

What Next for Community Empowerment?

Imogen Bayfield

Based on *Engaged Publics: Community Empowerment and Collective Organizing in Times of Crisis*

OVERVIEW

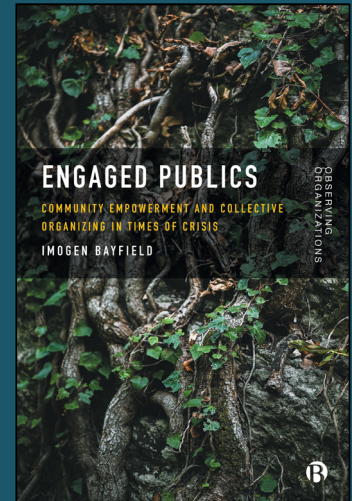
This briefing presents evidence on what enhances community empowerment processes, what constrains them and what might contribute to the design of future community empowerment initiatives. It is based on a multiyear ethnographic study with three community groups that were part of Big Local, a UK-based community empowerment programme, by anthropologist and sociologist Dr Imogen Bayfield.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The UK is experiencing increasing social and political polarisation, alongside declining trust in democratic processes and institutions. Periods of civil unrest have brought to light concerns over social tensions and societal cohesion. At the same time, global crises are becoming more frequent and complex. This is increasing the need for social and political mechanisms of collective deliberation and problem-solving.

Recent years have seen political and policy focus on communities as the contexts in which complex societal challenges are felt and, sometimes, mitigated. Across policy domains, initiatives that seek to involve residents in decision-making about national and local policy issues, resources and services are on the rise.

Many of these initiatives have been criticised for failing to adequately transfer power to residents. Community empowerment emerged around the 2000s as an approach for fostering the democratic health of a society by 'handing over control' to 'communities' to decide how to improve local lives and areas. Community empowerment programmes provide funds and resources to residents over long periods of time, often targeting 'deprived' or marginalised areas in which social capital has been eroded. Such programmes seek to create a context of freedom and flexibility that puts residents in the driving seat, allowing them to decide on shared goals and choose how they want to work towards them.



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FINDINGS

This study shows that community empowerment initiatives offer real potential to contribute to the democratic health of society. **Such initiatives benefit communities and society by:**

- **Bringing people together who might otherwise not have met.**
- **Fostering a sense of community and belonging** for those who get involved.
- Creating opportunities for communities to develop **new deliberative and organising capacities.**
- Giving people opportunities to **consider what kind of world they want to live in** and the resources to bring about change.
- **Enhancing civic life** in local areas.
- Developing networks that can **mobilise quickly in response to emerging crises.**

Despite these benefits, **societal inequalities shape who gets involved and how.** Cultural norms of organising are at the heart of this process. These **norms and aspirations towards certain ways of working constrain how groups work together and what they imagine to be possible.**

- Not everyone who lives in a local area gets involved in community initiatives, and of those who do, **some have more access than others to the resources that enable them to take part** – the time and financial security to be able to get involved at all, and the skills and cultural capital to participate fully.
- **‘Organising’ is not merely a technical process but a cultural one.** Organising practices often found in large institutions started to be used in the Big Local areas: meeting agendas and minutes, having someone chair meetings, and various organising and conversational norms associated with formal structures. **As groups aspire towards ‘effective governance’, this culturally dominant ‘organising logic’ constrains the possibility of communities imagining alternative ways of working,** even when given the flexibility to do so.

- **Culturally dominant ‘organising logics’ also act as a vehicle of inequality.** More privileged people tend to have had more opportunities to develop the skills associated with culturally dominant organising logics. This is why people from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to take on leadership roles in community initiatives, simply because they have skills that are seen as useful to their group, even when they have no desire to ‘take control’.

The following brought wide-ranging benefits to groups and their work:

- When groups had more **capacity** – be that through number of volunteers or staff, or through training those already involved – their ambition grew. Having enough capacity also meant that groups had time to engage in what might be considered ‘optional extras’ but that brought wide-ranging benefits (see below).
- **Strong interpersonal connections** enhanced all aspects of groups’ work. Groups with more capacity than they needed to run their immediate programme were more able to invest time and energy in strengthening these connections.
- Some groups engaged in **collective imagining exercises:** talking together about what they wanted for their neighbourhood and society, without restriction. These exercises fostered group morale, helped groups come up with new ideas and expanded collective ambition. Groups only engaged fully with these exercises when they had strong interpersonal connections and enough capacity to manage their immediate workload.
- Fieldwork for this study straddled the COVID-19 pandemic. It showed that **operating within the context of crisis, and collectively responding to it, can bring surprising benefits to groups.** In some cases, being in crisis together strengthened interpersonal connection and led to **notable improvements in groups’ problem-solving capacities.**



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PROGRAMME DESIGN

The 'hands-off' approach taken in Big Local was a logical and necessary next step in advancing participatory development design and practice. With the body of evidence that has been generated through and following the Big Local programme, to which this study contributes, future community empowerment initiatives might productively **include a carefully designed package of training and support that is available for residents from the start**. This could include:

Delivering training that helps groups reflect on how they work

- **Training that supports groups to evaluate their capacity and consider what can be done to grow it.**
- **Support for groups to explore how inequalities affect who gets involved, how they participate and what this means for the goals and issues the groups choose to address.** Such exercises could support groups to diversify engagement and think critically about the issues they want to address.
- **Support for groups to reflect on how the ways they work (the 'organising logics' they draw on) affect participation and inclusion.** This will build groups' reflexive practice and enable them to seek alternative ways of organising, should they choose to do so.

Designing programmes to enhance participation and inclusion

- Consideration should be given as to whether and **how funding might best enable more marginalised people to take part and take part fully**. This might include compensating people for their time, paying for professional carers and making clear that such funds are available from the start, so that those who need them do not automatically assume that they will not be able to take part.
- Giving groups the **time and resources to strengthen interpersonal connections**, and the confidence that doing so is a worthwhile use of their time, will support other aspects of their work.

Harnessing crisis, building resilience

- Stepping carefully and drawing on insights into group dynamics, programmes could be designed to **harness the power of collective imagining** in ways that address contemporary crises. **This could generate new paths towards addressing societal challenges**, while building groups' deliberative capabilities.
- Designing initiatives in ways that ensure that groups **have capacity to engage with their collective futures with imagination and ambition** will extend the impact of what a programme can achieve.