Northumbria Research Link

Negotiating Self in an Arena of 'Othering': How key policy drivers – since the election of the 2010 Coalition government – are reconstituting the identities and social practices of key social actors, in three community development projects, in the north east of England.

by

**Andie Reynolds, University of Northumbria
(andie.reynolds@northumbria.ac.uk)**

Abstract

Community development (CD) is a contested professional practice due to the contrasting
ways that academics, practitioners, policy makers and 'service users' define and utilise it.
Arguably, the 2010 Coalition government rejects the principles and practice of CD; especially
the role and function of CD practitioners, as it advocates that communities, citizens and
volunteers can now, without CD support, utilise localised power and funding to build
'stronger', and more independent, communities. This paper will demonstrate how key policy
drivers – such as: The Big Society, voluntarism, localism, public sector cuts / austerity and
asset transfers – are reconstituting not only representations and understandings of CD, but
also the identities and social practices of CD professionals, volunteers and local people who
are working together in localised CD projects. The key outcomes in this reconstitution
process are **resilience** and **resistance,** where some social actors are pragmatically
modifying their roles and practices in their specific project to ensure the project's survival;
whereas others are resisting this process by asserting alternative identities and social
practices. Therefore, this paper will demonstrate how each outcome is specifically affecting
each of the three localised CD projects, and thus the potential implications for future CD
practice in the north east.

Key Words: Community development, identity, social practices, community projects,
resilience.

Background

Within England at present, the principles and practice of community development are,
arguably, under a wide-scale attack due both to the Coalition government's current
economic strategy of austerity, which has resulted in wide scale public sector cuts, and the
controversial ideology of The Big Society and the Localism Act (2011). Although the Big
Society has now, almost completely, disappeared from mainstream political rhetoric, some of
its 'principles' are being developed through the Localism Act (2011), i.e. the promotion of
asset transfers, social enterprise and the Community Organisers programme. On the whole,
it can be argued that the Coalition government is currently rejecting the principles and
practice of community development; especially the role and function of community
development practitioners, as it advocates that communities, citizens and volunteers can
now, without community development support, utilise localised power and funding to build
'stronger', and more independent, communities (Chanan & Miller, 2010).

Interestingly, an overview of the history of community development as a professional practice in England emphasises that community development practice has always had complex relationships with political parties in power, with the some expanding its practice, and others – like the current Coalition government – constricting it, in accordance to the political parties' views on the merits and utility of it, and the socio-economic climate of that particular time (Emejulu, 2010; Taylor, 2011). Therefore, to understand the impact that the Coalition government specifically is currently having on community development practice, a mixed – methods case study was undertaken in one local authority area in the north east to determine how key Coalition policy drivers are reconstituting community development practice, and the impact that this process is having on the identities and social practices of community development professionals, volunteers and local people who are working together in 3 separate community development projects.

Methodology

The research project was split into three separate parts: (i) post-structuralist discourse analysis (PDA) of selected national policies, local authority strategies and academic texts; (ii) 20 life history interviews with community development professionals, volunteers and local people/residents who are involved in three community development projects in one local authority area; and (iii) 18 follow-up interviews with all the participants (2 had left their respective projects) 6 to 8 months later to discuss if the analysis compiled by the researcher is representative of their role within the community project, and how / if their role has changed within the community project since the first interview.

Sampling:

A purposive sampling strategy was undertaken in the selection of, both, the documents and the community development projects / participants. The selected documents were national policies and local strategies concerned with: The Big Society / volunteerism, localism / asset transfers, public sector cuts / austerity, the Community Organisers programme, and social enterprise / venture philanthropy. The majority of these documents were introduced after the election of the 2010 Coalition government although some were included that were introduced before this cut-off date due to the fact that they were still adopted by the Coalition government. 15 national policies and 13 local strategies were analysed in total.

3 community development projects were selected in this specific local authority area due to: (i) their comparatively high levels of user-led involvement; (ii) the fact that the professionals, volunteers and local people in each project were all centrally involved in the strategic

planning and day-to-day running of the project; and (iii) likely to have sufficient funding until mid-2014. Community project 1 is a specialist youth project that has been running for over 10 years from locally-run community centre. There were 8 participants in total from this project including: 2 community work professionals, 1 professional volunteer, 2 non-professional volunteers and 3 service users / young people. Community project 2 is a one-stop-community-shop in an estate within the 20% of the most deprived (multiple deprivation index) in England. There are 6 participants in total from this project including: 2 part-time community development workers and 4 non-professional volunteers of which all the latter also use the services within the project. Community project 3 is completely voluntary-run disability advocacy organisation that receives no local authority funding. There are 6 participants in total from this project including: 3 professional volunteers, 2 non-professional volunteers and 1 service user.

Initial Findings

The initial findings will be separated into different three parts: (i) PDA of national policies and local strategies; (ii) PDA of the life-history interviews, and (iii) the validation of the PDA analysis and the 'change' interview.

(i)   *PDA of national policies and local strategies*

From the analysis of the selected 15 national policies, it is clear that the distinct language of community development practice is disappearing and is subsequently being replaced by competing discourses that are focussed on: **social action, philanthropy** and **social enterprise.** When community development as a distinct practice is referred to, it is referred to in a negative manner, typically characterised as an exemplar of New Labour's governance - an overly bureaucratised public service that was not cost-efficient. There is also very little reference to key community development terms such as **social justice, equality** and **power**, with the exception of the latter being adopted by Coalition policies to refer to the 'empowerment' of local people and local community groups through specific localism policies such as *Community Right to Challenge* (2012) and *Community Right to Bid* (2012) where, in the latter case, local community groups can 'bid' to directly 'buy' local authority-owned assets that will be closed down or sold off.   Other key terms, such as **empowerment** and **participation**, have been adopted by Coalition policies but their meanings have been gradually altered, i.e. 'empowerment' has become fully entwined with the concept of **active citizenship** and statements such as: *"Local people are playing a more active part in shaping their neighbourhoods and working together for the good of others"* (Cabinet Office, 2013, p.34) are being repetitively ascertained to reinforce such links between the two terms, arguably creating a 'new' definition of empowerment where local people are being

empowered to become active citizens, which will ultimately lead to more cohesive and 'better' communities.

The impact that this is having on the identity roles and social practices of key social actors in community development projects is potentially far-reaching. Indeed, the role of the community development professional or practitioner is being gradually replaced with roles relating to 'local expertise' and 'enterprise', i.e. local entrepreneurs who give time and expertise to local community groups; voluntary and community sector (VCS) managers and front-line workers; social entrepreneurs and senior community organisers. However, there is additionally also a blurring of boundaries occurring between this new 'local expertise' professional and that of the local volunteer / active citizen where the latter can, potentially, become the former with experience as they have the 'true' expertise in their local communities. Therefore, the analysis of the Coalition national policies states that community development practice, and community development professionals, are no longer a key ingredient to build stronger and more independent communities.

This shift is also echoed in the analysis of local authority strategies but this process of removing community development based language to incorporate new language - based on the discourses of **social action, philanthropy** and **social enterprise** - is occurring much more gradually. Indeed, at a local authority level, it is volunteering and active citizenship – and, to a lesser extent, social enterprise - that is predominantly taking over the 'space' that community development once occupied. Asset transfers are also being increasingly promoted at this level, preferably into the hands of 'responsible' voluntary community groups and active citizens.

  (ii) PDA of life-history interviews

Analysis from the life-history interviews for community project 1 shows that the community development professionals, 1 professional volunteer and 1 of the non-professional volunteers (4 of the 8 participants) were extremely concerned and fearful about the impact that Coalition policies – especially the public sector cuts and austerity measures – were having on their community project. Indeed, one of the community development workers stated that: *"I don't think that… train of thought has come into it to be honest. Whether we will survive or not. I think it is just a case of… they've got to pull workers out and that is what is going to happen."* Indeed, this participant took voluntary severance pay some months after this initial interview due to further public sector cuts in that local authority area. Both of the workers discussed how they were trying to 'bring on' the volunteers to ensure the project's survival, yet the level of responsibility that the volunteer should take on was a contentious issue. One of the volunteers directly commented on this and stated that: *"if I'm*

not here this project doesn't run. It's as simple as that." This level of volunteer responsibility was regarded as 'unfair' by the workers, volunteers and some of the young people who use the service.

The analysis of the life-history interviews from community project 3 is remarkably similar. One of the professional volunteers, who is the co-founder and 'office manager' of the project, similarly reinforced the increased pressures that are being placed on volunteers: *"I think a lot of charitable organisations do a lot of work that have massive impacts on families' lives. I think we are being expected to take on more and more. I think we are expected… a lot of people are expected… a lot of volunteers… are being expected to do things that maybe they shouldn't be doing. Because they're not qualified to do those roles. Yet you don't get any money to send your staff on the appropriate training courses... but we are expected to… pick up the pieces, when the so-called professionals from the council, drop these people with the cuts. And we're expected to go in there and be social workers… psychologists… counsellors… you know… and… we're not qualified to do that."* Indeed, this participant had recently experienced 'burn-out' managing this project and stated that: *"Nobody can afford to work for nothing and we are here from nine o'clock in the morning 'til, sometimes, six or seven o'clock at night… and you just do it. And you think you're doing it; that you're coping with everything… but when you take a step back… you haven't coped; you haven't juggled…".* These perspectives from both projects succinctly highlight how the Coalition policy drivers are impacting on the participants' roles within each community development project.

Interestingly, community project 2 appears to be more 'resilient' than the other two community projects. Both of the part-time community development workers commented in their respective life-history interviews that the community project had actually been **expanding** in the three years that the Coalition government had then been in power. Reasons presented in the interviews for this expansion were: (i) the dedication of the 2 part-time workers and their knowledge about funding; (ii) the development of a large core group of volunteers who also use the services the one-stop-shop provides; and (iii) the fact that the majority of the people involved in the project come from the one estate and have close interpersonal connections. Both workers admitted that they do substantially more hours than they are paid for and are, in essence, also volunteering their time; and the 4 volunteers felt increasing pressure to give more and more of their time to ensure the project's survival. Indeed, all of the volunteers were also service users and they actively encouraged as much of the entire estate as possible to get involved to make sure that the project would still run and meet its 'footfall' targets.

(iii)   Validation of the PDA analysis and the 'change' interview

These second interviews have all taken place with the participants but have still to be analysed. Based on the transcriptions alone, it is clear that the identity roles and social practices of the participants have changed since the election of the Coalition government, and are still continuing to change. Since the initial interviews that took place between March 2013 and July 2013, 5 of the participants have either left the projects or have changed their roles from a professional to a volunteer due to the continued public sector cuts and the discrediting of community development as an effective professional practice. Analysis of these interviews should be completed by July 2014.

References

Chanan, G. & Miller, C. (2010) "The Big Society: How It Could Work". Available at: http://www.pacesempowerment.co.uk/pacesempowerment/Publications_files/Big%20Society.pdf (Accessed: 15th October 2011).

Emejulu, A. (2010) *Community Development as Discourse: Analysing Discourses, Identities and Practices in the US and the UK.* Unpublished thesis. University of Strathclyde.

Great Britain. Cabinet Office (2013) *Encouraging Social Action.* London: Cabinet Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/encouraging-social-action (Accessed: 23rd March 2014).

Great Britain. Department for Communities and Local Government (2012a) *Community Right to Bid.* London: Cabinet Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/giving-people-more-power-over-what-happens-in-their-neighbourhood (Accessed: 16th April 2013).

Great Britain. Department for Communities and Local Government (2012b) *Community Right to Bid.* London: Cabinet Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/giving-people-more-power-over-what-happens-in-their-neighbourhood/supporting-pages/community-right-to-challenge (Accessed: 16th April 2013).

Taylor, M. (2011) *Public Policy in the Community* (2nd ed.) Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.