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## Community Capacity Building: Critical Evaluation of the Third Sector Approach

Colin C. Williams  
*University of Leicester*

### Abstract

*Throughout the advanced economies, public policy has become ever more deeply involved in developing the capacities of communities to help themselves. Until now, this has been pursued through facilitating the development of community-based groups. The aim of this paper, however, is to critically evaluate the implications and legitimacy of this public policy approach that views developing community-based groups and community capacity building as synonymous. Drawing upon empirical evidence from the United Kingdom, it is here revealed that this third sector approach of developing community-based groups privileges a culture of community involvement that relatively few engage in and is more characteristic of affluent populations, while disregarding informal acts of one-to-one engagement that are both a more popular form of community involvement and also more characteristic of the participatory culture of less affluent populations. The paper concludes by exploring how public policy might respond, especially with regard to the finding that less affluent populations have relatively informal cultures of engagement.*

### Introduction

In nearly all advanced economies, ever more attention is being paid in public policy to rebuilding the capacities of communities to help themselves. The way in which this has been pursued until now is by public policy facilitating the development of community-based groups. The widespread consensus is that nurturing community-based groups and rebuilding community capacity is synonymous (e.g., Anheier & Salamon, 2001; Dekker & Van Den Broek, 1998; Merrett, 2001; Perotin, 2001; Salamon, 2001; Stoll, 2001). The objective of this paper, however, is to critically evaluate the implications and legitimacy of such a public policy approach toward community capacity building.

First, therefore, and through an investigation of the nature of community participation in the United Kingdom, it will be shown here that the current focus upon developing community-based groups when seeking to rebuild community capacity privileges a form of engagement more characteristic of the participatory cultures of affluent populations. Displaying how less affluent populations possess more informal participatory cultures, which has generally not been recognized in public policy circles, it will be then argued that there is a need to seriously consider the legitimacy of parachuting into less affluent populations what in effect are "foreign" cultures of community engagement. For public policy to rebuild community capacity in less affluent populations in ways more in keeping with their current participatory cultures, then the argument of this paper is that much greater consideration needs to be given to how informal forms of community participation can be fostered.

In the second part of this paper, in consequence, attention turns toward how public policy might go about developing informal community engagement in the form of one-to-one acts of neighborliness. This will reveal that one way in which

public policy can avoid becoming embroiled in the thorny issue of monitoring and evaluating such engagement is by adopting a “facilitating” approach where policy initiatives to harness informal community engagement are developed in which participants monitor and evaluate each other. Three possible policy initiatives are then reviewed that could be used by public policy to cultivate informal community engagement in this manner, namely local exchange and trading schemes, time banks and employee mutuals, along with the relatively surmountable, but real, problems involved in implementing them.

Before commencing, however, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of community capacity in this paper. Here, and akin to the widely used definition, community capacity refers to the capacity of people in communities to participate in actions based on community interests, both as individuals and through groups, organizations and networks (e.g., Davis Smith, 1998; Field & Hedges, 1984; Home Office, 2003; Lynn & Davis Smith, 1992). Similar to most other commentators, these actions that are taken are here divided into two broad types, namely participation in local community-based organizations, here referred to as “third sector” or “formal” community engagement, and participation in one-to-one acts of community self-help here termed “fourth sector” or “informal” community participation (e.g., Coulthard, Walker, & Morgan, 2002; Davis Smith, 1998; Field & Hedges, 1984; Home Office, 1999; Krishnamurthy, Prime, & Zimmeck, 2001; Lynn & Davis Smith, 1992; Prime, Zimmeck, & Zurawin, 2002).

### **Community Participation in The United Kingdom**

To critically evaluate the legitimacy and implications of viewing the development of community-based groups as synonymous with community capacity building, especially in less affluent populations, this section first introduces the various recent United Kingdom government surveys of community involvement, then reviews participation rates in formal and informal community engagement in the United Kingdom, the ways in which participatory cultures differ across socioeconomic groups, and finally, the variations in cultures of community engagement across relatively deprived and affluent neighborhoods.

#### **Survey Data**

To decipher the extent and nature of community participation in the United Kingdom, the results of four recent national surveys by the United Kingdom government are here analyzed: the 2000 British Crime Survey (BCS), the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey (HOCS), the 2000 General Household Survey (GHS), and the 2001 National Adult Learning Survey (NALS).

For the 2000 British Crime Survey (BCS), 19,411 people (the main sample) and an additional 3,874 people from minority ethnic communities (the minority ethnic booster sample) were interviewed and of these, 9,659 and 489, respectively, answered questions on their voluntary and community activities (Krishnamurthy et al., 2001). The 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey (HOCS), meanwhile, was the first of what is intended to be a series of surveys to assess social cohesion and civil renewal so as to assess the Home Office’s performance against targets—in the

case of the Active Communities agenda, the target of making substantial progress by 2004 toward actively involving one million more people in their communities. This survey had a sample of 15,475 people aged sixteen and over in England and Wales, a nationally representative sample of 10,015 and a minority ethnic booster of 5,460 (see Prime et al., 2002).

The 2000 GHS interviewed 8,221 households, of which 7,857 answered questions on perceptions of their neighborhood as well as on community involvement in both formal and informal community engagement (see Coulthard et al., 2002). Finally, the 2001 National Adult Learning Survey (NALS) interviewed 6,459 adults in England and Wales on their participation in learning and included questions on the extent to which they were involved in formal and informal community activities (La Valle & Blake, 2001). The results are reported here.

### ***Participation in Formal and Informal Community Activities***

All four of these surveys identify higher participation rates in informal than formal community activities. The 2000 BCS, for example, finds that while 13% had helped groups or organizations once a month or more, 31% had helped people on a one-to-one basis directly. The 2001 NALS, meanwhile, similarly finds that 17% had engaged in community-based groups once a month or less while 24% helped neighbors (and 31% and 47% respectively over the last twelve months). Taking the last three years as the benchmark for participation in community-based groups, meanwhile, the 2002 GHS finds that 13% had been involved in local organizations with responsibilities and 8% without responsibilities, while in just the prior six months, three-quarters (74%) of respondents had done a favor for a neighbor and a similar proportion (72%) had received a favor from a neighbor.

Measured in terms of participation rates, therefore, there is a wider culture of engagement in informal than formal community activities in the United Kingdom. Does this mean therefore, that informal community engagement constitutes the vast bulk of the community sector? To answer this, data on the total number of hours spent by the population in each form of community activity is required. This is provided by the 2001 HOCS. Akin to the above three surveys, the 2001 HOCS finds that there is wider participation in informal than formal community activities. In the last twelve months, 67% and 39% respectively had engaged in informal and formal community activities (and 34% and 26%, respectively, at least once a month).

Of the 16.5 million people in England and Wales that the 2001 HOCS identifies as engaged in community-based groups in the prior twelve months, the mean number of hours was found to be 110.5 hours. Extrapolating from this, it can be estimated that some 1.82 billion hours of formal community engagement had taken place in the previous twelve months. Of the 28.3 million in England and Wales found to be participating in informal community actions in the last twelve months, meanwhile, the average number of hours spent engaged in such activity was 66.4 hours. If translated into the total number of hours of informal community engagement, then some 1.88 billion hours of such activity had taken place. In consequence, the total number of hours spent on formal and informal community participation is about the same. Just over half (50.7%) of

the total time spent engaged in community activity action is spent in informal community actions.

The lesson, therefore, is that viewing participation in community-based groups as synonymous with community capacity building is to focus upon only one half of the community sphere. As will now be shown, moreover, it is also to concentrate on a culture of participation that is more characteristic of some segments of the population than others.

### ***Socioeconomic Variations in Community Participation***

Examining how community engagement varies across different socioeconomic groups, Table One reveals not only that less affluent social groups (e.g., the unemployed) have lower participation rates in formal and informal community activities, but also that participation in community-based groups is a relatively foreign type of engagement. For example, just 7% of unemployed respondents in the 2000 GHS had been actively involved in a local organization in the past three years, but 67% had done a favor for a neighbor in the previous six months. Similarly, although only 8% of respondents in rented accommodation had formally volunteered in the past three years, some 69% in the socially rented sector and 59% in the privately rented sector had done a favor for a neighbor in the previous six months. Community participation among these less affluent groups, therefore, is very much oriented toward one-to-one aid rather than participation in community-based groups. Among more affluent populations, however, a far greater proportion engages in formal community activities. For example, nearly twice the proportion of the employed as the unemployed (13% compared with 7%) engages actively in local organizations. As such, participation in community-based groups is much more part of the participatory culture of relatively affluent social groups than less affluent populations.

**Table 1.** Participation in Formal and Informal Community Activities: By Socioeconomic Group, 2000

	Involved in Local Organization with Responsibility in Past 3 years	Involved in Local Organization without Responsibility in past 3 years	Done a Favor for a Neighbor in the Past 6 Months	Received a Favor from a Neighbor in the Past 6 Months
<i>By occupation:</i>				
Nonmanual	18	9	78	77
Manual	9	6	73	69
<i>By employment status</i>				
All employed	13	7	75	74
Full-time employed	12	7	75	74
Part-time employed	16	8	77	75
Unemployed	7	4	67	60
Economically inactive	14	9	72	70
<i>By tenure:</i>				
Owner occupier	15	9	77	76
Social renter	8	5	69	64
Private renter	8	5	59	57
All	13	8	74	72

3

Source: General Household Survey, 2000.

### Geographical Variations in Community Participation

Table Two documents the geographical variations in the cultures of community participation. Using the Index of Multiple Deprivation produced by the Department of Local Government, Transport and the Regions (DLTR), the 2001 HOCS examines participation rates in formal and informal community activities in six types of ward, ranging from the most to the least deprived. The finding is that although participation in both formal and informal community actions is significantly greater in more affluent areas, it is the proportion of people involved in community-based groups that differs by the largest margin when comparing the least and most deprived areas. Less than a third (29% of people) engage in community-based groups in the most deprived areas compared with nearly half (47%) of the population of the most affluent areas. Consequently, while the proportion involved in community-based groups differs by some 18 percentage points between the most and least deprived areas, the proportion involved in informal community activities differs by just 12 percentage points (71% compared with 59%).

This is further reinforced by the results of the 2000 General Household Survey (Coulthard et al., 2002). Again using the Index of Multiple Deprivation produced by the Department of Local Government, Transport and the Regions (DLTR), the 2000 GHS divides all wards into ten (rather than six) types, ranging from the most to the least deprived. The first important finding is that participation in both informal and formal community activities is again found to be significantly greater in more affluent areas (see Table Three).

**Table 2.** Participation Rates in Informal and Formal Community Activities within the Last Twelve Months, by Level of Deprivation in Area (%)

Percent engaged in:	Least Deprived			Most Deprived			All
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Informal community activities	71	69	68	65	64	59	66
Community-based groups	47	41	39	35	33	29	37

Source: Home Office Citizenship Survey, 2001.

**Table 3.** Geographical Variations in the Extent of Participation in Formal and Informal Community Activities: By Index of Deprivation (Grouped by Deciles)

Percent of respondents	Most Deprived Wards									Least Deprived Wards	All
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9		
Been involved in a local organization, with responsibilities	7	7	12	12	15	12	15	22	20	18	13
Been involved in a local organization without responsibilities	7	5	7	7	8	7	9	8	7	11	8
Done favor for a neighbor in past 6 months	65	72	73	78	76	74	71	77	77	78	74
Received favor from a neighbor in past 6 months	64	68	71	77	75	74	71	74	74	76	72

Source: General Household Survey, 2000.

Just 14% of people participated in groups in the last three years in the most deprived wards compared with 29% of the population in the most affluent wards. Similarly, merely 65% did a favor for a neighbor in the past six months in the most deprived wards compared with 78% in the most affluent wards (and this difference between deprived and affluent wards is even smaller when the most deprived decile of wards are extracted). Consequently, while more than twice the proportion of the total population engage in groups in the most affluent compared with the most deprived wards, the proportion of the total population engaging in informal community activities in the most affluent and deprived wards differs by a much smaller overall amount: 78% compared with 65% (or 78% compared with 72% if the most deprived decile of wards are excluded).

Examining whether ward-level variations in the rate of participation in formal and informal community activities are statistically significant, a chi-square analysis reveals no significant spatial variation in the participation rate in informal community activities across these ten types of ward. However, there is a statistically significant variation in the participation rate in local organizations across these affluent and deprived wards [1]. In the most deprived 10% of wards in England and Wales, just 7% of respondents participated in a local organization with responsibilities over the last three years (compared for example with a peak of 22% in the eighth decile of least deprived wards, tailing off to 20% in the ninth decile, and 18% in the most affluent wards) and 7% without responsibilities (11% in the most affluent wards).

To seek to engage in community capacity building by nurturing participation in groups is thus to attempt to cultivate a vehicle in which only a small proportion of the population in the most deprived wards participate. This approach has as its focus the development of a specific form of participation (and participatory culture) that is relatively unfamiliar to most of the population in deprived wards and at the same time, pays no heed to further bolstering the type of community activity in which two-thirds (65%) of people in deprived wards are already involved, namely one-to-one aid.

Participating in community-based groups in consequence, is much more a part of the participatory culture of affluent than deprived wards and this variation is statistically significant. Deprived wards in contrast have a more informal culture of community participation.

### **Public Policy Implications for Community Capacity Building**

Until now in United Kingdom public policy, and similar to many other nations, rebuilding community capacity and developing participation in community-based groups has been viewed as synonymous. Public policy has concentrated almost entirely upon encouraging participation in voluntary groups (e.g., Countryside Agency, 2001; HM Treasury and Home Office, 2002; Home Office, 2003). This focus upon voluntary groups also prevails whenever developing the community sector in less affluent populations has been discussed (e.g., Home Office, 1999; Social Exclusion Unit, 1998, 2000).

These findings, however, display that this public policy approach toward community capacity building concentrates on developing a form of engagement more characteristic of affluent than deprived populations and a participatory culture that



is relatively foreign to the vast majority of less affluent populations. What is necessary, therefore, once it is recognized that less affluent populations possess a participatory culture more oriented toward informal community activities, is for public policy to consider how such informal community engagement might be nurtured rather than continue to seek to impose a foreign culture of engagement onto such populations.

One way forward would be to look at the current set of policy initiatives and to investigate whether they either nurture informal community activities or could be developed in a manner that would enable such one-to-one aid to be further developed. Reviewing the current raft of initiatives, one notable example of an initiative that directly nurtures informal community activities is the Higher Education Active Community Fund (that enables university students to engage in acts of one-to-one aid in their local community). Many of the other present initiatives that could potentially facilitate one-to-one community activity tend not to do so at present. Here, I am thinking of the Experience Corps for those over 50 years old, Community Champions, the Community Empowerment Fund, and the Community Chest, all of which currently deliver funding only to community-based groups but that could be used to nurture informal community activities.

Using these initiatives to foster informal community engagement, however, is likely to prove difficult to implement in practice. For those officials charged with managing these initiatives, fostering participation in community-based groups is relatively straightforward to monitor and evaluate. Giving money to formal community-based groups and evaluating the impacts is something that policymakers know how to do. It is also unlikely to result in the wrath of the strong third sector lobby representing such groups. People engaged in informal community engagement, meanwhile, not only lack a lobby to voice their concerns and represent their interests when informal volunteering is not focused upon in public policy, but if these initiatives were used to nurture informal community engagement, it would be extremely difficult to monitor and evaluate the activity taking place.

To overcome this thorny problem that monitoring and evaluating participation in informal engagement would be extremely difficult if the current raft of initiatives were extended to support participation in one-to-one aid, the proposal here is that public policy needs to seriously consider adopting an enabling approach whereby it funds or sets up systems of mutual exchange and then, once they are operating, lets participants monitor and evaluate each other. If such systems could be designed, then not only would the outlay by government be relatively minimal, but at the same time, it would avoid the issue of monitoring and evaluation when engaging in informal community capacity building. How, therefore, might this be achieved?

Here, three initiatives are outlined well suited to such an enabling approach, namely local exchange and trading schemes (e.g., Williams et al., 2001), time banks (e.g., Boyle, 1999; Cahn, 2000) and employee mutuals (e.g., Leadbeater & Martin, 1998). Each is outlined along with the relatively curable, but real, problems of implementing them.

#### ***Local Exchange and Trading Schemes (LETS)***

Local exchange and trading schemes (LETS) are nonprofit-making associations that encourage people to help each other one-to-one by putting people in need of



aid in touch with those who are willing to help (see North, 1996, 1999). They do this by compiling a directory that lists the services that members would like ("requests") along with a list of the types of help that members are willing to engage in ("offers"). The receiver and supplier then use a local currency created by the LETS for the purpose of reimbursement. Similar to national currency, a check is written by the purchaser and given to the supplier who sends it to the LETS bank who credits and debits the accounts. Recently, United Kingdom policymakers have displayed considerable interest in the potential of LETS as bridges into work for unemployed people. Here, however, the aim would be to use them for a different purpose. Rather than cultivate them as springboards into employment, it is argued that they should be used principally as vehicles for facilitating informal community activities.

The benefit of using them to develop one-to-one aid is that this is precisely the purpose for which they were designed and the role in which they are most effective. A recent national survey of LETS in the United Kingdom based on a postal survey of all LETS coordinators, 2,515 postal questionnaires, in-depth action-orientated research, and interviews with key figures in United Kingdom, LETS finds that they are most effective as capacity-building vehicles that develop acts of one-to-one reciprocity rather than as springboards into formal employment. Indeed, some 76% of members asserted that LETS had helped them to develop a network of people on whom they could call for help (Williams et al., 2001).

If LETS were more widely introduced and supported as a vehicle for nurturing informal community engagement, then they thus represent one possible potential means for rebuilding community capacity by identifying in a structured manner people who need help and specifying the help that they require to which people can respond. For LETS to be effective in this regard, nevertheless, several alterations are required in both their internal and external operating environments (see Williams et al., 2001). One crucial change is that much greater clarity is required by the United Kingdom central government over how LETS earnings are to be treated, especially with regard to both employed and registered unemployed people. Until now, there has been no clear guidance as to whether earnings on LETS will be treated as income for taxation purposes, nor whether any earnings will result in social security benefits being reduced accordingly. Unless this is resolved, then lower-income populations, especially the jobless, will continue to conclude that joining is too much of a risk.

### ***Time Banks***

Time banks reward informal engagement by paying one "hour" for each hour of commitment, which can at any time be "cashed in" by requesting an hour's work in return from the system (see Boyle, 1999; Cahn, 2000). As such, time banks record, store, and reward transactions where neighbors help neighbors. Starting in the United States (see Cahn, 2000), time banks have been promoted in the United Kingdom by the New Economics Foundation (NEF). However, they are in their infancy. In late 2001, just fifteen time banks were operational (with 400 participants and 9,760 hours in total being traded) and a further twenty-one under development. As such, they are only in their start-up phase.

The most recent national evaluation in the United Kingdom, nevertheless, shows that they are currently far more successful than LETS in encouraging less affluent populations to engage in one-to-one aid, not least because the United Kingdom government has clearly stated that participation in such schemes has no consequences for tax or social security contributions (see Seyfang & Smith, 2002). Indeed, nearly all participants in time banks assert that this scheme had allowed them to develop a support network of people upon whom they can call for help and had enabled them to more easily help others by providing clear indications of opportunities to do so. A time bank costs about \$50,000 per annum to operate, requiring a central office that matches the needs of members with the volunteers available. Such a level of funding, in consequence, would go a long way to helping resolve the current problem whereby there is a lack of focus on nurturing informal volunteering in less affluent populations.

### ***Employee Mutuals***

A third and final initiative, still under discussion, is the “employee mutual” (Leadbeater & Martin, 1998). These are intended to be localized bodies that the unemployed, employed, and firms can voluntarily join through the payment of a weekly subscription fee. Similar to LETS and time banks, members earn points on a smart card from their work for the mutual, which enables them to acquire goods and services from it. As such, they are a “new institution for collective self-help” that matches local demand for work with local supply, enabling people to get completed the many one-time jobs that need doing, but that they are unable to afford to do. Whether this initiative is implemented however, will in part depend upon the extent to which the development of informal involvement becomes seen as important in public policy circles.

For some reading this advocacy of LETS, time banks, and employee mutuals, it might be assumed that despite calling for a focus on community-based groups to be transcended when rebuilding community capacity, this is not being achieved. After all, these policy initiatives are themselves formal groups. To argue this, however, is to miss the reason why these initiatives are being advocated. The primary importance of these initiatives is not their organizational character, but that they nurture informal community actions by providing an enabling framework within which one-to-one aid can expand. As such, they are advocated not because of their characteristic as a community-based group, but because of their focus upon nurturing informal engagement on a one-to-one basis, and this is why they are important.

### **Conclusions**

In this paper, it has been uncovered that the current United Kingdom government policy approach that rebuilds community capacity through the development of community-based groups focuses upon the development of a culture of engagement characteristic of relatively affluent populations. By failing to nurture informal community activities, it not only underemphasizes a culture of community participation that is widespread but also ends up imposing onto less affluent

populations a relatively foreign form of community involvement that does not mirror their current participatory cultures.

If community capacity is to be developed in ways that reflect the current participatory cultures in less affluent populations, in consequence, the finding of this paper is that public policy needs to pay much greater attention to the issue of developing informal community activities. The problem with using the current raft of public policy initiatives to build community capacity, which, although not presently nurturing informal engagement could in theory be used to do so, is that there would be a major problem in monitoring and evaluating participation.

In consequence, an enabling approach has been here advocated whereby government funds or sets up systems of mutual exchange and then, once they are operating, lets participants monitor and evaluate each other. In doing this, the government outlay is minimal and at the same time it avoids the thorny issue of monitoring and evaluation. In this regard three initiatives have been outlined that are well suited to this facilitating approach, namely local exchange and trading schemes, time banks, and employee mutuals. There are doubtless many more.

Whether these initiatives are the initiatives that should be the focus of a community capacity-building approach that emphasizes informal community engagement is perhaps not the crucial issue. Much more important is the fact that unless attempts are made to further develop informal community activities, especially in less affluent populations, then a public policy approach that focuses upon nurturing community-based groups will continue to parachute into such populations policy initiatives that impose foreign cultures of community involvement. This is both denigrating to their existing participatory cultures and an exemplar of a form of cultural domination inappropriate in today's world that claims to respect diversity and difference. Whether the United Kingdom is the sole culprit in this respect only further research will tell; I very much doubt, however, that United Kingdom public policy is alone on this matter.

## Note

1 Examining the participation of people in local organizations with responsibilities, the geographical variations are statistically significant within a 99.5% confidence interval using chi-square tests.  $\chi^2 > 23.589$  leading to a rejection of  $H_0$  that there are no local variations. The remaining local variations (i.e., involvement in a local organization without responsibilities as well as doing a favor for a neighbor and receiving a favor from a neighbor) are not statistically significant leading to an acceptance of  $H_0$  that there are no local variations.

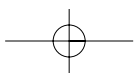
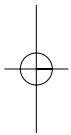
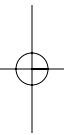
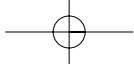
## About the Author

**Colin C. Williams** is Professor of Work Organization and Director of the Center for Alternative Organization Studies (CAOS) in the University of Leicester Management Center. His research interests are in rethinking the organization of work and public policy with regard to alternative work practices. His recent books include *Poverty and the Third Way* (Routledge, 2003), *Community Self-Help* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), and *A Commodified World?* (Zed, 2004)

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2	AU: Salamon et al. not cited in text; please provide, or delete ref.	
3	AU: Please list the specific references for the sources in the tables.	