

SUSTAINABLE PATHS TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

HELPING DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES TO HELP THEMSELVES

A MONOGRAPH BY CHARLOTTE AND DON YOUNG
FOREWORD BY GREG CLARK MP



SUMMARY OF MONOGRAPH

The gap between rich and poor in the UK is widening. Well-meaning attempts by various governments to narrow this inequality through ambitious, large-scale interventions have largely failed.

This monograph explores the reasons for this failure and presents the argument for a more consistent approach to solving problems related to social exclusion and social cohesion. A considerable body of evidence now points to an approach based on small-scale, community-based, bottom-up initiatives, properly supported, as the best way to break the deep-rooted cycle of deprivation and exclusion.

Using publicly available data and their own investigations, the writers explore the dimensions of, and underlying factors behind, some damaging social trends. They assert that there are understandable reasons why governments have failed to reverse the downward spiral for some parts of UK society, and explore a range of successful examples which do appear capable of beginning a beneficial process of change.

These examples are brought together to develop an approach which could be used much more widely. The monograph finishes with a detailed clarification of the distinct roles that key players such as government, third sector bodies and trusted community activists should adopt.

Chapter One starts by exploring the dimensions of a problem now familiar to most readers – the huge disparity of wealth, achievement and wellbeing between the best-off and the worst-off in the UK and the fact that the gap is persistent and widening. The writers have assembled a closely worked picture of the UK which is both arresting and grim. They point out that

the 70% most well-off in the population have tended to distance themselves from the rest, not regarding the disparity as a matter of direct concern. The chapter comments on the economic and social impact of this phenomenon on the rest of UK society, both in immediate terms and also in terms of the UK's long-term economic and social wellbeing in comparison with many other developed nations.

Chapter Two assesses the actions and thinking of government and opposition parties about this problem. It explores how politicians tend to be driven by a concern for greater participation in the democratic process. It evaluates the recent interest shown by politicians of all parties in 'social enterprise' and community-based projects and shows how valuable initiatives can lose many of their potential benefits by being put through conventional governance aims and processes. It introduces the main thrust of the research, based on community-driven ventures with a strong focus on learning and development and explores why the evidence for this approach may often be ignored by politicians and central and local government officials.

Chapter Three steps back from the social trends and examines some of the theoretical perspectives. It looks at international research that throws light on the effects of inequality on factors such as social trust and cohesion, health and educational attainment. It then examines two different interpretations of 'social capital', one which 'bonds' homogeneous groups together and the other which establishes and maintains 'links' between groups. The writers go on to explore some of the thinking that is demonstrated in government policy regarding participation and community governance. They suggest that the emphasis has been on attempting to bring

wider community participation in order to contribute to a government-constructed agenda rather than encouraging communities to define their own priorities and to take the lead in getting local people to resolve local problems.

Chapter Four the last chapter of Part One, describes the available research on British culture and explores the impact of two features where Britain has particularly extreme tendencies compared with a large international sample: high individualism and low power distance. The writers then go on to explore the effects of the long history of social class in Britain, attitudes to education and success and the results of all this in some damaging aspects of the structure and condition of our society. They then use their knowledge of change processes to assess how far the UK is likely to be able to bring about sufficient change in attitudes and behaviour to alleviate the problems that they have earlier outlined. They conclude that beneficial change is certainly possible but that it will only be achieved if attention is paid to some key factors, including the recognition that grand strategies are rarely successful in comparison with 'lighting many fires' so that a fundamental cultural shift is obtained.

Part Two is introduced by an acknowledgement that the first half of the monograph presents a gloomy picture, but also suggests that there is now the possibility of an historic opportunity for turning the situation round.

Chapter Five sets out the stall for a different approach. It starts with a short exploration of some possible blockages that will need to be overcome if the institutional learning that is needed is to happen on a wide scale. It recognises that some of the problems lie with

officials and professionals who perceive that they have quite a lot to lose by letting power and initiative move away from them. The main characteristics of the approach are then explored. They include:

- Recognition and support for individual and small groups of **Trusted Community Activists** who are willing to take the risk and who have both the local knowledge and the emotional energy to make an impact
- Significant effort to allow **ownership** of projects and programmes to arise from inside communities and to find ways of legitimating informal initiatives, because of the unfortunate but real turn-off effect of top-down approaches
- Focus on **specific concrete problems and many small gains** rather than generalised 'improvement targets' with the aim of making a modest but successful start, in order to gain experience, capability, confidence and trust before moving on to wider issues
- Making use of **existing local assets** – emphasising what the community has and building on it rather than what they lack and importing it
- Delegating **control over resources** – small 'pots' initially whilst expertise and trust are established
- Support by low-profile **generalist intermediaries and facilitators** who can encourage learning through doing and avoidance of 'middle-men' and directive advisors especially those whose work is target-driven in order to obtain financial reward
- **'Viral' learning** through networks and informal links rather than 'scaling up' and 'rolling out' neither of which provide the same scale of benefits in terms of emotional commitment, local knowledge and attuning

as well as acquisition of valuable community experience and confidence

- **Light and collaborative evaluation** rather than the more commonplace types of targeting and data measurement. Evaluation needs to become a valuable activity that enhances local learning rather than an intrusive official burden
- Recognising doing and **learning** as the key activities rather than advising or teaching

The authors suggest that this model, if it were to be supported as the most widespread approach, would lead to far more sustainable change in UK society than any alternatives but recognise that, as with any sustainably embedded transformation, the initial speed of change would be slow.

Chapter Six compares programmes that have shown evidence of real effectiveness and those where little significant sustainable change appears to have been achieved.

The authors look at the conclusions of extensive work undertaken by organisations including New Philanthropy Capital, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the New Economics Foundation. The studies are extensive, long-term and academically rigorous and all the findings point towards the approach outlined in the previous chapter.

By contrast the writers explore some of the published results of the £2bn New Deal for Communities, where the approach has been quite different. These have been ambitious, large-scale, complex interventions with broad aims. Given the scale of funding, the results have been modest, but furthermore they have tended to import too much 'professional' expertise, embody too much bureaucratic process, and pay too little attention to the

existing resourcefulness of people within the neighbourhood.

The evidence is completed with a discussion of how the ideas from Chapter Five have been applied in educational settings. The writers contrast educational approaches adopted in Denmark and US, with the government-initiated Scottish New Communities Schools Initiative. They use the examples to explore the way in which UK assumptions about how to intervene tend to lead to complexity, bureaucratisation and over-reliance on professionals.

The Chapter finishes with a strong plea for recognition of the 'informal' domain of community activism and self-help as an important mechanism for building social cohesion.

Chapter Seven is devoted to a detailed exploration of a particular example of the thinking outlined in the earlier framework. The writers are deeply involved with the School for Social Entrepreneurs, have over the years undertaken several studies with participants of its programmes and have used the findings of an evaluation by New Economics Foundation to explore below the surface. The analysis of the School's approach is therefore informed not only by the School's official 'line', but also by the subjective experiences of participants and how their own attitudes, capability and confidence have been affected, as well as the impact on their communities or user groups. The chapter looks at typical participants and how they become involved, the learning methods used, how the School has grown beyond its roots in Bethnal Green, and why it appears to be so effective.

Conclusion

The monograph concludes with a summary of the argument with a clear statement about the shift of mind-set that would be needed for this particular approach to be enacted. This is followed by recommendations about the elements needed to produce an integrated system for support of community development. These are:

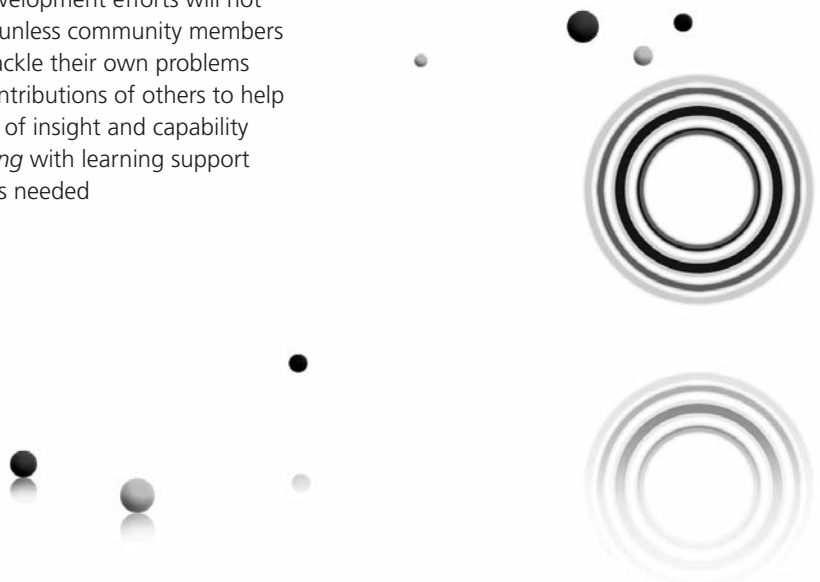
- From the 'official' domain – appropriate, contingent strategies and support
- Between the 'official' domain and communities – active and knowledgeable intermediaries
- Grafted into communities – trusted agents and interfaces
- From within communities – many community activists

Each group of significant actors in this scenario is identified with guidelines offered to lay out actions that will tend to be helpful and those that should be avoided.

The writers conclude with these statements:

- Community development efforts will not be sustainable unless community members *learn* how to tackle their own problems and use the contributions of others to help
- The best forms of insight and capability come from *doing* with learning support delivered as it is needed

- Enabling the spread of enthusiasm, ideas and practice across communities through supported *networking and action learning groups* is a valuable means of creating genuine social capital
- The roots of Britain's problems of deprivation and lack of social mobility lie in financial, educational, occupational and social inequality. Unfortunately, these problems cannot be solved solely by helping the disadvantaged. The UK will not become a truly healthy society unless the issues of privilege and excessive wealth enjoyed by a few are also tackled – and this means a degree of redistribution. This subject seems to be 'taboo' and is publicly aired only with great caution. It is not the prime subject of this monograph, but the evidence is there for those who have eyes to see. Societies that have tackled inequality enjoy better health, education, workplace involvement and social engagement, and seem not to suffer economically. In short, they are *better* societies for the vast bulk of their members.



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