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Community Development, Higher Education Institutions and the Big Society: Opportunities or opportunism?*

Abstract

In his Prison Notebooks, written between 1929-35, Gramsci claimed that '*all men are intellectuals: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals*.' He used this term '*organic intellectuals*' to illustrate that those working at grassroots level who have significant knowledge(s) about the way communities of all types work, are as important to the development of society as academic intellectuals. This article explores the current idea of a 'Big Society' as a hegemonic idea. This exploration is undertaken in relation to the current economic, social and political situation and with reference to the practice of community development[1], lifelong learning and the role of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in supporting this field of activity. In this article we use the term 'community development' as Tett defines in Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007:104). She claims it means to '*increase the capacity of particular communities through targeted resources for particular areas*'.

We specifically explore the following areas

- challenging the hegemonic ideas and policies

- practicing within the restrictions of cuts and limited resources

- setting up supportive networks which will sustain workers

- making meaningful international links abroad and using international examples of good practice

- turning the ideology of the Big Society into an opportunity

We will pose the critical questions that we think need to be addressed and which we hope will help us to find direction and an understanding of the way forward at a deeper level. We hope to create both useful and innovative knowledge which will be a valid contribution to the field of community development.

Introduction

Last year saw a landmark political change in UK politics – for the first time in post-war years we have a coalition government, not only that, it is a coalition of ideological contradictions. As leader of the Conservatives, David Cameron was elected as Prime Minister at the general election of 6th May 2010. He has been the Leader since 2005. The Conservatives won 307 seats in a so-called 'hung' parliament and then formed a coalition Government with the Liberal Democrats. David Cameron's 'Big Society' is a reaction to the old Labour notion of 'Big Government' or 'statism'. The 'new' idea is presented as putting decision-making power, service provision and responsibility for local action into the hands of local people. In contrast in May 2011, Scotland made a milestone decision at the polling station – to elect a majority Nationalist government.

According to Norman (2010:4) The Big Society '*seeks to improve our public services, is not ideologically opposed to the state but is concerned about the state's current ability to meet social needs and to support British society*'. For others the initiative is an attempt to fill gaps in services for little or no cost. Ed Miliband, the leader of the current Labour Party claims, '*No one can volunteer at a library or a Sure Start centre if it's being closed down'*. He continues, '*and nor can this Conservative-led government build a Big Society while simultaneously undermining its foundations with billions of pounds worth of cuts to the voluntary sector.*'

The concept has split opinion markedly since its announcement - it has been hailed as a 'radical attempt to strengthen communities' by *The Times* (2010); but dismissed by unions as 'a big cop out' (UNISON, 2010) and 'intellectually flawed' (UNITE, 2010). Norman (2010:14) claims that '*the coalition government will stand or fall on this policy'* and that we need a '*shared vision of social and economic renewal*'. It has been said that there is a thin line between vision and delusion, and we are yet to see on which side of this divide The Big Society will find a final resting place.

Challenging the current hegemonic ideas and policies

In promoting his idea to his party David Cameron, stated that the 'Big Society' is his personal mission.

> '*I recognise it is my duty. We've got to do this for the good of the country. I don't believe it is impossible to do your duty at the same time as having a sense of mission and purpose about what would make this country stronger, better and a nicer place to live and make our communities more healthy.*' Bentley and Woodcock (2011:1)

It is against this present political situation we examine what community development theory and values have in common with the vision of David Cameron. The definition of the practice of community development is

expressed in the following key purpose: Community Development is a long-term value-based process which aims to address imbalances in power and bring about change founded on social justice, equality and inclusion. The process enables people to organise and work together to identify their own needs and aspirations, to take action to exert influence on the decisions which affect their lives and to improve the quality of their own lives, the communities in which they live, and societies of which they are a part. The revised standards for community development contain five key values: Equality and Anti-discrimination, Social Justice, Collective Action, Community Empowerment and Working and Learning Together.
http://www.fcdl.org.uk/about/definition.htm

In Scotland the model of Community Learning and Development is defined by the CLD Standards Council (2008:2) as;

> *'A distinct sector of learning alongside schooling and further and higher education, a discipline using a distinct set of competences that can be utilised by staff in a range of settings across the public and third sectors and an area of activity that promotes: achievement for adults … achievement for young people … and achievement through building community capacity'.*

There is a current popular tabloid portrayal of Britain as 'broken'. This term was first used in *The Sun* newspaper to describe a perceived widespread state of social decay in Britain. The Sun has run frequent stories under the 'Broken Britain' theme since 2007. It is suggested by the Tories that 'Broken Britain' could be fixed by a new wave of responsible, hardworking, local volunteer groups, spurred on by the love of their communities and a desire to return to traditional values. We believe the current dominant ideology is not all that different from previous political regimes. The difference lies in *not employing paid qualified professional workers but exploiting (sometimes inexperienced) volunteers without training and support.* Community practitioners have lived with the reduced funding challenge since the profession was established in the 1960s. Craig and Mayo (1995:27) make a number of observations in the past when they talk about '*discussion and evaluation of different experiences of combining both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' approaches to community development, in the changing context of recession and restructuring on a global scale.*' They continue, '*One such approach has entailed a return to voluntarism, including attempts at the revitalisation of community-based organization'*

In our opinion the points they were highlighting still stand. Government policy to shrink resources for programmes, projects and interventions has always been with us therefore this is not a 'new' challenge or phenomenon.   The notion that in the UK we are too reliant on the state has been a notion that has become accepted within many levels of society, for example within 'new Labour'. That does not mean it is not a contested ideal.

Craig and Mayo (1995:46) also asked '*How can community development resist incorporation into state strategies for minimising public responsibility and resources for economic and social development?*' This question has as much resonance and relevance today as it did in 1995 when it was originally posed. If David Cameron's vision of the Big Society is to work then his reliance upon volunteers being able to offer time, commitment and expertise without adequate resources or support is perhaps an unrealistic expectation. Many people like to volunteer for their community but many more want to earn a decent living.

CLD practitioners, whether from the voluntary sector or employed by a local authority, bring people together and offer necessary theoretical frameworks and alternative paradigms that can expand the efficacy and impact of these groups. They can help embed democratic practices, evaluation strategies and sustainability measures. CLD Practitioners are often vital in linking communities' aspirations, successes and needs with wider global communities. We believe that living in a 'global village' is more a more appropriate approach than emphasising that we live in a 'broken Britain'. In CLD work we talk of not only geographic communities (place) but as Tett in Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007:103) suggest there are also communities of interest (same goals) and function (those involved in the field of community practice). Thus the concept of community includes all sectors of society.

If the Big Society agenda wants local people to take charge of their own communities then we would strongly encourage Universities and other learning organisations to open their doors to these groups and give them space and time to explore their issues. HEIs must 'go to the people' (Lao Tse circa 1700) enabling communities of all types to link theories and ideas to their experiences and to develop their abilities to interact with decision makers at all levels; then become decision makers themselves. Ultimately community development practice was set up to create social groups of critical thinkers who can challenge and change things for the better.

As we alluded to in the beginning of this article, the Big Society ideology has embraced some of the language and terminology of Community Development and the left in politics. It may be using our language but has not shown the use of our values and principles in practice. We need therefore to develop a new wave of practice that meets the challenges of working in and against the current dominant hegemony. We would argue to do this we must endeavour to create a new way of being academics, practitioners, organisations and communities - as a united force. In order to challenge the current hegemonic policy we must; work from within it and challenge from outside it, embrace the learning from our past experiences and find innovative ways of reaching out to each other and protecting our core values, principles and practice. Hegemony, dominant ideology and accepted ideas about life in Scotland, Britain and globally are in a constant process of re-formation and evolution; we can make a difference to the new shift of paradigm.

Practicing within the Restrictions of Cuts and Limited Resources

With the ideologically driven concept of the Big Society being seen by some as a smoke screen for cuts in public services, the role of the community development practitioner will become pivotal in ensuring that the most vulnerable communities in society remain supported despite ever decreasing resources. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, on 2nd Nov 2011 told the BBC the St Paul's protests had raised awareness of the 'unfinished business' of financial sector reform. He said the public had the feeling that changes to financial institutions were not coming fast enough. Yet cuts in public services seem to be just around the corner.

It is difficult to practice with a lack of resources - depending of course on what you regard as resources. We do recognise the wealth of potential in all people but most organisations are feeling the effects of the economic situation. Perhaps it is time to go back to old methods, for example street work within our communities or meeting in local cafés. This would get us closer again to the grassroots views and opinions of those who are affected most by the cuts and away from the instrumentalism of targets and outcomes. Another tension is the need for intellectual [and physical] space in which to reflect on our values and principles. For the authors this space is created by the HEI with which we are linked, as well as our fellow students. However, not all practitioners we work with experience this opportunity to reflect. We must promote the need to balance local experience and professional knowledge. We must turn these challenges into opportunities and set up a partnership with the HEI which will benefit both parties.

As practitioners we need to resist the inevitable pressure that will come from our own hearts *and* heads i.e. to do more with less, which means keeping more plates spinning in the air with less plate spinners. To improve we need to reflect on the past to remind ourselves what was successful and what was not. A lack of resources has sometimes resulted in more imaginative ways of working, of sharing of resources and looking to what resources we do have and how they can be better used. This might create a more authentic community profile as we engage with a wider cross section of the community and with 'often forgotten' or so called 'hard-to-reach' communities.

We should take time to look at our current praxis and use techniques which have been tried and tested in other places than the UK. Governments both local and national are interested in outcomes and efficiency. We must critically reflect on the effectiveness of our practice as the two are inextricably linked. Ledwith quite rightly states that we give way to anti-intellectual times which emphasise '*doing*' at the expense of '*thinking*' (2007:1) and that '*action without reflection is uncritical*' (2008:28). Ledwith also gives us the conceptual tools to do this stating that we need to centre our practice on the concept of critical praxis. To do this we need to keep drawing on theory because as Freire states, '*Human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis…and as praxis*

it requires theory to illuminate it' (1996:106). One way that we use theory is by gaining a greater in-depth understanding of the relevant theoretical framework. We are encouraged by Freire to continually identify and develop generative themes because as Wingeier (1980:563) suggests, '*Generative words not only describe the world the way it is but also become signs pointing directions for its transformation*'. These generative themes then can be used as a starting point for communities to address and overcome problems. Freire builds on this idea by stating that, '*In the way they think about and face the world— fatalistically, dynamically, or statically—their generative themes may be found*' (1996: 87). He maintains that, '*To investigate the generative theme is to investigate peoples thinking about reality and people's action upon reality, which is their praxis'* (1996: 87).

Another of the key components of the Big Society is the use of volunteers as opposed to paid and professional workers. Making use of volunteers is admirable and desirable, but not only for the sake of 'cheap labour'. Increased opportunities for volunteering must seek to develop those we recruit into the role, and this should be a priority.

Opportunities for local volunteers to capitalise on opportunities for personal learning and development are important because as Field (2005) suggests those that are involved in their community, are more likely to be adult learners (2005:83). We would argue the reverse is also true. Involvement in community based learning of any form can lead to a greater awareness of opportunities for community involvement. Universities therefore need to be more flexible in their approach to community learning and reach out to develop community based learning as well as support those who wish to study at under- or post-graduate levels. Furthermore by bringing the learning into the community it breaks down the barriers of local people thinking they cannot attend university and helps them overcome what Freire called situation boundaries. They could meet academics in local neutral venues, such as community centres, as these places are less intimidating and more accessible for communities. An example of good practice is the Activate course at Glasgow University which is community based, funded by local organisations and offers those active in their communities an opportunity to further develop their skills and knowledge. This foundation course in community development run by the University of Glasgow CD team is a partnership with local community organisations. They are in effect linking their action and practice to theory in order to develop praxis.

Furthermore to develop the theory base of practitioners, the academy could offer placement opportunities within their own establishments. This could be done initially by universities developing community-based networks of academics, communities and practitioners which help develop praxis together.

Setting up Supportive Networks which will Sustain Workers

Given the scale of cuts, restructuring, change and uncertainty that society faces, there is now perhaps more than ever, a need for strong and purposeful networks that workers can feed in to, and be fed by, as they seek to meet ever increasing demands, with consistently decreasing resources. Time and space is required for practitioners to connect with one another and be strengthened through those connections.

The Big Society policy presents a number of challenges for community development, but also opportunities that can be seized for the good of communities around the UK. 5000 new 'community organisers' will be employed. This seems like a very positive policy; however there are things to be mindful of. There is a question of where consistency will come from with 5000 new workers. How are these workers supported to be radical practitioners when they are working for the system they seek to challenge? This is an issue that practitioners have faced since our profession developed in post-war years. The dilemma is whether to support communities and local people to take on services and facilities or support them to work within constraints. This can be seen as being 'thrown to the wolves' by local authorities or as local authorities supporting expressions of grass-roots 'do it ourselves' community development.

In a 2010 survey of 200 community development practitioners and managers, over 50% said they were involved in some form of support network, and being part of such practitioner networks came out as one of the best ways of finding support. Sender et al., (2010) However, before we begin to think about the good things that networks of support can provide, it is wise to firstly be open and honest about those elements of networks that are unhelpful and unsustainable.

A small email survey of colleagues in various roles in the broad spectrum of community work asking what they looked for in support networks, inevitably also garnered responses about what they did *not* want: meeting for the sake of meeting, 'talking shops', inefficient use of people's time, lack of reciprocity or purpose.

The things that the consulted practitioners were looking for from networks resonated with our own responses such as relevance, mentoring, confidential support, support to address weaknesses, understanding, to develop professional strengths and even friendship. They wanted to make real partnership working opportunities, to share practical ideas and experiences, and for the networks to lead to action, change and joined-up approaches. They wanted the meetings to be chaired effectively, include reciprocal, open and honest discussion, for opportunities to review progress objectively, with a clear agenda and specific focus and for the benefit to outweigh the cost.

The values of tolerance, reciprocity and trust as set out by Putnam (2000:19) in Mark Smith (2000-09) are key to well functioning communities. We can see that these tie in well with what those characteristics of support

networks that consulted practitioners found appealing. Effective support networks must in themselves model strong community, in order to sustain practitioners and volunteers to engage in community development work.

Healthy networks should also play a key role in keeping practitioners sharp. Keeping theory at the forefront of people's practice must be a priority as we seek to work in a policy context where community development language and practice is subtly co-opted. Local networks can be a critical space for current practitioners and new workers recruited as a result of the Big Society policy – a space for reflection – a space where praxis is nurtured. The New Economics Foundations (2010) calls these places 'think and do tanks'. These spaces could also give scope for pilot schemes to be evaluated and critiqued – an important job, which should be done well, if we are really to make best use of limited resources. Support networks must be a place where reflective practice transcends the individual to include the collective – a group that looks in to affect how they work out must be a priority.

Our lives are lived in networks, and it would be remiss of us not to touch briefly upon online social networking. If our private lives are shared online, we must consider whether our professional lives should also take advantage of the opportunities presented by new media such as Facebook, Twitter and other online networking. Remotely supporting other workers, sharing ideas, information, good practice and discussing theory should be a resource we make good use of. However, it is important to ensure that effort expended in online support networks is not wasted energy. Already we can see the digital graveyard that is the collection of under or un-used Facebook groups and pages dedicated to practice, theory or individual organisations. Time spent online is time spent away from face to face interactions with other practitioners or people in your community. The aforementioned survey, also suggested that practitioners want to spend up to 60% of their time in face-to-face work. Support networks – whether actual or virtual – must be a catalyst for this, not a hindrance or barrier to it.

So if we really are entering an era of a Big Society, where decision making and community shaping will come from the ground, we must be aware that support of practitioners is a requirement. And as with other elements of the Big Society agenda, this will probably fall on practitioners themselves to provide this. Universities and other educational institutions have an opportunity – and might we suggest a *responsibility* – to play a role in this support of practitioners, by providing a consistent input of theory, so that practitioners can be part of a haven of criticality. Networks of support must work for those involved; they must provide rewards that outweigh costs for participants - they must be much more than the sum of their parts.

Making Meaningful International Links and using International good practice through HEIs

In terms of research and knowledge the mission for the University of Glasgow is to promote a culturally diverse community and each stakeholder has its role to play. According to the university, we need to improve and increase local engagement by working with the city and the West of Scotland region to support social, cultural and economic development through the international profile and reach of the university. We see these objectives as being important as we move into an economic, political and social period of change and into what Coote (2010) has called a 'Great Transition'. Perhaps it is time for academics to reach out to the practitioners and *share experiences and listen to other voices*, so that rather than *transfer,* we *exchange* knowledges.

We believe the links should be between practitioners and academics both here and abroad. Ivanov (2008:14) claims, all universities' international activities should be directly linked to community empowerment, and that '*development and capacity building must be acknowledged both internally as a part of universities' missions and strategic plans, and externally by national governments as indicators of universities' contribution to regional (as in international region) development'.* He explains that the synergy between internationalisation and community engagement

> '*clearly exists in multiple dimensions, but at the moment a clear separation between community involvement and international activities discourages recognition of the contribution universities make internationally to their neighbouring communities and countries through teaching, research and community development and capacity-building programs'.* p.18

In the case of community development in the UK the HEIs have the opportunity to make solid links to a number of communities of practice who share our values and approach – including for example the International Association of Community Development. Because of this community of practice we are now learning from many places throughout the world about how to turn to approaches which promote self-reliance, independence, asset building and positivity. We need to continue to exploit these international relationships as those communities who know more about running non-governmental organisations (NGOs) than we do can help us to understand how to work effectively outside government systems with existing assets and avoid exploiting those in the most deprived of our communities.

In their recent research around 'appreciating assets' [funded by the Carnegie Trust] O'Leary et al., (2011:49) explain, '*The point isn't just to get community groups and individuals contracting and 'doing things locally*'; *the point is to redesign services that improve wellbeing and are cost efficient'.* She suggests that if we look around we can find plenty of existing research and reports that can guide us and help us avoid re-inventing the wheel.

In India there are 'people's institutions', which are tangible assets owned by and for communities and where natural assets such as forests and watersheds are managed by communities. In the United States you can find investment in asset links through community ownership. O'Leary points out that in Australia social entrepreneurs are investing in the purchase of community assets to build the sustainability of communities and the organisations who work in them. Many approaches have been developed which we can learn from such as developing sustainable livelihoods, the self-reliance and indigenous self-determination movements, appreciative inquiry, liberation theology, participatory rapid appraisal, non-violence, rights based and training for transformation. These are global efforts and thankfully are now well recorded so that we can all benefit if we just reach out and learn.

Local outreach work at the university must be more than just 'Widening Participation' with links to schools. 'Town and gown' events are just not enough to meet the objectives of the 'Third mission' nor to justify the university's claim to input into community life and help create wealth. Third Mission activities facilitate engagement with community and industry in order to create wealth in society. The university does have work-based learning community development courses for practitioners within the School of Education focused on developing praxis and critical thinking and which encourage critique of the formation and implementation of policies on community learning development in Scotland, but we need more real partnership activities.

The university has a role and responsibility to expand on this crucial role and take the lead as an adviser as well as a monitoring agency. As Bowles (2010) warns us '*Although published details on the coalition government's ambitions to train a new generation of community organisers are still unclear, it seems likely that they will depart from the COF model for community organising in some very fundamental way*'.

Community organising must not lose its challenging edge through incorporation into an opposing ideology nor should we '*dilute the broad-based organising and power leverage approach exemplified by COF and the community organising movement*'. As Mayo (2004) in Bowles explains, '*Broad-based community organising', of the kind inspired by Alinsky, is about creating a powerful alliance of institutions*'. In terms of lifelong learning which is closely related to community development, the university can offer networking opportunities through the PASCAL International Observatory which offers an '*innovative approach to accessing state-of-the-art international knowledge and expertise on place management, social capital and learning cities and regions*'. As the website tells us, '*The whole essence of PASCAL is on sharing knowledge, experience and mutual learning. The activities range from international research and development projects, to targeted local inputs to members' policy and practice development*'.

Coote (2010) Senior Policy analyst with the New Economic Foundation suggests,

> '*What's needed is not just a transfer of power from the state to individuals and groups, but a new kind of partnership between citizens and government, where power and responsibility are shared on an open and equal basis between,…*'

She lists in a related article about the Big Society ten suggestions as to how we could do that. For example; we could make social justice the main goal, build a broader economy, build a bigger democracy, make co-production the standard way of getting things done and transform the role of professionals and other 'providers'. She continues, '*It needs a growing movement of individuals and organizations that recognize that a different world is possible, working together to make it happen. Only with a transition on this scale can the best elements of the 'Big Society' vision be realised and sustained over time.*

Conclusion: Turning the Ideology of the Big Society into an Opportunity

We have outlined the ways in which we see the field of Community Learning and Development as holding opportunities for a 'Better' not 'Big Society' to thrive by taking a pro-active approach as opposed to a reactive one. For example, we have looked at a counter ideology and how we can challenge the hegemonic systems; explored how we could develop praxis and create spaces for us to reflect on our practice within a culture of cuts and develop strong effective networks in relation to community development practitioners.

We argued that the academy should be engaging with existing networks; connecting local individuals and organisations to new networks; inspiring these to provide a consistent input of theory and criticality and rewards that outweigh costs for participants. We also suggested that internationalisation within universities should include not only a recruitment of postgraduates from abroad but an exchange of ideas locally between academic and practitioner, and globally between practitioner and a recruitment of more 'non-traditional' students. We understand the financial strain Universities find themselves under but still argue that an investment in the communities will draw financial sustainable rewards in the future.

We suggested that Universities and other learning organisations should open their doors to community groups and give them space and time to explore their issues, as well as 'go to the people'. This would enable communities of all types to link theories and ideas to their experiences and to develop their abilities to interact with decision makers at all levels. HEIs should bring the learning into the community or meet academics in local neutral venues, offer placement opportunities within their own establishments, further develop capacity building, joint training opportunities, accreditation, and volunteering opportunities, and develop community-based networks of academics, communities and practitioners developing praxis together.

Finally, trained, supported professional community development practitioners and strong relationships between other practitioners both home and abroad with HEIs should be viewed as a way forward; as a means of bringing people together, offering theoretical frameworks and expanding the efficacy of community groups, helping to embed democratic practices, evaluate strategies and put in place sustainability measures.

We believe this is vital in linking communities' aspirations, successes and the needs of local and global communities.

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Endnotes

*A version of this article was first presented as a roundtable discussion at The Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE) Annual Conference (June/July 2011) – Theme: Lifelong Learning and Community Development

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