

Trust In The Community?

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Ian Cooke has been a community development practitioner for the last 27 years, and a large part of that time has been spent supporting community activists and community organisations within a succession of local authority and government led regeneration initiatives. As Manager of the Pilton Partnership within North Edinburgh he played a key role in re-constituting the organisation as a development trust, and in 2009 took up post of Director with the Development Trusts Association Scotland.

Over the last 25 years, an increasing number of communities throughout the UK have established development trusts as a framework for community-led regeneration or as a means to address key community issues. On the face of it this seems to have been a largely organic development, and much of this activity has taken place with limited support from “professional community development”. But what exactly are development trusts, what historical, economic and political influences have shaped the development trust movement and what potential do they have to offer within a community development context?

Development trusts come in a number of shapes and legal forms, but essentially they can be distinguished from other types of community organisations in that they possess a number of key characteristics. Firstly, they are community led and community owned; and this is enshrined within their constitutional arrangements. In the main (exclusively in Scotland) development trusts represent defined geographical communities, and are seeking to either regenerate these communities or address a number of key community issues. They are, therefore, multi-issue in nature, rather than single-issue community organisations. In seeking to address these issues, development trusts will work in partnership with public sector, private sector and other third sector organisations – from informal working relationships to joint ventures. Finally, development trusts are committed to reducing their dependency on grant income through the development of an “independent” income stream(s) from trading and social enterprise activities.

Importantly, this enterprising approach includes the acquisition and ownership of assets to host services and activities and / or deliver an income stream for the development trust. In this way the community ownership of assets can provide a foundation from which to launch community led social enterprises and deliver sustainable transformation. The community ownership of assets has the potential to increase the sustainability, independence and status (community groups with assets are players rather than tokenistic or peripheral partners) of the organisation and therefore tends to be the characteristic most associated with development trusts.

The Development Trusts Association, which is the UK-wide body for development trusts, currently boasts a membership of 466 (this includes the 143 members of DTA Scotland) which gives some indication of the scale of the national movement. Within England, development trusts are more prevalent in urban, rather than rural, communities although this position is reversed north of the border where for a variety of reasons Scottish development trusts are more common in island and rural communities. This figure of 466 significantly underestimates the extent of development trust activity, with at least as many organisations again in existence outwith the membership of the DTA; community organisations who in some cases may not recognise or call themselves development trusts but exhibit all the key characteristics which define development trusts.

What is particularly striking within the development trust movement is the range and variety of communities and organisations; the range of issues being addressed and the activities and services being undertaken to address these issues. In terms of size or scale, development trusts range from those covering small rural settlements of between 40 and 50 people to the large, well established development trusts such as Coin Street Community Builders in central London. Formed over 20 years ago as a community response to the lack of affordable rented housing for local people in the centre of London, Coin Street now has extensive commercial and property interests on the South Bank (including the Oxo Tower and Gabriels Wharf) which have enabled the development trust to establish 4 housing co-operatives and other state of the art community facilities for local people (see www.coinstreet.org). The scale and diversity of the development trust sector, the ability of development trusts to harness community energy and the creative ways in which they have addressed a wide range of issues has led to an increased level of interest in development trusts from both communities and politicians alike.

The 2009 annual membership survey of the Development Trusts Association calculates that the combined turnover of member development trusts across the UK is £275 million (of which £136 million is earned income) and that the asset base of members is currently worth around £565 million. Viewed in this light, community development seems a much less marginal activity than many community work commentators would have us believe. In addition to land and buildings in community ownership, the assets of development trusts in Scotland include woodlands, harbours, housing, renewable energies (wind turbines, hydro schemes and bio-mass initiatives), castles, swimming pools and other sports facilities, shops, post-offices, hotels, former MOD bases – the list is endless! In addition, development trusts often operate around the area of market failure and many have acquired, and successfully run, a range of commercial businesses, in many cases maintaining vital local services and safeguarding local employment.

The growth of development trusts within Scotland has taken place within (and arguably as a response to) a difficult and challenging context for many communities.

For many urban communities, and particularly the poorest urban communities, the last 25 years have been characterised by a succession of regeneration partnerships and initiatives by governments of different political complexions. While the experience of these partnerships, including their limited impact, have been well documented in the pages of *Concept* and elsewhere, the top down nature of these arrangements have frequently required communities to engage on the terms of the paymaster, with issues and problems (and the required solutions) invariably being defined in advance by politicians and civil servants. Out-with housing funding, the major financial investment has usually taken the form of grant funding, the consequence of which has been vital local services being delivered by fragile community-managed voluntary organisations who are almost 100% grant dependent. The longer term sustainability of this community infrastructure will be tested to the limit in Scotland as the ring fencing of Fairer Scotland Funding is removed over the coming year or two.

It is interesting to note that over the same period, the issue of rural communities has been virtually ignored within contemporary community work literature in Scotland, yet the experience of many island and remote rural communities has been not that dissimilar to the poorer urban communities – effectively abandoned by the market (apart from the second home / holiday home market which has contributed further to the de-stabilisation of fragile rural communities) and systematically failed by central and local government. Arguably, the major exception to this public sector failure is the approach of Highland and Islands Enterprise (HIE), who have for some years encouraged and supported community based social enterprise as a key element within their economic development strategy. However unlike their urban counterparts, and with the exception of HIE programmes, there has been no major comparable government “regeneration interventions” within island and remote rural communities.

Given these different, yet in some ways related, contexts which many communities have experienced over the last 25 years, it is perhaps unsurprising that a new approach – the development trust approach – has emerged: a framework which enables communities to define and prioritise issues for themselves, engage in genuine partnership working on their terms, release the creativity of local people, reclaim “enterprise” from being the sole preserve of the private sector and increase the community ownership of land, buildings and other productive assets. Because of the different elements within the approach it is difficult to place development trusts neatly within any one part of the political spectrum – indeed the fact that development trusts talk of enterprise and assets in the same breath as co-operation and mutuality perhaps presents a challenge to the nature of the political spectrum itself. In a similar vein, development trusts, as community organisations using an enterprise approach, straddle both the community sector and the social enterprise sector.

Despite this, the development trust movement seems fairly comfortable with itself, where it has come from and where it is going. In terms of the community ownership of assets it can point to a rich historical tradition emanating from the struggles of

various groups of people from as far back as the 17th century (the Levellers, the Ranters and the Diggers perhaps being the most well known). Over the centuries, the community ownership of land and assets has ran “like a golden thread through our social history” (Wyler,S 2009), remaining a consistent issue within progressive political thought, and subsequent struggles and movements. The concept of community-based social enterprise can arguably be traced back even further - to the medieval guilds which existed in the twelfth century. Since then, the concept of social enterprise has informed the development of successive progressive movements (including the Chartists, the Rochester Pioneers, Robert Owen’s villages of co-operation, the trade union communities of the 1840s, and the early Co-operative movement), often being interwoven with ideas of community ownership.

While the impetus for many of these social movements was the eradication of poverty and exploitation and a desire for transformative social change, development trusts within the current context make no such claims, preferring to draw on their rich historical legacy to provide practical and creative solutions to both traditional community issues and new, emerging issues (such as climate change) with an approach which is both “can-do” and often opportunistic in nature. As has been described above, the development trust approach is not rocket science and indeed part of the attraction for communities, may lie in both the simplicity and the flexibility of the framework on offer.

The current economic crisis has arguably posed more fundamental questions about the nature of the society we live in than any other event in recent years, summarised in the following quotation from the Independent newspaper - “The present situation has shown us that the purely profit-motivated business model hasn’t worked. It never worked for the poor and excluded, but now it can’t even survive on its own terms. It has over-borrowed, over-promised and finally the bubble has burst”. If ever there was an opportunity to re-focus on the concepts of co-operation, mutuality and social enterprise and the re-emerging economic ideas of thinkers such as E.F. Schumacher, then this is it! However, in the absence of this being picked up by any major political party, then the onus would seem to fall on civil society, and seen within this context the development trust approach may offer an apposite way to engage local communities.

Writing in Newstart magazine (November, 2009), Tony Hawkhead, the Chief Executive of Groundwork UK, argues that “a broken society won’t be mended from Westminster or the town hall. Society has to mend itself. This means those people with the most challenges being given the best tools and support to increase their self-reliance a community that is motivated and feels involved in decision making can affect real change”. Faced therefore with the consequences of further potential economic crises, an increasingly ageing population, and the twin threats of climate change and peak oil, it is fairly safe to conclude that communities will increasingly require to be stronger, cohesive, creative, more autonomous and more resilient.

While the development trust approach seems to have much to offer within the above context, it should be stressed that it is not a panacea for all of society's ills. It does however, arguably, offer a new framework for community development, which draws on the strengths of good, progressive community development practice, whilst at the same time addressing some of its historic weaknesses. Importantly, the development trust approach also addresses many of the problems within traditional, and much of current, community engagement activity (top down, tokenistic, marginal, with imposed partnerships, and agendas). Having said that, the development trust approach is not totally without its challenges - for instance there is a fragility within some of what has been achieved to date, and, like much other community activity, it runs the risk in some instances of community activist burn-out. In addition there can, at times, be a tension between the development trust being both democratic and enterprising. However there is no doubt that increasing numbers of local people are drawing inspiration and motivation from both the development trust approach and each other, and using this to achieve all kinds of success in their communities – often in very adverse circumstances. As more and more communities vote with their feet, professional community development would do well to, at the very least, ascertain why.

References

- Wylar, Steve 2009, *A History of Community Asset Ownership*, Development Trust Association
- Hawkhead, Tony 2009 “Whatever your political hue, the starting point for fixing our society is community”, *Newstart journal*, November, 2009, Newstart Publishing
- Schumacher, E.F. 1999, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*: with Commentaries, Hartley and Marks

DTA Scotland has recently produced a new learning resource which is available free to community organisations interested in exploring the development trust approach. “Inspiring Change” charts the birth and early years of Comrie Development Trust in Perthshire through a DVD, illustrated wall chart depicting the ‘time line’ of the trust’s journey, and booklet which gives essential ingredients for success as well as relevant information, contacts and tools.

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