

Briefing Paper 91

Seeing and doing: learning, resources and social networks below the radar

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Introduction

There is a growing interest in social networks and the potential that exploring them brings to understanding development and change in communities. Equally, there has been substantial investment over the past decade in community capacity building aimed at enabling communities to have a voice in decision making processes, establishing independent organisations to meet local needs, or developing communities' ability to manage local assets and services. These have been themes across both the New Labour and Coalition administrations. Indeed, if anything, the Localism Act and Open Government White Paper places even higher expectations on communities in terms of the skills required for local governance and the delivery of services.

Yet, little is known about how those active in small, below the radar, community groups gain the skills, knowledge and resources they need to meet their goals and objectives. Indeed, the assumption which has underpinned 'capacity building' initiatives has been that skills are best developed through formal training and education. But is this the case?

In this context, the following briefing paper explores:

- What types of resources, social networks and skills do communities harness to reach their goals?
- How do they acquire those skills and resources and how do these change over time?
- What kinds of policy and practice is needed to support access to the kinds of social networks, resources and skills that community groups need to get?

The approach

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at 11 venues (including community hubs) with 16 representatives from small, volunteer based, community organisations. These were supplemented by three focus groups exploring skills, knowledge and resources in small community groups involving 45 activists, practitioners and academics.

The sample was selected, drawing on a range of community networks, to reflect the diversity of below the radar activity, different geographical settings (rural/urban, inner

city/peripheral estates) and communities of interest. It also focused on groups that had sustained themselves over a number of years.

Findings

Starting out

When starting out, respondents identified a set of common features that had enabled the group to move from informality to some form of more structured activity. A common cause was, in each case, the catalyst. Sometimes this was a crisis – such as problems with flooding, or the loss of local facilities.

Personality characteristics were identified as an important resource for groups. Leaders were frequently charismatic: full of ideas, enthusiasm and determination. A further asset was the possession of strong networks between key activists and the wider community and an ability to mobilise others to work towards delivering the group's aims and objectives

Drawing on skills, knowledge and resources

Each of the groups was good at using social networks to identify and attract the skills and knowledge required for group development from people within their community, and tapping into those skills in order to move forward with their aims. Participants highlighted the important mix of 'soft' and 'hard' skills. The specific technical skills required evolved over time and included financial management, buildings management, health and safety, food hygiene, marketing and communications and many more competences. Yet interviewees were adamant that possession of such skills alone was not enough to

ensure success of their groups. Certain types of interpersonal skills which facilitated team working were critical to ensuring the ability of often quite heterogeneous groups of people to work together effectively. The ability to negotiate and inspire confidence was important.

Developing skills, knowledge and resources

As groups evolved and moved towards achieving their goals, they identified a range of learning needs. These changed over time. For example, as those involved in the Community Shop and Village Hall groups began to realise their goals. Skills in fundraising which had enabled initial progress (e.g. purchasing premises) needed to be augmented with other skills; they had to learn how to manage an asset. Another group moved from campaigning and negotiating to technical estate management. These skills were developed, however, not through formal training, but by 'seeing and doing' often by linking up with members of the community who had the requisite skills or by learning from other similar groups. 'Seeing and doing' for most groups was a physical activity (rather than via virtual social media) whereby they visited a person or a group who could teach them what they needed to know.

Addressing skills gaps

Social networks were critical in identifying expertise and addressing skills gaps. This applied both within the community '*knowing who was around and who could do what*' but also when external support was required. For example, whilst respondents were well networked within their area/community of interest, as they evolved and took on greater levels of responsibility, vertical as

well as horizontal relationships became more important: relationships that were often absent at the outset. It is interesting to note that in developing and using those networks the focus tended to be upon the person helping them, rather than their employing organisation. Relationships were 'individualised'.

What people, groups, and communities gain

Those interviewed talked about what had been gained from involvement from their own, and wider community, perspectives. Activism had involved developing or refining particular skills for individuals and had contributed to building new networks and relationships within the locality - bringing together people who had previously not come into contact with each other across class or other divides.

Furthermore participants highlighted the importance of social activities and spaces in successful groups. Social events were important in the way the groups worked: both together and in communicating with a wider community. For the Village Shop, establishing a community owned business was not only about "*providing somewhere for convenient shopping*" but also creating "*a social meeting place*".

Discussion

Throughout the research, interviewees tended to highlight the skills mix within a group, rather than individual knowledge and resources. Technical knowledge was important, but community connections were critical. Furthermore knowledge without passion and a shared cause was seen as 'meaningless'. The collective abilities and capacities of all involved brought groups

their strength and were critical to their success. Each member of the group could be conceived as being part of a jigsaw. If any part was missing the group would not function effectively and thus the missing piece had to be sourced via social networks.

The findings demonstrate that community groups use a wide range of resources, social networks and skills to reach their goals. Many of those resources could be described as human capital developed from other spheres of their lives: paid work, raising children, and running other voluntary groups. Others could be described as a kind of emotional capital – commitment to 'the cause'. Wide connections meant access to support, in the form of volunteer time, and to the specialist skills needed to run organisations effectively. As resource needs changed over time groups moved from what, in Putnam's (2000) terms might be described as bonding capital, that which exists between members of the bounded community of geography or interest, to bridging capital as they sought knowledge from other organisations by observing how they worked. Some, but by no means all, also developed linking capital with agencies or institutions, though typically such connections were developed via individual volunteer's personal or professional social networks, rather than through any formal networking activity on the part of the organisation.

Conclusions

Drawing firm conclusions from a relatively small pilot study is problematic. However, the findings highlight three areas for further research into the under-explored issues of networks and learning in small, informal or semi-formalised, community groups.

Firstly, there are issues around understanding more fully the nature and use of networks 'below the radar'. Those interviewed talked mainly of horizontal, peer to peer, networks based on trust and friendship. Less was said about the role of vertical networks in influencing policy. How then, do those informal peer relationships interact with, or relate to, more hierarchical organisations (the Local Authority etc.) which can influence and shape local services?

Secondly, social networks and networking were clearly important for research participants. However, as successful groups, other forms of capital came into play, human, financial, cultural and environmental. Each described the complex weave of skills and knowledge (from communications through to understanding health and safety legislation) required to run even a small community group. Social networks alone were insufficient.

Thirdly, across all those interviewed, whatever the task taken on by the group, what was particularly important (and a dominant theme in some interviews) was the quality of friendships formed and relationships sustained through community activity. Can groups survive or thrive where the task dominates group dynamics or, vice versa social relationships divert attention from group goals?

Finally, how do those active in their community learn? Research in formal voluntary organisations has tended to stress the importance of formalised, often accredited learning. Much less is known about informal, experiential, learning in community groups.

Yet informal learning is acknowledged to come from a whole range of activities related to work, family or leisure. It is often not structured and incidental. Academics writing in this field stress the communal, rather than individualised, characteristics of informal, community based learning and that informal learning is 'situated' in local issues, activities and cultures. Learning through experience in community activity may have very practical outcomes for those involved, including access to employment, but those outcomes are not the motivation for, or purpose of, learning in community groups. Rather participants talked of the 'practical intelligence'. Learning was by 'seeing and doing' rather than training per se: but how is such 'practical intelligence' supported and shared between communities at a grass roots level? Understanding these complex interactions, between social networks, other forms of capital and how informal learning can develop community practice, is critical to developing a richer picture of associational life.



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