

Conclusions

McCabe, Allister; Phillimore, Jennifer

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

McCabe, A & Phillimore, J 2017, Conclusions: Thinking back and looking forward. in A McCabe & J Phillimore (eds), *Community groups in context: Local activities and actions*. Policy Press, pp. 281-290.

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Reflections: Thinking Back and Looking Forward

*'The dude abides'*ⁱ

Angus McCabe and Jenny Phillimore.

Thinking back over almost a decade of research with below the radar community groups, what has changed? At one level, very little. Community groups continue emerging, growing, thriving and dying (Davidson and Packham 2012). In increasingly diverse communities, there are a growing number of vibrant new community groups (Phillimore 2015). Faith based actions continue to proliferate at a community level (McCabe et al 2016a). Some of the more apocalyptic predictions about voluntary action post-austerity and the 2010 election have not happened (Abbas and Lachman, undated).

Yet, in other ways, plenty has changed. Much has been written on the impact of the austerity cuts on charities and smaller, formal, voluntary organisations operating at a community level (Kenny et al 2015, Milbourne 2013). For example some of the groups which grew following Area Based Initiative funding have either closed or become dependent on BIG Lottery monies.

Less, empirically, is known about the impact of austerity on below the radar groups which never dependent on external government funding. Third Sector Research Centre research indicates that they have been affected, but perhaps in more complex and invidious ways. Loss of income with less money circulating around many communities has been just one factor (see chapter 5). Uncertain labour markets have impacted on levels of volunteer involvement and activism. The loss of pro-bono advice and no/low cost meeting spaces has also taken its toll (see case studies – Chapter 5). Further, partly to survive, some groups have taken on new, service delivery, roles diversifying from their original purpose of advocating on behalf of their community – the extent to which this has affected their ability to lobby requires further examination. Such extensive change, however, has probably affected only a minority. More common is a situation whereby residents, whether they have some access to funding or not, taking on, or commissioning, services that have been cut from local authorities: in particular children and youth services (McCabe et al 2016b). This pressure to take on services has come from below, from communities, as well as policy or statutory influences.

Further, there has been a loss of voice and influence particularly following the loss of network and advocacy organisations. In part this has been due to the loss national and regional infrastructure and support agencies: from Urban Forum through to Community Matters. At a more profound level, it has resulted from pressure to be 'doing more and saying less' (Aitken 2014). The UK Government give the impression that they believe it is not the role of community, faith or other groups to speak out about injustice and poverty. Instead their place seems to involve meeting increasing local needs with patience and, ideally, in silence.

There is also evidence that the divide, in communities as well as within the Third Sector – between the have's and have not's has grown. There is an increasing gap between the large charities and smaller organisations in the sector (NCIA 2015. Crees *et al* 2016). At a community level, a growing number of Community Development and Land Trusts have created innovative solutions to, for example, a lack of affordable rural housing and, particularly in Scotland, played a role in revitalising rural economies. Yet most of these

initiatives are in affluent, or relatively affluent communities, rather than poor neighbourhoods. Then, there has been the demonization of certain communities in both political discourse and the media: in particular poor working class neighbourhoods (Jones 2011) and new migrants. What has been played out has been the conundrum of St. Mathew's Gospel: to those that have more shall be given (Matthew 12:13)

The state of community groups and activities, the more informal part of the third sector, could be described currently as thriving – but fragile and uncertain – with further cuts and hard times to come (Hillier 2016). This situation is not simply about lack of money but connects with a more philosophical debate about what the third sector is for and whether as MacMillan (2013) argues it can be reasonably described as a sector at all. Questions have been raised about whether shared, core values can be identified (see Chapter 4 and Kenny et al 2015) or if there is a fragmented, fractious, sector that no longer has a strategic unity (Alcock 2010). So looking forwards what does the future hold?

Predicting the future of the third sector, or wider civil society, is notoriously difficult. Visioning is fraught with problems. As Deakin (1995) noted, predictions of the demise of charity in 1945, with the introduction of the welfare state, were slightly wide of the mark. Similarly, prophecies of a doomed voluntary and, particularly, community sector in 2010 have proved false. The Coen Brothers' epitaph for *The Big Lebowski* (1998), 'the dude abides' seems apposite. What can we say, then, about the futures for below the radar activity? The following predictions are, therefore offered, with some caution. Indeed, some are posed as questions.

What is evident, with continuing austerity, is that the hopes that short term deficit reduction strategies could be ridden out and some kind of 'normal service' would return have faded. Co-production has become a by-word for creative responses to managing austerity and creating a new contract between local government, statutory agencies and the communities they serve (Parker 2015). Questions can be raised as to whether there will be enough enthusiasm, never mind capacity, for communities to 'co-produce' and what exactly will they co-produce. It is likely that there will be ongoing and intensified debates about the appropriate roles and boundaries between public provision and civil society.

Further some have posited the view that organisational structures no longer have primacy and organisations as Gilchrist (2016 forthcoming) suggests are no longer 'fit for purpose: what is needed, and what will emerge, is a more relational, networked, way of working in and with communities". In this view, such a situation has been evident, for example, within inter-faith work – what the traditional forums for dialogue have by and large collapsed to be replaced by personal relationships between faith leaders and 'encounters' between those of different faiths (McCabe et al 2016 a). Whilst it is not likely that organisations will be abandoned altogether its probable that multiple and fluid forms of organising will evolve and co-exist. What has not been seen, however, is wholesale dismantling of corporate or governmental structures – these too continue to evolve. As the community sector moves towards more relational ways of working, of possibly 'doing politics' there will be consequences for the ways that power relationships between the state, corporations and communities are played out as set out in 2011 by an interviewee from a local development agency stated

*“I don’t want to predict what the future, say in five years, will look like for voluntary never mind community groups. There may be a leaner but more efficient and effective sector, a more entrepreneurial and business like sector – or just a leaner one. **What we will see played out in some form is a profound change in the relationships between people, government and the sector.**”*

There are those that argue the third sector has, indeed, become leaner and meaner (NCIA 2015) and more business-like with the ‘Tescoisation’ of large charities in terms of growth and tendency to adopt more commercial modes of operation (Hind 2014). This has played out, in terms of the relationship between ‘people and the sector’ as a backlash against, predominantly larger, charities and aggressive fund raising strategies. In terms of the relationship between people, communities, and government, even more profound forces are evident. The growing disenchantment of people with political and corporate elites (Sayer 2015) and, amongst politicians, a view that, in some cases that community is the problem

What is evident is that regardless of political, policy and financial changes one thing remains constant and will ensure the continued emergence, evolution and expansion of community organisations (as well as subsequent closures) - people will continue to be motivated to come together to seek solutions to problems that matter to them. Community groups are, and will remain, grounded in emotional engagement (chapter 13); emotions which may result in conflict but also provide spaces for solidarity and creativity (Chapters 6 and 12) which are and shall be resistant to co-option either by ‘standard’ managerial ways of working or external policy agendas (Chapters 5 and 6).

Perhaps the fluctuations and shifts which we have outlined in this book are more likely to affect the extent to which communities are able to be effective rather than their desire for community driven change.

When thinking about below the radar community groups now, and in the future, perhaps the last words should belong, not to activists, practitioners or academics, but to the novelist, playwright and poet Samuel Beckett (1983 p.47 and 1958 p.418):

‘Ever tried. Ever Failed. Never Mind. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.’

Or perhaps more optimistically – and realistically - for communities and their ways of organising

‘I can’t go on. I’ll go on.’

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ⁱ Quote from the Cohen Brothers film (1998) *The Big Lebowski*