partner, trains organisers 'in the 'Root Solution Listening Matters' approach to help them build networks and create dialogue. 'Of 54 hosts around 7 (13% at the time of writing) may be considered rural in base, coverage or activities: Ashington Community Development Trust (Northumberland); Gloucestershire Rural Community Council; Keystone Development Trust (working across the East of England); Cambridgeshire Community Foundation; Kirkgate Arts – a Cumbrian social enterprise and Penwith Community Development Trust, Cornwall.

Methodology

This paper presents illustrative findings. The research was mainly in the form of a literature review of published practice and academic work. Sources include comment and opinion from blogs and tweets. This is supported by feedback from 20 key stakeholders, including COs and those agencies supporting or hosting them. Individuals were contacted on a 'snowballing' basis. The aim of this research is to understand commonalities and differences between community organising and community development; and to explore – practically – whether, or how, each may inform the other.

Findings and discussion

Key findings in relation to English rural community organising in 2013 are mirrored in the words of the US Annenberg Institute for Social Reform (2011): there are few 'models of rural organizing and little research to draw upon'. Hence this briefing and full TSRC Working Paper aims to address this gap.

The importance of faith-based support for organising and community development

In rural England there are around 13,000 Christian churches (Farnell et al. 2010). Furthermore, a 2013 study by the Church Urban Fund indicates that more than 6,500 Church of England parishes now provide services for the elderly, young people, families and new migrants; this points to the potential for faith-based community action and organising as a sustainable path.

Links and cross-fertilisation across urban and rural community organising

Organising, as already noted, has a strong urban image and heritage in terms of development 'within the US's (largely black) inner cities' (Craig et al. 2011: p4). There is also a network stretching from London to other UK cities plus alliances with urban organising in Germany, Australia and the United States. However, internationally, community organising remains associated with urban neighbourhoods and high population densities.

Neighbourhoods = urban = where community organisers operate

Furthermore, there is an issue of perception: when is a rural CO rural? For example, Gloucestershire Rural Community Council recruited three COs for a one year traineeship. However, only one operated in a rural location (Nailsworth population 6,000); the other two serve Gloucester's urban neighbourhoods of Tredworth and Coney Hill. Locality themselves describe a rural neighbourhood as 'a market town, a rural district or an island community.' These are relatively large population centres compared to many villages.

There are issues common to rural and urban areas. London Citizens, for example, has campaigned on affordable housing and the

need for a living wage. The persistent need for affordable rural homes has been repeated in many official reports. Similarly low wages and poverty have regularly surfaced³, for example in the 1994 Rural Lifestyles research published by the UK Government. These point to 20-25% of English rural households living in or at the margins of poverty. Such issues represent a nucleus around which rural and urban organisers could combine forces and learn from each other.

Community organising remains a potent force in American national politics and localised action, so there may be benefits in sharing insights from American (urban and rural) organising with UK counterparts and those engaged in CD.

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

Organising is based on listening; helping people 'to realise things, put them in touch with others who think the same way'. CO is about solidarity and collective action. Whereas CD has more of a 'signposting' role in enabling a community, organising is deemed to be more animated and encourages community members to act without delay. In brief CD and CO represent different approaches to gain similar results. They coexist on a 'messy', diverse and overlapping spectrum. Despite both models focusing on working with others to generate community gains - antagonism between CD and CO advocates seems entrenched. Proponents of consensus based action hold that 'traditional' models of organizing...which emphasize protest and divergent interests, are not likely to succeed. Proponents of organizing conversely may view consensus-based community development 'as the manipulation of existing networks without changing terms of power.' (Greenberg, 2012: 228). A potential bridge between CD and CO is highlighted in a

³ Defra (2012) Rural Statement. London: HMSO

Community Development Foundation survey⁴ (2010: 6), which indicated that, '42% of paid CD workers were previously volunteers or carried out unpaid activities', such as organising. Furbey et al. (1997:142) state that turning to CO represents a reaction to 'long and often frustrating experience of established community strategies in Britain.'

The blight of short-termism and other issues and possibilities

Short-termism has dogged community development initiatives over many years. Unfortunately this has been repeated in Government guidance on community organisers' 51 week traineeships offered via the *Locality* programme: the 'problem has been that they don't have enough time to get into it before they are looking to finish' (RCC Senior Manager, 2013, personal communication). On the other hand, there is some evidence that trainee COs continue to be active beyond the traineeship. Rural community initiatives inhabit difficult logistical terrain, including a dispersed population and poor communications; everything takes longer. A former rural American CO contends that rural CO 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.

CO + CD = mutual reinforcement in pursuit of community-based action.

⁴Community Development Foundation (2010) *Report on survey of community development practitioners and managers*. Available at <http://www.cdf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/FINAL-Report-on-survey-of-community-development-practitioners-and-managers-with-covers.pdf> [accessed online 27.1.2013]

The overall features and boundaries of Community Organising and Community Development are indistinct, porous and contested. Whilst the extent of English rural CO is barely visible - 'off map' - there are tantalising views that combined action by organisers and developers 'could create power by breaking through the usual alignments and coalitions' (Wade Rathke cited in Szakos and Szakos, 2008: 63)⁵. In principle and in practice given constrained resources – collaboration, rather than conflict surely offers a productive way forward in fostering rural community action?

Key Questions

This paper raises three key questions:

1. What can community development learn from community organising in rural contexts and vice versa?
2. What are the key challenges for organising in and with rural communities?
3. What are the ways forward for rural community development and organising?

Please send feedback and reflections to;
jderounian@glos.ac.uk

⁵Szakos, J. and Szakos, K.L. Editors (2008) *Lessons from the Field: Organizing in Rural Communities*. New Orleans: American Institute for Social Justice/Social Policy Magazine



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

© TSRC 2013

This paper is part of the Third Sector Research Centre – Briefing Paper Series see www.tsrc.ac.uk for more details and a copy of the full Working Paper.

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Barrow Cadbury UK Trust is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the programme of the joint ESRC, Barrow Cadbury and the Third Sector Research Centre.