

Is there a place for community development in Wales?
Reflecting on 6 years of Communities First in Ely & Caerau

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The flickering flame

I am writing this during the week following the London 2012 Olympic games. Like most people, I was sofa-bound and glued to the television throughout, watching other people exert themselves. I loved the sense of common humanity and goodwill, the little every day stories of effort and sacrifice, triumph and tragedy. It didn't always look like it was going to turn out like this...

My most grumpy pre-Olympics moment came when I took my two daughters to see the Olympic torch pass through Cardiff. After waiting expectantly with the throng lined along St Mary's Street, a huge Mexican wave of a cheer finally started making its way towards us from Cardiff Castle. Our sense of anticipation grew with the noise but, no, the cheering turned out to be aimed at a police car full of smiling, waving officers. This happened several more times, with my daughters eventually getting bored of waving. Next came the apocalyptic Coca Cola rave bus. Bright red with thumping house music and a man standing on top shouting at us through a microphone. The bus stopped right next to us for about five minutes while Coca Cola employees threw branded items at us. My 2 year old daughter looked at me with a worried expression and told me that she didn't want to go home on that particular bus because it was too noisy. I agreed with her and assured her we would find a quieter one. After Coca Cola the other sponsors had their equally loud moments in the sun. Finally came the solitary, everyday man with the torch. He looked slightly tired but he carried the flame with dignity. When he did finally arrive, my four year old daughter completely missed him – she had been lulled into boredom by the endless lines of waving policemen and then temporarily blinded and deafened by the sponsors. For those of us who did see the torch, it was beautiful. I carried my daughter and ran further up the road to give her a second chance.

For those of us working in community development it can sometimes feel like an Olympic torch relay. Collective, community led efforts towards social justice and equality have burned bright in Wales' history. The flame is still carried by thousands of everyday people but is often missed in a contemporary context that frames people primarily as passive recipients and consumers of services and goods, rather than as key players and contributors towards a common good. A key political challenge is always to define the appropriate roles of the market, the state and civil society. The flickering flame of civil society currently looks rather small and powerless next to the powers of the market and the state and it should be the work of community development to seek to rebalance this. It is this challenge which I hope to reflect on here.

Communities First – a brief and unsatisfying foray into community development?

Since 2001 the Communities First programme has provided a concerted, government sponsored attempt at using community development principles and techniques in 'poor' communities in Wales. Original programme guidance emphasised the role of communities in leading local regeneration (organised through the community partnership model - which aimed to bring local people, private sector, statutory sector and voluntary sector reps around the table as equals). A focus on 'capacity building' acted as an acknowledgment that development work was needed to enable suitable levels of community participation. Where practiced best, this concept of capacity building was broad, encompassing the up-skilling of local people and staff, the development of social capital, the building

of key partnerships across sectors and the pursuit of a common understanding of local history, challenges and opportunities. The concept of 'programme bending' demonstrated a belief that local people could and should have more meaningful influence with the state (and other sectors) in how services are provided. Finally, the programme would be a long term programme, with a commitment to at least ten years investment to 'make things work'. In short it seemed that the challenges of enabling a thriving, engaged civil society in struggling communities was being taken seriously.

Despite a real and serious commitment to community development, there was perhaps never any clarity as to what community development could realistically expect to achieve in communities (or at least not a shared clarity). There was a strong sense that it should enable participation and there was a rather more 'woolly' view that it should have some kind of impact on poverty, although the potential extent of this impact was never seriously explored. This lack of clarity has led to problems later on, for example the introduction of 'child poverty' as a 'theme' which the Communities First programme was expected to take a lead in tackling. This came at a time when many community development workers and local people were still knee-deep in the painstaking, sensitive work of building (or re-building) frameworks and networks of local participation. It is not that partnership groups didn't want to tackle child poverty (given that it is having an immediate impact on their own children and grandchildren). It is rather that we are all aware of the intractability of a problem with causes that are local, national and even global. Arguably child poverty is caused, in part, by the actions and decisions of the powerful and there is only so much a community experiencing poverty can do about it. A prerequisite to local people's involvement in tackling child poverty is a thriving civil society which is able to make a coherent case regarding the local impact of poverty and its causes, and which has mechanisms to communicate these perspectives to those in power.

Whatever the original ambitions and ambiguities of the Communities First programme, the next phase is now coming, and it is a significantly different beast. Capacity building has been frowned on for some time now and is no longer perceived to be a legitimate activity of the Communities First programme. It seems that capacity building activities have not been seen to be contributing to useful outcomes. It is a great shame that this was the case. Community development principles emphasise the development of knowledge, skills and capacity of all kinds through a cycle of action and reflection (learning on the job). So real, experienced outcomes should have been in evidence early on. It is certainly the case that the original uncertainty about what outcomes could realistically be expected from the programme was inevitably matched with uncertainty as to how these outcomes might be recorded and evaluated, and what success would look like. The move towards the next phase of Communities First has already introduced a great deal more clarity regarding the outcomes we are looking to achieve, and there has been plenty of scope for local people, partners and staff to influence and indeed develop these proposed outcomes. However, a move towards clearer outcomes has come hand-in-hand with a more 'service provision' orientated approach within the programme. Communities First cluster teams and partners will be expected to provide a range of projects and services aimed at contributing to outcomes under the themes of healthy communities, prosperous communities and learning communities. Community members in receipt of these services have been referred to as 'customers' in Welsh Government guidance. This is hard to stomach for those of us who have tried to break down traditional boundaries between service users and providers to enable the co-production of services.

So, if there was once a focus through the Communities First programme on building a thriving civil society, ready to take its place alongside the state and the market and to influence those sectors, then it appears that focus is shifting. Partnership groups are no longer seen as necessary in order to enable local people to take a lead on regeneration. They have been replaced with a 'Community Involvement Plan' which seems a secondary concern to the development of a collection of service

provision projects led by a staff team. Fear of insufficient governance and poor financial management has generally prevented support for community owned organisations to lead and manage the Communities First programme locally.

What can Community Development do? An example of co-production in action

So, what should community development be for, and what can it realistically be expected to achieve? This might best be demonstrated by a case study, taken from the work of Ely & Caerau Communities First in Cardiff:

During 2008, a comprehensive community audit was carried out by the Ely & Caerau Communities First team. The approach taken involved the completion of approximately 1000 questionnaires with community members, focus groups with those identified as 'hard to reach', key person interviews and community visioning events. The process was seen as part of a wider commitment by the staff team to 'get to know Ely'. Key to this has been the development of a huge network of local relationships with a diversity of local people. This has been aided by the fact that the team is based in the community (some team members also live in the community) and by a willingness to be flexible in terms of working hours. Staff have also been keen to 'go where the people are' be it homes, religious buildings, social clubs or the streets.

The community audit identified a number of key concerns held by the community, one of them being a lack of opportunities for young people during the school holidays. This was seen to be contributing to anti-social behaviour and was having an impact on the local quality of life. Over time conversations with community members led to the identification of potential groups which might become the focus of action towards tackling this issue. Staff invested significant time in supporting these groups to coalesce, develop and express their ideas, and build their capacity to act. Five groups emerged, all with a desire to develop positive activities for young people, but each with a distinct emphasis. One group was particularly concerned about the state of a neglected local park, and its potential to be brought back into use. Another small neighbourhood area spawned two groups, one of parents who were concerned to positively engage local young people who were involved in anti-social behaviour, the second being made of the local young people themselves, who had their own perspectives on local issues and their own aspirations for their group. A fourth group was formed by a number of young people interested in skating. They were aware of the positive influence this activity had had in their own lives and were keen to offer it to other young people. They also hoped to lobby for improved skating facilities. The fifth group were located near the local enterprise centre and hoped to work with the staff there to offer increased opportunities to local people.

Alongside their work in supporting the formation and development of these groups, the staff team had also been building strong working links with partners in the youth service. This led to the formation of the Ely & Caerau Children & Young People's Action Team. Communities First staff, the community groups and youth service partners decided to run a range of activities for young people, based at a variety of venues, throughout the summer holidays. The groups, with their local knowledge and networks, would take a lead in deciding on the locations and the nature of the activities. The Communities First and youth service staff would bring their expertise in youth work, health and safety, event organising etc. The initial activities would be seen as an opportunity to pilot the approach and build the skills of the community group members. The activities were attended by hundreds of young people and were successful in lowering anti-social behaviour levels. The local knowledge provided by the volunteers led to carefully chosen activities. For example, it was known that some young people were not eating regular healthy food during the summer holidays so cooking

activities were run which were used to teach young people about food and to provide a healthy lunch for everyone attending.

Following the success of the first summer programme the groups have been supported in developing their skills and knowledge, and their capacity to run activities themselves. The professional staff now take a secondary role and are brought in to provide specific expertise (e.g. substance misuse advice, healthy cooking and eating activities, sporting activities etc). The planning, organisation and staffing of activities is led by the local groups. Together the five groups now provide a programme of activities throughout the summer holidays (and have been doing so for the past 6 years). A menu of activities is made available to every child and young person in Ely and Caerau through the schools and youth clubs. The programme led to a huge range of positive outcomes for the local community, including:

- A range of positive healthy activities for local young people including various sports, and learning to prepare healthy food.*
- The group concerned with their local neglected park have succeeded in bringing a focus back to the site. They have negotiated with local authority partners and ward councillors to ensure the park is regenerated for use by local young people. Over £100,000 has recently been invested in installing new play equipment.*
- A number of the skaters have been employed by the local leisure centre. Part of their paid role is to provide skating activities for other local young people. They have also provided sessions at a school. They are currently exploring opportunities for social enterprise development and have received training in this area.*
- The skaters are just beginning to hold conversations with key partners regarding the relocation and development of their local skate park.*
- A number of participants have received training in a range of issues including child protection, food hygiene, first aid, sports leadership and social enterprise development.*
- One group has just set up a homework club which is acting as a pilot for further clubs in the community.*
- All the groups worked together to provide healthy food at the annual Ely Summer Festival. This activity was run as a social enterprise with all profit being re-invested in the work of the groups.*
- A number of the groups now organise specific activities aimed at tackling anti-social behaviour 'hot-spots', for example on Halloween.*

The particular contribution of community development

The case study described above is a good example of the wide range of benefits afforded struggling communities by community development processes. In this case, these include; physical regeneration of local space, skills development, improved health, increased community safety, new learning opportunities, intergenerational interaction and increased community cohesion. This has been achieved with relatively minimal staff and financial resources and with maximum involvement of local people of all ages. There is a danger that some youth work engages young people in isolation of their social, environmental and economic circumstances. This is increasingly the case as many programmes shift their focus towards supporting individual young people to access training and employment opportunities. Work of this kind, if not careful to engage participants in the context of their community, can lead to simplistic solutions which locate the 'problem' with the young person themselves (a pathological approach) rather than taking seriously the range of influences that have mitigated against the individual seeking and finding fulfilling employment. The approach described above succeeds in working with young people in the complex context of their

family and community life, enabling them to negotiate with other stakeholders to improve their own chances and the chances of their community.

Absolutely fundamental to the success of this approach is the development of a thriving civil society. Community workers spent significant time developing a large network of local relationships which facilitated the following:

- Access to a wide range of skills
- Access to a wide range of local knowledge
- A dynamic set of relationships which enables negotiation of common concerns and the common good
- A mechanism for managing disagreements and disappointments constructively
- A mechanism for the inclusion of those who have traditionally been excluded
- A network of participants able to respond quickly to a wide range of local needs and opportunities
- A forum for the effective engagement of local people with local public, private and third sector providers

These are the kind of outcomes which should have been evident in Communities First areas as the capacity building processes bore fruit. What's more, these outcomes should have quickly led to the kind of 'harder' outcomes described in the case study above. It is possible that these benefits have been realised in many Communities First areas but have been recorded inadequately.

The state, the market (and civil society?)

The recession and a consequent commitment to austerity as the approach to reducing the national deficit, have led to debates regarding the appropriate role of the state and the market. Of course this debate is not new, with those of a left wing persuasion tending to advocate a stronger role for the state and the regulation of the market, and those of a more right wing persuasion generally advocating a stronger role for the market and a softening of the state's influences. These are important but age old arguments that tend to go around in circles. For those intimately involved in communities (especially communities suffering poverty) it sometimes feels a bit like arguing whether to paint your bedroom red or blue while the foundations of your house are collapsing underneath you. It is a thriving civil society, practiced in participatory democracy, that legitimises the essential role of the state in managing the fair distribution of resources, and that ensures the market meets the needs of society rather than a wealthy minority. Consequently the development of an active civil society is crucial in the current fight to prevent the market dominating both the state and civil society.

Policy suggestions

- The Welsh Government should seek to develop policies (in partnership with theorists and practitioners in the fields of community development and co-production) that actively support the re-invigoration of civil society
- Clear expectations should be agreed, and outcomes proposed, for the achievements of community development, and specifically capacity building. These should include methods for measuring and valuing the kind of outcomes listed above under 'the particular contribution of community development'.
- A clear aim of the next phase of Communities First should be to establish and secure community based organisations capable of sustaining and developing community development beyond the life of the programme.

- Networks of relationships between community organisations should be promoted across local and regional boundaries, to enable civil society to negotiate with, and influence, the state and the market in a meaningful manner. (London Citizens is a good example of this approach, see <http://www.citizensuk.org/>).

Conclusion

Despite talk of the Big Society, capacity building, and so on, and despite a strong history of co-operative and mutual approaches in Wales, civil society seems to be losing the battle to a dominant market and a weakening state. With the movement of Communities First, Wales' flagship community development programme, towards a traditional service provision model, we risk losing the benefits of one of the very few professions capable of supporting the re-development of civil society in our most struggling communities. The flame is still flickering but it needs some space to spread.