Community Development and the 'Austerity Decade' (2010-19)

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Abstract

Local government in Scotland and across the UK was transformed in the last decade by an economic policy shaped by austerity, resulting in the biggest cuts to local authority spending seen in a generation. In this context, community development as an 'approach to working' in local government has found itself embroiled in new forms of work designed to reduce public expenditure. In the main, this work has centred on the outsourcing and asset transfer of public goods and services to new (and cheaper) community-based providers. This article explores how community development's involvement with outsourcing and asset transfer has transformed the 'competencies' required of practitioners, and changed their relations on the ground with communities. The article argues that, despite the progressive rhetoric which is associated with outsourcing and asset transfer - 'community empowerment', 'co-production', 'self-help' and so forth - the real agenda has been shaped by austerity and managing the fiscal crisis of the state.

Introduction

In policy terms, it could be argued that the years 2010-19 were good years for community development, which found itself centre stage in a series of new policies and initiatives, most of which stemmed from the Scottish Government. These policies included the Community Empowerment Act (2015), which provided a new focus for the profession in Scotland (see Scottish Government, 2015). The Christie Commission (2011) on the future delivery of public services was another significant development which highlighted the importance of 'empowering individuals and communities' to have a greater say in the design and delivery of public services which they used. Other

noteworthy developments included renewed National Standards for Community Engagement, which set out 'good practice' guidelines for public bodies to engage with communities (see Scottish Community Development Centre, 2019). New terms such as 'co-production' and 'participatory budgeting' also entered the discourse, framed around a narrative which was familiar (and, indeed, which appealed to) many practitioners. And yet, in my experience, social policies framed around themes such as 'community empowerment' and 'co-production' are problematic and, as this article argues, have often provided progressive window-dressing for practices more related to managerial preoccupations with cost-cutting. Indeed, given the sheer scale of cuts to local government since 2010, it would be inconceivable for it to be otherwise. This article explores how austerity has transformed local government and community development and, with regards to the latter, it considers two specific areas of practice – outsourcing and asset transfer, both of which I argue are informed by cost-cutting agendas. The article discusses the ways in which these practices have radically transformed community development, changing the 'competencies' required of practitioners and leading to top-down and managerial relations with communities. The article ends with a call for a debate about the role of local government in relation to providing universal public services in Scotland.

In the opening section, the article considers the impact of austerity on local government at the start of the last decade.

Local Government and the 'Austerity Decade' (2010-19)

In basic terms, austerity refers to a programme of reducing government deficits by cutting public expenditure (see Blyth, 2013). There is not the space to tell the story of austerity in depth in this article, but it emerged as an economic strategy pursued by governments across much of the West following the 'Global Financial Crisis' of 2008, which Skidelsky argues caused one of the 'most violent collapses in economic life seen in the last hundred years' (Skidelsky, 2010, p. 5). In the UK, the first austerity budget was introduced in 2010 by the then Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government and involved the biggest cuts to public expenditure seen in the post-War era (Mellet, 2012, p. 114). Local government, in particular, was

disproportionately affected compared to other areas of the welfare state – health and education, for example. The situation was especially dire in England where central funding to local authorities was reduced by almost 50 per cent (see Blakely, 2019). This resulted in a situation in which some English Councils faced financial collapse, whilst services such as social care were placed in a state of near permanent crisis (see Levitas, 2012). In Scotland, local government generally fared better, largely as a result of the Scottish Government using new financial powers to ameliorate the worst excesses of austerity (see Audit Scotland, 2019; Fraser of Allander Institute, 2017). However, Scottish Councils also implemented a programme of austerity at the behest of central government in Westminster, and it was local government which took the brunt.

The challenges faced by local government in Scotland in the last decade have been quite staggering; on the one hand Councils had to cut their budgets significantly, whilst at the same time experiencing a substantial increase in demand for services – especially social care and housing (see Audit Scotland, 2019). In order to address these challenges, they embarked upon a process, which was described by management and auditors as 'Transformational Change' (Ibid, 2019). Since 2010 this agenda has been driven by two objectives; first, reduce public expenditure, and second, increase 'income maximisation'[1]. The first objective was achieved mainly through a programme of job losses: it was estimated that around 30,000 jobs were lost in local government in the first part of the last decade (see Jimmy Reid Foundation, 2018). As an example of the scale of redundancies, one Council - Dumfries and Galloway - is said to have saved £60 million in a five-year period, partly through reducing its workforce by 11.3 per cent (see Audit Scotland, 2019). And yet, by the middle of the decade, auditors and senior management noted that there were limits as to the amount

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[1] 'Income maximisation' refers to a policy of Councils charging for services which were once funded out of general taxation; examples of charges introduced post-2010 included burials (the average burial plot has increased by 12 per cent since 2011/12), garden waste uplift, public toilets, community alarms for older people, expansion of car parking charges and new licensing charges – for example, new licences for public entertainment (see Audit Scotland, 2019).

of 'savings' that could be made via job redundancies and, as a result, Councils were instructed to 'fundamentally rethink' how they provided public goods and services (Ibid, 2019). This led to every local authority in Scotland drawing up plans to outsource their services to new (and cheaper) 'third sector' providers, a process described by Audit Scotland as 'community empowerment'. According to the auditors, 'community empowerment' is part of the 'transformational change' agenda and aims to 'involve communities in the difficult decisions that need to be made about priorities and options' (Ibid, 2019).

In the next section, I explore how community development has been called upon to facilitate the 'transformational change' agenda, and consider two areas of practice - outsourcing and asset transfer - which have transformed everyday practices in the field and provided a new and troubling context for professional practice.

Outsourcing and Asset Transfer: A new context for professional community development

In the last decade, cash-strapped Councils rediscovered community development as a vehicle through which reductions in public expenditure might be facilitated. Two specific areas of practice emerged which dominated work in this period: outsourcing and asset transfer. The types of service which have been outsourced with support from community development include home care, day care clubs, crèches, youth clubs and 'after school clubs' (see Fraser, 2017; 2018). In addition, community development approaches were drawn upon to implement 'asset transfer' – a policy which involved the wholescale transfer of Council-owned assets such as town halls, community centres, libraries, leisure centres, swimming pools and playing fields, to new 'third sector' providers, as cheaper alternatives to local government (see Whitfield, 2012). The scale of outsourcing and asset transfer has been significant; since 2010 Audit Scotland noted that around 140 organisations which included Development Trusts, Social Enterprises and Arms-length Executive Organisations, were now directly responsible for service provision in many parts of Scotland (see Audit Scotland, 2016). This constitutes a radical restructuring of the local state and, in the case of

community development, has led to significant changes in the field of practice, especially in relation to the competences and skills required of practitioners.

Ensuring that community groups are able to provide services, which were once delivered 'in house' by local authorities, is a complex challenge and, as I have suggested elsewhere, the skills base of practitioners has become increasingly technical and specialist in the last decade (see Fraser, 2018). For example, practitioners have had to become 'competent' at writing business plans and presenting business cases to management committees who have been encouraged by Councils to see the opportunities inherent in transforming themselves into Social Enterprises and Development Trusts (Ibid, 2018). In addition, practitioners are required to have technical knowledge of complex areas such as procurement law and local government tendering processes, especially if 'third sector' organisations intend to compete successfully in the burgeoning public-sector delivery market (Ibid, 2018).

The work has also become increasingly focused on implementing pre-determined 'work related objectives' and 'performance targets'; examples of these drawn from my research included 'increase the number of Development Trusts and Social Enterprises providing services', 'increase the number of asset transfers'; 'increase the number of volunteers engaged in service design and delivery' and so forth (Fraser, 2017, 2018). Such 'targets' set by Council management have seldom been negotiated with communities.

It seems then that something significant has changed in the profession post-2010. In particular, the emergence of new competencies could be said to have hollowed out traditional community development skills such as advocacy work, issue-based group work and work focused on the nurturing of independent community activity (see also research by the Scottish Community Development Network, 2015). I would also argue that community development's historic claim to legitimacy as a practice grounded in those issues generated within and by communities (see Tett, 2010) has been rendered highly contestable as a consequence of its entanglement with austerity-related programmes.

In the final section, I consider policy frameworks such as 'community empowerment' and 'co-production', and argue that the rhetoric is discursively deceptive, concealing a reality on the ground which tells a very different story.

Community Empowerment and Co-Production: The reality behind the rhetoric

As noted, practices informed by outsourcing and asset transfer are often framed in terms of 'community empowerment' and 'co-production' (see Audit Scotland, 2019b). These policies emphasise the importance of 'community', 'participation' and 'engagement' and highlight the importance of giving more power to communities. Indeed, the Scottish Government defines 'community empowerment' as a 'a process where people work together to make change happen in their communities by having more power and influence over what matters to them' (Scottish Government, cited in, Audit Scotland, 2019b). And yet, research emerging from the last decade suggests that these claims are politically questionable, especially when used to justify outsourcing and asset transfer.

One notable finding, for example, is that outsourcing and asset transfer have primarily benefited middle-class communities at the expense of working-class and poorer communities (see Bailey, et al, 2015; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2015; Nichols, 2015). One of the reasons for this is that 'average volunteers' - namely, those who give up their free time in order to take part in the management of a service or an asset - are said to be disproportionately middle-class (see Findlay-King, et al, 2018). These 'middle-class volunteers' also possess a range of professional skills - such as finance and project management - which, on average, those living in poorer and working-class communities do not have access to (see Skerratt and Steiner, 2013, p. 322). The end result is that poorer communities with less 'social capital' of this kind often discover that their library, swimming pool or local community centre closes in the absence of alternative models of community ownership (see Whitfield, 2012). Outsourcing has also been criticised for having a detrimental impact on the workforce, especially as volunteers have replaced paid workers (Ibid, 2012). Similarly, it has been argued that the Third Sector is, itself, an attractive option for Councils seeking to outsource

services because of its reduced labour costs and lower levels of unionisation (see Cunningham, 2008). Issues relating to democratic accountability have also been identified in criticisms of asset transfers (see Nichols, 2015); whilst the concept of public services being controlled by democratically-elected Councils may be far from perfect, the alternative, is arguably even more problematic when services are potentially abandoned to 'unaccountable, unrepresentative and fragmented local groups' (Shaw, 2011, p. 4).

My research suggests that, in certain contexts, 'community ownership' is a poor substitute for state provision. Furthermore, when local government retreats from its role as funder and provider to that of commissioner, far from creating 'empowerment', the result is the emergence of new 'post-code lotteries' in terms of who gets access to public services. Of course, this is not to suggest that all forms of 'community ownership' are disempowering; indeed, there are many examples of communities developing resilience in the face of austerity, and stepping in to plug the gap vacated by the state (see Davies, 2019). However, in light of new findings, it would seem that a broader discussion is required in Scotland about the role of local government in relation to service provision.

This should also be part of a wider public debate which considers whether or not the current system of local government is 'fit for purpose'. Encouragingly, discussions are already taking place along these lines, with some raising important questions about the size of Scottish Councils, which are amongst the biggest in Europe, and noting how their scale and structure may seriously undermine local democracy (see Jimmy Reid Foundation, 2018). In addition, others have proposed returning powers to local government in relation to borrowing, tax-raising and creating new powers for Councils to issue Bonds in order to invest in local infrastructure (see Blakely, 2019). I would argue that these discussions need to be incorporated into the wider debate that Scotland is currently having about its constitutional future and that the community development 'community' itself needs to find a way of being part of these discussions as opposed to being a mere delivery vehicle for government policy in the community.

Concluding remarks

This article has argued that the years 2010-19 constituted an 'austerity decade' for community development in the context of local government in Scotland, with significant consequences for the meaning and practice of community development. At the start of this new decade, it is argued that the 'era of austerity' is drawing to an end, especially in the context of the landslide victory of the Conservative Party in the 2019 General Election. Arguably, this victory was at least partially based on promises to increase borrowing in order to invest in public spending (see Hassan, 2019). For some, this is a cynical ploy to win working class 'Leave' voters in Northern England, whilst for others it is representative of a significant shift, which is happening on the political right in the UK. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) take the latter view, arguing that the right has discovered that it is successful when it combines being 'right wing' on cultural issues such as patriotism, immigration, crime, and so forth, whilst tilting to the left in the economic sphere, a form of politics which they describe as 'national populism'. This formula could be part of the Conservative Party's wider agenda for achieving political hegemony and electoral dominance in the 2020s - certainly in England anyway - but it also suggests that the frame of the debate regarding austerity might need to be revisited. A note of caution is wise in this regard. The financial situation for local government in Scotland (and the rest of the UK) is particularly dire, with cuts forecast to continue (see Audit Scotland, 2019). As an illustration of how serious the situation is, it was recently revealed that most Councils in Scotland tapped into their reserves in the last decade, reserves which were meant to be there for emergencies - not everyday spending commitments (Ibid, 2019).

Finally, the continuation of spending cuts, and the hollowing out of universal public services which accompanies them, suggests that the political faultlines in local communities in the 2020s will increasingly be shaped around issues relating to public spending and debates about who should fund and provide public goods and services. How community development responds to these challenges will be important for its future, and the claims it can legitimately make to be responsive to communities.

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