

JOINING FORCES, INCLUDING WITH RIVALS, AROUND A COMMON CAUSE



By Nick Gardham

One insight from our Joining Forces cell is that, in order to find common cause, you must surface and resolve any conflicts or power imbalances. Nick Gardham here shares his experiences of doing this in the world of community organising.

In 2011, David Cameron set out his blueprint for a Big Society. At the heart of this was Cameron's ambition 'to transfer power from the state to individuals, neighbourhoods or the lowest possible tier of Government, in that priority'. Perhaps what is most interesting for those involved in community organising was his statement that what remains of state power should be used for 'galvanising, catalysing, prompting, encouraging and agitating for community engagement and social renewal'.

To achieve this vision Cameron called for a 'new generation of community organisers', and in 2011 the Coalition Government delivered on this promise by awarding Locality a contract to train 500 community organisers across England. This ambitious project, operating at significant scale, was both welcomed and treated with disdain, in equal measure. Whether it was intentional in its timing or not, it couldn't help but be interwoven with cuts to the public sector, austerity and a desire for communities to step up and do more as public services retreated.

The Government investment in community organising in 2011 shone a spotlight on practice that had already been developing in England and across the UK by organisations such as Citizens UK in London, Church Action on Poverty in Teeside and Manchester, and Together Creating Communities in Wales, as well as Nurture Development's promotion of Asset-Based Community Development which bridged the gap between community organising and community development.

All this created a flurry of activity from organisations and funders seeking to understand what community organising was, and how it applied to their existing practice. It paved the way for new community organising initiatives, such as ACORN UK, and for many individuals and organisations to explore how community organising could help them meet their goals, including trades unions, political parties, charities and protest groups. Inevitably this led to both growth and competition.

As new models and approaches developed, a few funders began to invest in organising, whilst think tanks such as the Young Foundation started to look at the ‘market’ for community organising and the potential for scaling up. The language of creating a market and competition over funding was perhaps a contributing factor to the divisions which quickly developed between organisations and practitioners of various types of community development, community organising, Asset Based Community Development, and also the many protest groups that use organising methods to build their power and effectiveness.

Causes of competition can also be the debates over ‘purity’ and what ‘real’ community organising is or isn’t, questions as to whether it is right to take Government investment, and the need of each organisation to build a brand and identity in order to recruit members and practitioners and to attract funding.

Not many would disagree that the growth of new practitioners of citizen-centred and grassroots community work was anything other than positive. However, the divisions that have emerged could be considered damaging to the people we aim to serve. The organisation I work for, Community Organisers, is no less culpable than any other community organising movement or organisation out there.

However, over the last two years nationally and internationally we have felt the impacts of global crises that are putting unprecedented pressure on those who are already on the margins. As organisers working alongside people to build their

collective power to bring about change, we need to challenge ourselves to look at how we can start to create the longer term systemic changes that counter the deep structural inequalities that people are facing, rather than only mitigating the immediate impacts.

It is in these times of crises that we need to break free from the traditional shackles of organising that leads to siloed approaches in separate organisations and issue-based areas and look to build the bigger we.

To exemplify this, in March 2020, Community Organisers called for the largest free-to-use wireless network for low-income communities. As the country was placed into lockdown, conversations across our community organiser network highlighted that many people would be locked out of society due to the unaffordability of internet access. Across our network local people and organisations started to develop organising approaches that were short term and immediate, taking the necessary action to ensure that local people could gain access to the internet. To support this, Community Organisers worked with grassroots organisers to build a wider national alliance of organisations to create a new power structure built on relationships and a commitment to a common cause that could advocate for a longer term strategic approach.

This strategy to organise simultaneously, locally and nationally, meant that powerful stories of action from the ground could complement the calls from a powerful nationwide alliance for a bigger change. The campaign led to the formation of the UK’s first ever national databank by O2.

As we shift from the crisis of a global pandemic to the impacts of inflation and unprecedented economic pressures on those with the lowest incomes, again we need to continue to organise in communities in the short term to mitigate the impacts, but also, at the same time, build national alliances of organisations committed to working with a common purpose to tackle the root causes of injustice. To explore how collectively an alliance of organisations can address the cost of living crisis, Community Organisers is convening the Cost of Living Alliance alongside 35 other organisations to create a common purpose.

It is, I believe, in this understanding of organising that we can start to rethink civil society. A civil society that is built on the principles of solidarity and local control with a commitment to join forces with others to work for longer-term systemic change.

Nick Gardham is the CEO of Community Organisers. Over the last 13 years Nick has worked across the UK and internationally, training and supporting thousands of people in the practice and principles of community organising.

