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

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Abstract

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 themes, of voluntary action, community organising and asset transfer, influence policy across both the New Labour and Coalition administrations. Indeed, if anything, the Localism Bill and Open Government White Paper places even higher expectations on communities in terms of 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, whether political or service driven. Indeed, the assumption which has underpinned 'capacity building' initiatives, and remains a core element of the *Community Organisers Programme*, has been that skills are best developed through formal training and education.

In this context, the following working paper, based on a series of pilot interviews with 15 community groups that began their activities as informal or 'below the radar' community organisations, aims to explore:

- What types of resources, social networks and skills do communities harness to reach their goals?
- How do they acquire those skills and resources?
- What can exploring the social networks involved in delivering community actions tell us about how community groups emerge, develop and evolve?
- 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 on in their local contexts?

Keywords

Community groups; social networks, learning and resources.

Contents

- Background..... 3**
- Research aims and methods..... 4**
- The approach 5**
- Research participants 6**
- Findings..... 8**
 - Starting out..... 8
 - Drawing on skills, knowledge and resources..... 10
 - Developing skills, knowledge and resources..... 10
 - Addressing skills gaps 12
 - Sharing skills, knowledge and resources 13
 - What people, groups, and communities gain 13
- Discussion 15**
- Conclusions 17**
- References 19**

Background

Over the past decades, the concept of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) has been influential in the development of policy around communities and neighbourhoods. More recently, research into social networks and how these operate at local level, has also become important in terms of informing policy and strategy for neighbourhood change, behavioural 'nudge' and community resilience (Gilchrist, 2009; Edwards, 2009; Rowson et al., 2010; McLean and Dellott, 2011; Cabinet Office, 2011).

At the same time there has been significant investment into a range of capacity building and community engagement initiatives: from ChangeUp, Capacity Builders, Community Empowerment Networks and Take Part under New Labour through to the Community Organisers Programme being funded by the current administration. Each of these programmes was underpinned by the assumption that people in communities needed skilling up to engage in decision making processes or deliver services to, and within, their communities.

The term capacity building has somewhat fallen from grace, replaced by 'developing skills and confidence' (IVAR, 2010) or 'capabilities' (BIG Lottery Fund, 2011). On the one hand this 'uneven distribution of capacity' has exercised not only Government programmes, but also major sector funders (see for example the BIG Lottery Fair Shares initiative and IVAR, 2010). On the other, there has been a growing trend towards often rather mechanistic needs analysis toolkits (NCVO, undated), 'Kite Marks' and quality standards, such as Community Matters' 'Visible Communities' , Birmingham Voluntary Service Council's Quality First, and the Charities Evaluation Service's PQASSO Quality Standard.

A series of recent reports has highlighted some of the difficulties and tensions within these initiatives. For example, programmes have lacked base-lines against which to measure 'built capacity' (NAO, 2009; TSRC, 2009). The focus of evaluations has tended to be the perceived quality of delivery (of training, advice etc.) rather than impact and outcomes in the longer term (Sender et al., 2011; Take Part Network, 2011). Where good practice and related guidance has been produced, it tends to define community organisations as smaller, formal, voluntary groups with paid staff (Kail, Keen and Lumley, 2011) or multi-purpose community anchors (IVAR, 2011) with incomes of up to £1 million per year and with a (hierarchical) management structure. Community groups and activities that are 'below the radar', that is with very small incomes, no/few formal structures and dependent on volunteers, have largely been omitted from consideration.

The emphasis in terms of developing skills, knowledge and resources within front-line organisations, amongst funders and in policy circles has therefore been on formal training and systems with the possible exception of the Communities and Local Government funded Guide Neighbourhoods Programme (McCabe et al., 2007) which developed models of resident led peer learning and 'seeing is believing' visits between estates involved in regeneration.

Further, research into social networks and social capital, their value and use (Putnam, 2000), has tended not to explore their complex relationship and interaction with the uneven distribution of other

forms of capital such as human, economic and cultural (Bourdieu, 1986; Savage et al., 2005), or widespread access to social technologies.

Nor has that research, in terms of the voluntary and community sector, explicitly examined networks in terms of:

- *structure* - the configuration of nodes and linkages (community networks), such as 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973 and 1974) or bridging and linking social capital (Woolcock, 2001);
- *functions* – transactional – in terms of personal or organisational benefits rather than trust based relationships (Blau, 2012), organising – with networking seen as an alternative to hierarchical organising (Eichler, 2007), information exchange (Antal and Richebe, 2009), emotional support, sharing or influencing (McPherson et al., 2001);
- *processes* - social interaction, strategic alliances, access to resources (Marcus et al., 2011) and mode of connecting: face-to-face, online, deliberate, chance encounters (Gilchrist, 2009).

As a result, little is known about skill and resource acquisition processes in small, generally dependent on voluntary labour, below the radar community groups and activities (McCabe, Phillimore and Mayblin, 2009). In addition, two of the characteristics identified as central to such groups are their fluidity and informality (Phillimore et al., 2010) yet these characteristics and how they influence, and are influenced by social network development and associated access to resources, have been overlooked. In light of these deficits we sought to examine the role of social networks within 'below the radar' community groups. The aim was to identify how social networks shape the emergence and ongoing evolution of such community actions, the ways in which social networks facilitate access to skills, knowledge and resources and how community organisations might be supported to access the resources they need to deliver their aims and objectives effectively.

Research aims and methods

The starting point for the research was a TSRC review of the literature on social network theories and research methods for mapping networks (Burnage, 2010). Four main approaches to mapping social networks were identified:

- *Whole-network Design* (Wesserman and Faust, 1994) which examines sets of interrelated objects or actors that are regarded for analytical purposes as bound in a social collective and with some form of shared purpose or identity.
- *Egocentric Design* (Marsden, 2006) – which focuses on one object or actor and its relationships within its locality.
- *Cognitive Social Structure (CSS) Design* (Krackhardt, 1987) – which attempts to measure observed relationships from multiple sources or perspectives both inside and outside the network.
- *Retrospective Design* – e.g. Life History Calendar (LHC) (Axinn, 1999) - designed as a method of collecting detailed individual-level event timing and sequencing data.

However, none of these approaches had the potential to illustrate ‘how resources within a network (including people, skills, knowledge, finance etc.) alter over time’ each presenting a snapshot of networks at a particular point in time or providing a temporal perspective for a single individual or group (Burnage, 2010: 5). Our review concluded that we needed to pilot an approach with an experimental design to adapt social network methods for use with below the radar groups and activities. This involved developing a set of core questions and ‘scoring grid’ to inform understandings of how/whether an approach informed by social network theory can inform research/findings on how individuals develop and share resources skills and knowledge within and between community based groups/activities.

The approach

The method we devised was based around an in-depth organisational history approach whereby our research participants, generally the leaders of community groups, explored with us their social networks and resource requirements at three stages of their development. The first stage was establishment of the organisation, the second was a critical moment, which they were asked to identify themselves and at which their social networks and/or resource requirements changed and the third was the present moment with some speculation about needs in the future. We identified organisations that had at least begun their lives below the radar as unincorporated associations that did not appear on the data-bases of regulatory authorities (e.g. Charity Commission) and still primarily operated at community level. For each phase we asked respondents:

- to identify the social networks involved in establishing/delivering the group’s actions;
- to outline the knowledge, skills and resources they used and their source;
- to consider gaps in skills, resources and knowledge and the impacts of their absence.

As part of this exercise we identified the resources, skills and knowledge that each individual in the social networks brought and asked the respondents to score that asset in terms of its importance for the group. Respondents were encouraged to reflect over the story of their group’s initiation and evolution and covered a wide range of issues such as how and why they came together as a community group, how and what the group learned over time, the relative importance of different types of skills and knowledge, how their needs and requirements changed over time, how skills, knowledge and resources were shared beyond the immediate group and moved around civil society as group members perhaps joined new organisations.

The study was conceived as a pilot. We aimed to use it to design a mapping tool to record how skills and resources were acquired, moved or lost over time and to identify and track further case studies networked to our pilot studies for further investigation (see for example Gilchrist, 2009; Rowson et al., 2010). Thus we hoped our pilot would ultimately equip us for understanding the ‘family trees’ of networked community organisations. Certain research assumptions underpinned this approach. Firstly, that research participants would be able to ‘score’ skills knowledge and resources in a hierarchy of importance. Secondly, that they would be able to identify the critical skills individuals brought to a group and how these had been gained. Thirdly, that community groups would be able to

identify 'critical phases' in terms of their development and change. Finally, that the research would enable us to develop visual representations of networks in community groups (see for example: Burnage, 2010; Rowson et al., 2010). The limitations of these assumptions are addressed in the final sections of the current discussion paper.

Research participants

Pilot interviews were conducted at 11 venues (including community hubs) with 16 representatives from small, volunteer based, community organisations between March and December 2011. 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. The characteristics of the groups participating is summarised in Table 1.

Despite this diversity of location, focus and activity, each of the groups in the pilot study shared certain common characteristics. All the groups involved started 'below the radar' as unincorporated associations, but had moved over time to gaining some kind of legal status. All had been successful and were highly visible within (though not necessarily outside) their own communities and had achieved their original objectives. With two exceptions, all the groups, and the services they delivered, were run by unpaid volunteers. The groups with paid staff had a single worker or a small, mainly part time, team which in one case was a recent development. All had a core group of 6-8 activists but were able to draw on a much wider pool of volunteers. That core group of activists was stable over time despite some changes in social networks.

These shared characteristics indicate that the sample for pilot interviews was not particularly heterogeneous. Certainly there was no evidence of the intra-group conflict that can characterise some community based organisations (Taylor et al., 2006). All had a clear direction of travel and had not 'stalled' into routine but ineffectual activity or ceased to operate. Each group had achieved what they had set out to do and negotiated their way through barriers that others might have struggled to overcome. We plan, at a later stage, to undertake interviews with groups that had 'failed' i.e. had ceased to operate having not achieved their original objectives. We recognise such an approach can also inform about the types of resources, skills and knowledge that are required to aid success.

As a sample of successful community organisations, there are therefore lessons to be learned through developing an understanding of how below the radar groups develop, and examining the factors which facilitate their growth.

Table 1: Groups participating in the research

Name	Location	Primary purpose	Activities
Brownton Village Hall Development Group	Rural	Community Hub/meeting space	Provides space for a diverse range of local groups and activities Fundraising Social events
Canute Flood Action Group	Rural	Campaigning	Lobbying for flood defences Fundraising Social events
Central Africa Communities Association (CACA)	Community of interest/ identity	Representation/ cultural identity	Social events Representation (immigration and nationality) Social history
Cobalt Connects	Market town	Area improvements	Asset management Social events/fundraising Informal learning opportunities Promoting the local economy/green initiatives
Faith in Volunteers England (FIVE)	Community of interest/ identity (faith groups)	Volunteer networking	Volunteer support Development of volunteer opportunities in faith based organisations
Hadrian's Wall Tenants and Residents Association (HWTRA)	Peripheral estate	Advocacy and representation	Representing tenants Estate Management Social events Community clean-ups
Heritage Hall	Peripheral estate	Community Centre/hub	Preservation society Local history group Friends of the park Coffee shop/snack bar Community festival
Hopes 4 All	Peripheral estate	Multi-purpose faith based organisation	Pre-school group Youth work Dance group Faith activities (Bible class etc.)
Noham Village Shop	Rural	Service provider: community shop	Volunteers running local community shop Fundraising Social events
Oddington Hall	Peripheral Estate	Community centre/hub	Neighbourhood regeneration Room hire Social events Community development
Stop It Now	Women's group/peripheral estate	Community responses to domestic violence	Support groups Advice and counselling

Findings

The skills, knowledge and resources developed within, and needed by, each group changed over time. Having started with generic skills largely underpinned by shared motivations and a degree of enthusiasm, most acquired highly technical skills: ranging from shop or asset management through to research (CFAG) and a detailed knowledge of housing legislation (HWTRA) or safeguarding issues (Hopes 4 All). These areas of expertise, however, were not seen as key at the outset.

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, other times it was a desire to overcome isolation or to provide some social activities for an overlooked group.

'I think it's important to have a common cause. If people don't have a common cause they won't come together. I think it helped that it was a short campaign not one that became long and drawn out. That helped keep energy levels high. Also we were focused. ... We worked on what we could change and not on things that you cannot do.' (Canute Flood Action Group)

Not all groups began with a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve. For example CACA started out as a social group, meeting to play football. As refugee numbers rose in the late 1990s and early 2000s the group evolved to focus on providing immigration and nationality advice to new arrivals because they found that members of their community were struggling to get the support they needed from mainstream agencies. The Tenants and Residents Group were motivated by a poor housing repair service and the disruption associated with two substantial capital projects on land immediately adjoining their estate: "It is people, and quite rightly, who are concerned about where they're living" (HWTRA). Hopes 4 All also responded to needs they identified in their local area, in their case for an out of school group, that featured dance classes and youth work:

'I saw some young people sitting by the church, about ten of them, the first time I drove past here. The second time about ten again just sitting basically near the grass there and I stopped one day and spoke to them and they said, "Yeah, because we don't have anywhere else to go". Actually they said something like, "Nobody cares about us yet the hall there is closing," and I just felt challenged.'

HWTRA and the domestic violence group at Oddington Hall were motivated by anger. This emotion and having a 'common enemy' was a key motivator, in early organising:

'It happened because of something that happened to a friend of mine and I was angry and cross about it, and that's really... you know, that was the thing, it's the passion, I suppose, and that's what we're probably trying to get through to people, what is your passion, what is the thing that will drive you forward.'

Cobham Connects' starting point, however, was different: the local environment was seen as excellent and need to be preserved and developed:

'But we are coming at it from the point of the aesthetics. "Wouldn't it be lovely to have a green road?" We're not coming at it from the "Oh God, we all hate..." It's just a different way of going into the issues.' (Cobham Connects)

Similarly, Heritage Hall activity was developed not from addressing local difficulties but from the "love of the area and the love of the building".

It was some kind of common cause, coupled as we shall see below, with interpersonal skills, that was critical to initial group development. Personality characteristics were frequently identified as an important resource for groups. Leaders were frequently charismatic: full of ideas, enthusiasm and determination. Their ability to attract other activists was seen as key:

'There's also issues as a leader, I think, in small groups that can be very good, but can also be counter-productive. It's having the skills to be a leader, but accept the fact that there are people below you that can bring something to the party and not feel threatened by it... The controlling leader who won't let others use their skills is dangerous.' (Oddington Hall)

When asked what members of social networks brought to the group, determination and perseverance were frequently identified as key assets of group members. Having the right attitude was important, "failure was not an option... we refused to be victims" (CFAG). Some individuals refused to be discouraged even when they experienced multiple setbacks. A further asset was the possession of strong networks between key individuals and the wider community. Often those involved in establishing groups were very well networked and able to mobilise others to work towards delivering the groups aims and objectives. Just having these kinds of people in a group enabled them to access a major resource: human capital.

'I know a lot of people and that helps, because I've been in the village a number of years, and I've involved myself in other projects in the past, not necessarily projects but just events and happenings in the village.' (Noham Village Shop)

For the Central Africa Communities Association (CACA) sharing space with other refugee and migrant groups enabled them to develop networks across diaspora communities enabling them to learn from each other, critically important for groups that have little experience of operating in the UK (Phillimore and Goodson, 2010).

Campaigning, especially when rapid action was needed, would have been much more difficult without the relationships and networks, which were already in place. CFAG, Browntown Village Hall and Heritage Hall, used their extensive networks to establish and to identify others, often with specialist knowledge or professional skills, to address particular barriers or needs such as local residents with business planning skills. While interviewees stressed the importance of personal characteristics and social networks they also identified elements of chance and 'luck' in both coming together initially and developing as a group:

'It was just a fluke phone call to me because I don't come to church or anything but he [the vicar] phoned me for somebody's phone number, because he'd known my husband, and he mentioned that this was going to be on the programme and he was looking for volunteers. So I rang round some friends and we all came to the meeting' (Heritage Hall)

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. Future interviews will explore how groups get on when social networks are not so strong, or where there is a lack of access to particular sets of technical skills and knowledge within the community. Our interviewees 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 were important.

'The confidence of the people... The belief in themselves, and far more importantly, because some people have come on there and thought, "Am I capable of doing it?" "Well, yes you are. Four or five years later, look at you. Look at what you know."' (HWTRA)

'Her background as a nurse, some meetings can be very hostile and very fraught. She's able to calm people down and inject a certain type of behaviour that you probably wouldn't normally expect. She's very... I'm sure it's because nurses are able to calm people down and reassure people and that kind of stuff.' (HWTRA).

Furthermore recognising and celebrating success and acknowledging contributions was seen as important. CFAG, for example, regularly contacted everyone who supported the campaign (from very active members to those who had signed petitions/organised fundraising events) to thank them. For HWRTA, celebrating successes helps 'keep the energy going'.

Generally, these skills, certainly in the early stages of development, were not seen as community or voluntary sector specific. Indeed, none of the community activists interviewed had a background in the voluntary sector. Rather, they talked about transferrable skills, brought from their work place, their life experience, or from Trade Union activity. "Here I use what I have learned through my work. But this is more fun than work." (Heritage Hall)

Those involved in the Community Shop, Cobham Connects and Village Hall talked about being able to draw on the professional skills of active members: the IT specialist designing the community website, the self-employed business woman managing the finances, etc.

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.

'People started with nothing when they arrived. Slept in each other's flats and on each other's floors. After the football there was a lot of talk like how do I renew my visa, how do I deal with this immigration problem. Now it has moved on. What we have identified is the barriers to employment and education,. So we have been doing something about that, getting an education. '(CACA)

'I suppose the skills we needed did change a bit over time. So there was the data collection and putting the report together for the Environment Agency. After that it was more about lobbying and getting our case heard, involving the media, talking to the Council and officers and that was new to me and a really steep learning curve.' (CFAG)

As those involved in the Community Shop and Village Hall groups began to realise their goals, skills in fundraising coupled with enthusiasm and motivation and which had enabled initial progress needed to be augmented with other skills; they had to learn how to manage an asset. HWTRA, moved from campaigning and negotiating to technical estate management skills. 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:

'Yes, we sent small groups out to look at some that weren't too far away, which were all run in quite different ways, really. Some of them with paid staff, one in a portakabin, all sorts of different sizes and ways of running things. But we always thought that we would probably start off on a voluntary basis. If there was any possibility in the future of employing a manager or a manageress, then we might think about it, but we thought we'd start off with just volunteers and it turns out that we quite like it that way, anyway, so we're sticking to it at the moment.' (Noham Village Shop)

CACA 'learned the ropes' through observing the practices at a well-established voluntary organisation which temporarily offered them office and meeting space. The design of Brownton Village Hall evolved from visiting other village halls "looking at spaces that worked and those that didn't and discovering what attracted people (to a Village Hall) and could make it viable".

Some groups identified very specific learning, again through seeing, doing and networking:

'But within that group it's about people who may be running their own businesses, sharing skills and experiences, but it's just... someone might say, "Oh I've got a problem with this on my computer," and someone else can say, "Oh I can sort that out". Or someone else might say, "Where can I...? I really need to find a new..." something and someone else says, "Well I know the person you need to speak to".' (Cobham Connects)

Seeing and doing for most groups was a physical activity whereby they visited a person or a group who could teach them what they needed to know. Use of IT and social networking tools were evident. The Internet tended to be used as a 'static' source of information and whilst Cobham Connects did use new technologies for networking, social networking was used not as a substitute for, but as an extension of, actual meetings:

'And conference calls and video-conferencing is all very well but it's not the same as looking across the table at someone.' (Cobham Connects)

HWTRA found out about Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) by chance through an internet search. However they only decided to change their status after meetings with several TMOs and through exploring other estate management options through site visits. The rural groups interviewed tended not to use on-line interaction because of concerns about access to, and the speed of, internet access (Fishbourne and Derounian, 2009) while Oddington Hall felt that IT could be an actual barrier for small community groups:

'More funders have moved from paper applications to online and people haven't necessarily got those skills... there's an assumption that everybody's computer-literate and they're not.'

Addressing skills gaps

Surveys repeatedly highlight fundraising skills as one of the key problems in the voluntary sector (Clark, 2007; Brown et al., 2011) alongside governance issues (IVAR, 2010). Most, however, focus on larger organisations with paid staff. Brown et al. (2011), for example, define a small charity as one with an income of less than £1.5 million per annum. Interestingly, none of our respondents highlighted fundraising or governance as key learning need at any stage in their development. Funding did, as the groups evolved, become a more important issue, enabling them to do more or, in terms of capital projects, achieve their goals. However, fundraising skills were again developed by 'trial and error' (Brownton Village Hall), by doing, or through identifying someone in the social network with appropriate skills, rather than attending courses. There were mixed feelings about the 'blessings' of external funding and the extent to which it could impact on the organic emergence of relationships and support:

'It's very important to not have too much money at the beginning, because if I had had too much money at the beginning I wouldn't have had to beg and borrow, therefore I wouldn't have established the relationships that we quickly did with the schools and the churches and local people. Because it became evident that we had nothing, people were extremely generous.' (Cobham Connects)

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'. HWTRA, for example, experienced the local Housing Department as a barrier "but Jim and Ray have been really helpful". CFAG developed links with District and County Councillors, but again referred to them in first name terms rather than their official role. The groups in Noham and Brownton developed links with national village hall and community shop network organisations, but again talked about individuals rather than organisations per se. CACA felt that the local Council for Voluntary Service had not been supportive and did not understand their cultural needs but 'Sally' had played a key role in securing some funding for their activities.

This disassociation from organisations reflects earlier studies which indicate that community groups are 'embedded more in networks of individual agency than institutional strategy' (Edwards and Woods 2006: 61). Further, others could remember the involvement of a named key individual from an external agency being drawn in for advice at a particular point – but not the nature of that advice, often because support interventions by infrastructure agencies may have been some time ago. It was not always clear to our interviewees what support had been accessed, how it was received and regarded

at the time, and whether it was of any use to them. In addition our respondents often worked as part of a team and this only had partial knowledge of the context in which support needs were identified (Batty et al. 2009 p 30).

Sharing skills, knowledge and resources

There was limited evidence of extensive skills sharing within each group; “people focus on what their speciality is, if they have one” (Noham Village Shop). Activists worked to existing skills sets and at a level they were comfortable with. There were some examples of individuals learning from each other, particularly in the area of IT but on the whole individuals had particular roles in their groups that reflected their expertise. Noham Community Shop adopted a ‘seeing and doing’ model to share their experience and expertise:

‘We do have, we host visits at the shop from other shops. We’ve got one coming up, actually, next week... who haven’t actually opened a shop yet, but they’re hoping to open a community shop, and we’re hosting a visit and usually spend three or four hours, this will be the third one that we’ve done, ..We try and get together a cross-section of our group, perhaps four or five of us, a finance person, a buyer, someone from marketing, so that we can cover all aspects of the business, and we have... we’ve, sort of, worked out the format now, so we can go through it with them. We start off in the shop, go through all sorts of things that they want to speak about that we can tell them and then we usually go back to somebody’s house, have some lunch, and then carry on talking about whatever.’ (Noham Village Shop).

Similarly, other Tenants and Residents Associations considering estate management options now visited HWTRA. Skills sharing appeared more common (if less formalised) in the groups with a more fluid membership. Members of CACA used the skills gained to establish refugee and support groups in places they had moved to elsewhere in the UK. Members of CFAG were using the fundraising skills gained to support international projects and to form a village action group that tackled issues beyond the need for a flood barrier. Cobham Connects noted:

‘We’re at quite an exciting point because we’re literally taking what we’ve learnt now and thinking about what value it has for other people.’ (Cobham Connects)

What people, groups, and communities gain

Those interviewed talked about what had been gained from their own, and wider community, perspectives. Activism had involved developing or refining particular skills for particular individuals:

‘How to work with people, (elected) members, officers who are coming with a political agenda. So political skills, how to work your way round systems and understand bureaucratic systems... More generally I think some people learned some highly technical skills like designing questionnaires and doing research.’ (CFAG)

A HWTRA committee member also remarked on what he had gained from his involvement in the group:

‘I personally can take an awful lot away from what I’ve been doing in the voluntary capacity, it’s added a hell of a lot to my CV, and you couldn’t pay for it in all honesty, so as much as I sometimes moan that I’m £3,500 down, I couldn’t have bought that, so...’ (HWTRA)

CACA, members were highly educated and in professional employment in their countries of origin. However, this education and employment history was not recognised in the UK and they knew little about UK systems and institutional culture (Phillimore and Goodson 2010). Involvement in the group offered the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the way things worked in the UK and to develop skills and experience that helped them get a job or a better job:

‘She started working in a restaurant. But with us she was doing advice and went and got her NVQ in Advice Guidance and Counselling and now she is an advisor with the Council.’ (CACA).

Further, interviewees highlighted broader social and economic benefits for the wider community associated with the development of their community organisation:

‘It’s all linked to the shop, but it brings in other people as well, like, for instance, local trades-people who’ve done work for us in the building, particularly when we were developing the coffee shop area, what value it’s been to them, not just directly with what we’ve paid them, but with other work they’ve picked up because other people have seen them working in the shop and asked them to do jobs for them.’

‘We still do have the Duke of Edinburgh kids; I think we’ve had three up to now. We decided that that would be quite a good thing to encourage, so, they, as it’s part of their volunteering hours, and they’re learning all sorts of new things really, which may help them to get a part-time job when they’re a bit older.’ (Noham Village Shop)

CFAG and Noham Community Shop felt that their actions 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. Participating in community activities was also said to be a good way of helping newcomers to fit into the local community and to develop social networks of their own. CACA believed that their experience running the group had enabled them to develop networks and projects across African communities in the UK. This was a move from their early work that focussed more around a single country of origin or region. They had also built links with Faith in Volunteering and were able to offer quality volunteering opportunities in faith based organisations.

Furthermore participants highlighted the importance of social activities in successful groups. Social events, sometimes, but not always, as a means of fundraising were important in the way the groups worked: both together and in communicating with a wider community. For Noham Village Shop, establishing a community owned business was not only about “providing somewhere for convenient shopping” but also creating “a social meeting place”. Similarly, CFAG, the key spin off from campaigning activity was the strengthening of networks within the village as a result of social activities: something that had continued after the end of their campaign. Others talked of the importance of friendships formed in informal groups:

‘I really enjoy coming up here. And the other big thing is here, it’s not just that, it’s the community, because the community spirit here is brilliant isn’t it? And you make so many friends. I mean, you can come in here any day and you’re going to meet people that you know and you’re happy to see.’ (Heritage Hall)

Informality was a key characteristic of the way groups operated, even when fully constituted and involved in highly structured/managerial activities such as running an estate, community shop or village hall.

'We meet once a week at the pub between 7.00 and 9.00, anyone who wants to come along that's got an idea, wants to kind of find out who we are, just come. And it's so informal, because normally we're having a laugh and a drink. That's been incredibly successful, hasn't it, because people who would feel threatened going into a formal meeting turn up and go, "Oh actually they're alright".' (Cobham Connects)

As more formal structures emerged, for each group these needed to be flexible and facilitate participation, rather than being rigid and alien to a particular community's way of working.

Discussion

Our original intention was to map, both literally and visually, relationships within and between groups, and identify the level of importance of particular skills and knowledge that an individual might bring to below the radar group development. What emerged was something different. In the first round of pilot interviews, participants were asked to identify key players, and the skills they brought, and then 'score' (on a scale of 1-5) those skills in terms of importance. Interviewees found it difficult to disassociate the individual from the skills and either refused to score or scored each skill as equally important. Interview schedules were then redesigned to reverse the question order so that people were asked to identify and score key skills (again on a scale of 1-5) and then asked who brought those skills to the group. This elicited a slightly different response – but one that essentially reinforced (from a different angle) the initial interview responses:

'Everyone was equally important – whether they got names on petitions, helped with the research, organised fund raising events or did things like provide lighting at those events or get bands to perform at the 'Bund Aid' event. I would say it was not about any one person or any one set of skills being more important than others. It was about attitude, about people working with their neighbours and becoming part of a bigger community and most important.' (Canute Flood Action Group)

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.

A second assumption in trying to map changing skills, knowledge and resources over time, was that community groups experience critical events in their lifetime. As external researchers, it was possible to identify such events for the groups involved: the Community Shop losing its premises just before its planned opening; a founder member and driver of the campaign group dying; the transition from campaigning and fundraising to asset management; the faith group taking over the lease of a redundant Local Authority Community Centre. This was not, however, the narrative of participants. For

them, the life of the group was seen as a journey, rather than as a series of critical events. The story was of natural progression. It is this narrative that has been adopted in the current working paper, rather than imposing an external rationale on participant narratives. It is possible that other groups might view their life-course differently, we shall explore this question further as the project progresses. Consideration needs to be given as to whether our research methods need further refinement given that the findings call into question the assumed hierarchies of importance attached to certain key individuals or agencies: an 'importance' which then facilitates the development of 'visual maps' of network relationships which assume central 'nodes' and relational hierarchies (Rowson et al., 2010) but was problematic in the current research as participants did not see either themselves or other activists holding that central (node) role (cf Gilchrist, 2009; Wesserman and Faust, 1994).

Our 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 or their lives: paid work, raising children, and running other voluntary groups. Others could be described as a kind of emotional capital; personality traits and emotions that motivated group members to work for the good of their community. We learned that strong social networks were the key to the success of the organisations that took part in our pilot studies. 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 we might describe as bonding capital, that which exists between members of the bounded community of geography or interest, to bridging capital as they sought and exchanged knowledge from and with 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 volunteers' personal or professional social networks, rather than through any formal networking on the part of the organisation.

We now move on to explore how the findings relate to policy and practice in developing community groups and activity. Firstly, they have relevance to current thinking around community resilience (Edwards, 2009; Cabinet Office, 2011), the importance on social networks in communities (Gilchrist, 2009) and regeneration and the role of 'behavioural nudge' in effecting local change (Rowson et al., 2010). Social networks were key to the development of each group and to the accessing of the skills and knowledge they needed to get on. Furthermore social activity and solidarity played a key role in 'resilience' and affecting change.

At a practice level: there was substantial investment in training and capacity building during the 2000's. While capacity building as a term has gone out of favour, and looks to be replaced by the use of the terms skills, knowledge and understanding (IVAR, 2010) or the language of training needs analysis (NCVO, undated), the emphasis on formal training associated with capacity building remains a key element of the *Community Organisers* programme and as BIG reviews its role (IVAR, 2010), funding streams such as BASIS, BIG Local and the BIG Assist. This approach assumes that there are a set of specialist technical skills which need to be in place for community organisations to flourish. However our participants stressed the importance of interpersonal skills and transferable skills drawn from their work or other experiences, or of having social networks enabling them to access those

skills. Learning as a political process (Mayo and Thompson, 1995) has, in the voluntary sector, been overtaken by concepts of competencies and vocationalism (Foley, 1999). The idea that transferrable learning in community activity (i.e. the building of confidence, of a different world view, developing voice) can equally change personal relationships and attitudes to, and in, the employed workplace appears to have been lost (Elsdon et al., 1995). All this may change if those involved in the *Community Organisers* programme adopt Freire's model of radical adult education (Freire, 1970) but the current emphasis seems to be still located in the idea of competencies for community engagement and formal training – though as Cairns (2003: 121) notes: 'While community activists clearly do a great deal of learning it does not necessarily come from [the] formal training' (Cairns, 2003: 121).

Yet our participants did not talk about training as instrumental to their learning. Indeed, often training was seen as 'patronising', 'not useful' and did not recognise the tension between communities as a space for learning at people's own pace and on their own issues, and more top down, formalised, learning on what policy makers and others assume is needed to strengthen community organisations and activities (Johnston and Coare, 2003).

People learned by seeing and doing and connecting. Through social networks and 'horizontal' peer experience:

'What I'm trying to encourage people to see is that a different perspective. Just 'cause Joe Bloggs says it and he's given you a lecture, it doesn't mean to say that Joe's right.' (HWTRA).

Learning in below the radar community groups develops collectively and by targeting and recruiting individuals into the group, rather than being an isolated and individualised activity. Further, our analysis suggests that there is not a hierarchy of learning. The 'soft' skills of being well connected, being able to negotiate and bring emotion and passion to a cause are as important as technical knowledge and vital ingredients in the success of below the radar community activity.

Conclusions

Drawing firm conclusions from a relatively small pilot study is problematic. However, our findings enable us to 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. Developing a visual 'network map' of each group – using the idea of central/crucially important nodes that then sustain linkages of varying strengths (Burnage, 2010) was therefore problematic. Less was said about their organisational function (Eichler, 2007), or the transactional role of vertical networks in influencing policy (McPherson et al., 2001). How then, do those informal peer relationships interact with, or relate to, more hierarchical organisations (the Local Authority, Health Trusts etc.) who 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 (Bourdieu, 1986; Savage et al., 2005). Each described the complex weave of skills and knowledge (from communications through to understanding health and safety legislation) required to run even a small, semi-formal, community group. Social networks by themselves were insufficient. So what happens when those capital, skills and knowledge, are unevenly distributed within and between communities?

Thirdly, what is the relationship between the tasks of small community groups (from running the community shop through to campaigning and supporting refugees) and their social functions? 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 (Lasa, 2012). Much less is known about informal, experiential, learning in community groups (Wenger, 1998). When they are discussed in the education literature, this tends to relate to community groups as a potential source of 'hard to reach' learners and moving them on from informal learning to formalised, accredited, education (Thomas, 1999).

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 (Commission of the European Communities, 2000). 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 (Colley et al., 2002: 5). 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' (Oddington Hall) required to run their organisation. Learning was by 'seeing and doing' rather than training per se: but how is such 'practical intelligence' supported at a grass roots level? How can networks that support and share learning within and between communities be nurtured? 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. Such information can help us to know how in community groups, where the social functions of groups are pivotal to participation, can volunteers be encouraged to be willing, and able, to engage in localism and the Big Society agenda.

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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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