

Development Trusts: 'Community empowerment' or 'devolving the axe'?

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Introduction

The significant and controlling effect of global forces on local communities has been exposed, first through the decimation of traditional industries in Britain, and now through the decimation of Britain's economic system. The result in Scotland will be long-lasting with severe cuts to public services and the consequent dismantling and changing of the role, social purpose and professional identity of community work.

The winter 2011 *Concept* Journal highlighted diverse locations of struggle and forms of resistance against or in response to this. In this current context there are different emerging actions and formations that are attempting to move 'from opposition to proposition'. Fraser (2011), for example, discussing the current dilemmas and contest around community engagement within this context, is concerned by the official political support for Development Trusts as a potential vehicle for facilitating the Tory cuts agenda.

In this article I would like to respond to that argument and to consider how Development Trusts *do* offer one form of community development (henceforth CD) worth considering. I will also consider how this relates to that much-debated term, '*empowerment*', in offering new possibilities, implications and threats for CD. After exploring the concept of empowerment, I will apply this to the Development Trust model, to look at whether this is community empowerment, or merely 'devolving the axe' and 'privatisation through the backdoor'. Finally, I will suggest four possibilities for the practice of CD in Scotland today in connection to Development Trusts. Throughout, I argue that power is a relational concept and the external structures that shape those relations involved will significantly alter how empowerment is understood, and how the role of CD is interpreted.

Community empowerment: The current context

The discourse of empowerment has become ubiquitous in British policy and politics. It has become a dominant tool in the move towards 'the Big Society' that is being applied across a wide and diverse policy spectrum and different domains of practice. Simultaneously, it is being proclaimed as a key principle for survival in a global economy (World Bank 2002), whilst also being celebrated as one of the core contents of radical and popular education (Bernard 2002).

What is to be made of these competing interpretations? It could be that the wide and varied uses of empowerment have diluted any critical force or application, further confusing the matter, and becoming simply another bit of jargon that '*doesn't mean a sausage to anyone else and sometimes even to us* [as local authority workers]. (Duffy et al 2008, p.8). However, it is precisely its prevalence across such wide ranging ideological positions and purposes that means it needs engaging with. In contemporary Britain we cannot escape its dominance in the political discourse of change, and nor should we choose to. Merely passing it off as meaningless is to take a neutral stance and, as such, implicitly support the status quo and the appearance that all institutions, organisations and actions are 'empowering' communities.

Power is inscribed within contextual relations and rules. The external structures that shape this context will reveal what determines the kind of empowerment possible and for whom. Hugh Butcher (2007) has provided a useful framework for understanding the different assumptions behind implementations of empowerment. He distinguishes between *Power-Over*, which treats power as a zero sum game in which empowerment is gaining more of the power over decision-making and the rules of engagement, and *Power-With*, which is the collective capacity to achieve and implement with others; the latter implies a kind of social empowerment that harnesses power and potential rather than taking it. The understanding of power as applied in different contexts will determine the types of relationships changed through empowerment.

The current Scottish Government suggests that:

Community empowerment is a process where people work together to make change happen in their communities by having more power and influence over what matters to them (COSLA 2009).

This is part of a wider political and rhetorical shift from the State as provider to enabler (Cowden & Singh 2007). Former relations between the state, service providers and citizens are seen to have created power imbalances which limited the capacity for self provisioning and democratic participation in the designing and delivery of public services. Effectively, the current Government claims there has been too much state interference and is vigorously pursuing an alternative. However this current discourse could also be seen as the language of progressive social movements being appropriated to justify the reduction of state welfare and responsibility. This can pose multiple threats, as Fraser (2011) pointed out in his article, to those who lack the same social and economic resources as others and so will have less recognition and representation in the design and delivery process.

The role of Community Development

Community development, as a professional and political practice, is positioned between external structures and discourses which determine its rules of engagement and changing relations, whilst simultaneously creating the conditions for new forms

of social and political expression in response to these changes (Shaw 2011). Significantly, though, I see it as working with communities to build on their experiences of injustice, exclusion and inequality as sources of strength and capacity, from which to gain more equitable control and power over their lives. CD has evolved into a variety of approaches and well-established areas. Claudio Schuftan (1996) has categorised these areas of practice as: service delivery, capacity building, advocacy and social mobilisation. David Cameron's 'radical shift' of policy towards the 'Big Society' (Cameron 2010) has narrowed its focus to the first two at the expense of the other two more politically, financially and administratively unacceptable. These second two however offer greater opportunities for Power-With. Lack of recognition and support for advocacy and social mobilisation can mask the emergence of new social movements, and overlooks the role these play in maintaining democracy and developing a sense of influence and meaningful collective pursuit. Within this context participation in service delivery becomes merely a managerial and imposed community engagement, as Fraser (2011) puts it: 'acting *for* communities rather than *with* them'.

This 'radical shift' has reinforced a Power-Over narrative which creates a dichotomous understanding of power, maintaining an 'us' and 'them' ideology. Community empowerment becomes something delivered to people as beneficiaries through efficient ways and new products, rather than participatory processes that require intensive time and capacity (World Bank 2002 Chapter 3). Genuine empowerment should arise in dialogue with a community and will inevitably involve dissent and conflict. This can be undermined by managerial community empowerment projects, competing for funding under current external structures, and limited by performance frameworks and outcomes that may restrict engagement with minority or dissenting groups and silencing of difficult issues. Such an approach can also threaten its legitimacy and increase the suspicion with which it may be seen by communities. In addition, the proliferation of invited spaces (Gaventa 2006) for participation, with structures of engagement set beforehand has led to the closing of informal, open and democratic spaces where new issues, identities and relationships can arise, and Power-With could be developed on people's own terms.

The task then for CD is to develop political and social relationships that can enable the capacities of collective advocacy and social mobilisation to flourish, but which do not isolate particular groups, undermining social networks across socio-economic differences (Cornwall 2008). This would rely on an inter-subjective relationship between development agent and subject. It would challenge the binary logic that empowerment is always achieved through a zero-sum game by demonstrating that groups can articulate their own terms for cultivating power and development through their relationship and dialogue with the state. I suggest that Development Trusts do create one possibility for CD to develop Power-With community empowerment through these kinds of relationships. The current political focus on empowerment

allows space for this because it builds on suggestions of specific policy lobby groups *and* struggles of community activism (Newman 2009). It is thus not just one hegemonic project but contains contradictions, multiple possibilities and implementations for the practice of CD.

Development Trusts: The possibilities

Development Trusts are a new form of community organisation, evolving in Scotland since 2003. They are free associations that can take a variety of different forms, often arising in communities that have been effectively abandoned by the market (Cooke 2010). Their key characteristics are: they are community-led and owned, they are multi-issue regeneration organisations centred around a particular place, they work in partnership with public, private and third sector organisations, and they are committed to reducing dependency on grant support by generating income through enterprise and the ownership of assets (DTAS 2011). They seek to tackle local issues and improve the quality of the lives of people in their area and through this build a stronger voice to influence the contexts within which they operate for maximum use of possible resources and opportunities.

Asset transfer and ownership can often be a significant foundation for Development Trusts in increasing the sustainability, independence and status of the organisation and area (Cooke 2010). The Scottish Government explicitly support this in both policy and funding;

For some communities empowerment will involve owning assets. Communities owning land and buildings can have a huge impact on their empowerment' (COSLA 2009).

Working with the policy and discourse of empowerment, Development Trusts offer, arguably, a new site and frame for CD which can address many of the problems within traditional, and much current, community engagement activity (Cooke 2010). It can, instead, connect people in the arena of public and political action through structures not prescribed by state, turning invited and closed spaces into claimed spaces (Gaventa 2006).

Development Trusts emerge as new forms of relational structures between the state and communities where local actors and citizens are engaged in many different ways with their communities. Being relatively small and local they can capture people's imagination, as tangible and visible gains can be made quicker than within the state system. This creates the conditions for an empowerment that is given meaning through the situated context and form of the action. Communities also have more autonomy and flexibility over outcomes, being able to determine their own success and aims locally to shape change rather than merely respond. They have less policy-directed targets with particular groups, and can work more easily on an intergenerational and mixed demographic basis where people are 'members', not

clients or service users. This can help build better relationships and recognition locally through involving a diverse range of people in a variety of initiatives and projects. Importantly they begin to address fundamental inequalities of ownership and material resources, which some community empowerment strategies ignore (Kirkwood 1990), and also political and economic representation without which communities are deprived of the possibility to articulate and defend their interests with respect to distribution and recognition (Fraser 2005). Having a 'voice' does not necessarily affect power differences or lead to having a genuine choice, and empowerment is too often assumed as an automatic consequence of engagement (Lowndes & Sullivan 2004).

Whilst the Big Society provides little or no account of the decentralisation of wealth to complement its agenda for devolution of power (Glasman 2010), the growing asset base in 2010 for Development Trust members was around £565 million (Cooke 2010), and therefore a much less economically marginal activity. This can make it more likely to attract investment from other sources and raise communities' confidence to claim assets or rights and to secure resources for which they are eligible and entitled (Mathie 2006). Their multi-issue orientation can also make them potentially more appealing and less likely to dissipate local energy and support. Through this they may be represented and respected as equal partners in negotiation and breed greater equality amongst their members through co-ownership, participation and profit combined (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010). Through building new relational connections between public, quasi-public and private spaces (Harvey 2006), communities can use what they have to secure what they have not (Coady in Mathie 2006, p. 2) strengthening Power-With as *catalytic* CD (Bowns 2011).

Development Trusts: Potential threats

However, this approach cannot claim to answer all of a society's problems, and contains many potential threats and questions. Development Trusts are still relatively new, and so issues of long-term sustainability and inevitable community dissent and conflict may yet arise. There are also various financial, administrative and managerial risks and tasks created which may, if not handled carefully and with support, inculcate undemocratic and hierarchical power structures of decision making. This may lead to forms of horizontal violence or segregation locally and potential reinforcement of hierarchies and exclusion (IDS 2010). Marginalised voices or groups in the area that need most resources and financial support may be left out for financial expediency or assimilated into systems where their distinctive interests are highly vulnerable to manipulation, dissipating their own potential power. At the same time, the increasing reliance on local actors and Development Trusts as agents of change, which depend on the energy of active community members, creates a fragile foundation for community collaboration and risks community activist burn-out (Cooke 2010).

Most significantly perhaps is the threat that this model, and that of public asset transfer, poses to the hard fought-for and established principles of social welfare and recognition of new claims based on identity. Colenutt (in Shaw 2011) warns that the promise of 'community ownership' blind[s] us to the realities of further surrendering commitment to universal provision of benefits and services in the name of CD where only 'legitimate' and valued communities are recognised, and resistance is structured out. This increasing focus on localisation, which is not necessarily engaged with the wider political and public sphere, can cut people off from wider social movements, political struggles and other citizens. Furthermore, it can threaten the breaking up or forming of collective issue and identity groups that go beyond place and geographical borders. Solidarity and support with those groups who are already marginalized or under-resourced may also be reduced when services become less of a public and shared good. The more a region or area is broken down into local communities without looking at them as a whole and connecting to the broader context of policy and politics, the more alienation is intensified...keeping the oppressed isolated from the problems of those oppressed in other areas (Freire 1972). CD workers have to make strategic choices within their practice and be ready to resist as well as enroll communities on empowerment programs. It seems important to analyse power within each context to see if needs *and wants* of local groups are really met, and what forms of empowerment are relevant. I have suggested the Development Trust model as one which is can reframe the possibilities of empowerment, but further consideration is needed to identify what role CD could or should play, particularly in addressing some of the threats referred to earlier.

Implications for community development practice

Finally, I want to highlight four implications for the practice of CD within this context. The first is the ability to interact more directly with these locally- responsive and community-led developments. The process of identification with the local community for a worker is critical in sustaining the activities of CD, and this can be most effective when external to decision making and power structures. If there is a greater political commitment and will to support community empowerment as demonstrated in Development Trusts, then it justifies broadening the role of CD to one that supports social mobilisation, as well as service delivery and decision making. There also needs to be a deeper appreciation and awareness that Development Trusts may need extra support to maintain relationships, and work with the most excluded and marginalised members of a community who are no longer being supported by the state, particularly in rural communities.

The second possibility is in extending this to include an advocacy role as an essential part of empowerment, that focuses on supporting both equality of influence and decision-making and equality of access to material resources. By supporting the economic and social development of communities, and increased representation and trust in the political sphere, communities can begin to contend with the external forces

which limit their roles and constrain their activities and open claimed spaces, or develop authentic partnerships that exist when there is a closer power approximate between partners (Bunyan 2010).

Third, Development Trusts offer the opportunity to implement community empowerment as a form of nurturing hope, deep and authentic relationships and lasting change through civic engagement. This would have a growth orientation not a compensatory one (Kirkwood & Kirkwood 2011), working on what communities are for, not what they are against. Transforming social relations and building local trusts and networks can have positive consequences on the demand for effective governance and participation in larger institutional systems. This is, of course, not the only way, but offers one emerging possibility of organising that can develop this potential.

Finally, 'one formidable need is a way of transforming local issues into a cohesive national agenda and integrating effectively the many forms of organising into the electoral process' (Miller et al 1995, p.126). This is both possible and threatened within Development Trusts in the current political context, and thus an imperative for CD. Local actions provide a site of immediate engagement and of tangibly experiencing the meaning of empowerment. However you 'cannot sustain islands of light in a sea of darkness' (Kirkwood 1990, p. 88) and, without linking these to wider struggles that constrain empowerment, they threaten to further isolate communities and struggles and breed disrespect and burnout rather than solidarity, social empowerment and transformation. I have tried to demonstrate the possibilities and potential inherent in the Development Trust model for greater political advocacy and increasing spheres of influence (Harvey 2006). However, this is an educational project on which CD should engage with Development Trusts if it is to counter the incorporating and quelling affects of some reductionist and outcome-drive empowerment projects.

In conclusion, the various social relations and purposes which shape the construction of power determine *whose* empowerment to do *what* (Miller at al 1995) is implied in community empowerment. CD has the potential to be used for wide-ranging purposes and CD workers need to specify the conditions of empowerment which they are promoting or using in the current context. 'Political education is not a set of text books but a living relationship' (Gibson 2011), and as such there is the need, and now the political and organisational possibility, to start at the bottom again in new social formations, to reinvigorate participation and democracy to challenge the external structures within which empowerment is understood through new relationships at a local and national level between citizens, the state, local actors, communities and service providers.

I acknowledge that this is a highly contested area, and that the implications for one community may be completely different from another. It therefore needs to be

approached with great care and consideration for the context. I am only beginning to experience and understand the way these changes might affect the lived realities of people in communities across Scotland and also how they link up to form wider support and learning networks, for example through DTAS (Development Trust Association Scotland) and CADISPA (Conservation and Development in Sparsely Populated Areas). I think this is an important area for dialogue and reflective practice amongst community education practitioners and communities in this current context, and thus as a primarily theoretical paper, I would invite those involved in well established Development Trusts to continue this discussion in *Concept* through contributing practical experience and knowledge gained of the lived issues that arise. Although asset transfer and Development Trusts may contain many potential threats to communities and to the social democratic ideals of community education that we must remain wary and critical of, it also contains seeds of hope and change for local people as one potential proposition worth exploring.

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