



Working collectively to support and promote community work as a means of addressing poverty, social exclusion and inequality and advancing human rights

Collective Action in an Era of Social Distancing

Listening Circle Discussions 8th February 2021 Report

Crisis

A moment of distress. It is experienced at different levels: personal, community and structural. There is an emotional dimension. Crisis impacts differentially on different groups of people. Crisis highlights inadequacies in economic and social systems.

Crisis can be ongoing and people and organisations can get stuck in particular ways of being/responding.

There is no stand-alone crisis, crises are interlinked: climate change; inequality; economic; social.

A point of urgency. A time when you have to get stuck in and respond to people in distress, to respond to basic needs. A time to stand back and reflect.

A moment of change. There is opportunity in crisis. Crisis demands change in patterns of living, working and acting. Things are in flux. It poses a challenge to imagine an alternative, what will come next.

Context

The context has been fluid over time with positive changes evident at one moment but in some instances being reversed at another point. Change in the context can reflect a series of thin lines with positive and negative potential inherent in many aspects of change that has happened, for example: the line between on the one hand community work being 'recognised' as essential but the risk of this crossing a line into the sector being 'used'.

Crisis has highlighted:

- Poverty, food poverty, inadequate housing and accommodation, and inequality.
- Differential impact of crisis on those who experience disadvantage.
- Politics in terms of: power to decide between business interests and community health interests; and the emergence of the left, even if fragmented, and its potential for community work has been lost.
- Economics in terms of: debt and debt management without cutting back on services as a neo-liberal narrative reasserts itself; incomes and policies to sustain incomes; and over-reliance on tourism, where some places become destinations rather than communities.

- Failure to build resilience, into the system, to meet future crises or to decentralise with power, authority and resources accompanying this.
- Emphasis on a charity model evident in the thinking of some policy makers.
- Lack of space and time for reflection or thinking about the alternatives for bringing about change.

Crisis has amplified:

- Loneliness and the importance of face to face contact.
- Division, where the space to express practical solidarity is limited and where the far right is increasingly active.
- Health inequalities, in particular mental health.
- Unemployment.
- Diminution of the local economy with online purchasing and negative impact on climate crisis and the need to localise.
- Digital divide, socio-economic & urban/rural, as life and work moves online.
- State over-reliance on community organisations to prop up key services and infrastructures that are inadequate, yet without providing adequate funding.
- Disempowerment of community sector and lack of accountability of power holders, where: there is no direct face-to-face engagement; processes of engagement in place are being rolled back; and decision-making centralised.

Crisis has shifted:

- Solidarity: in people pulling together through crisis, alongside the loss of solidarity for inability to come together.
- Empathy: in focus on caring, alongside loss of empathy in lack of informal engagement and communication.
- Recognition for the community sector and its reach into communities, alongside a concern that the space for dissent is further curtailed.
- Freedom from commuting and space for connection as life, work and action moves online, alongside a concern at dependence on a privately-owned space that could be controlling of dissent and that is subject to fake news.

Community Work

Community work has been pushed into reactive mode and into a predominant service provision role in meeting basic needs. There is a danger of community development being kept in this role and redefined in terms of such a role.

Engagement with policy makers has been made easier for an advocacy role. There is more local decision-making now. Holding power to account, however, has become more of a challenge.

The core barriers experienced in the role of community work are in facilitating communities and activists to analyse and to influence their situation. Building the relationships for processes of conscientisation and empowerment is compromised. The spaces for the collective and grassroots mobilising have narrowed. It is challenging to live up to community work principles. There is learning, however, chance to reflect, and a re-imagining is possible and becomes important.

The process of community work is challenged to use creativity for enabling analysis and technology in building solidarity. The agenda for community work is changing with issues such as resilience emerging as central. There are new opportunities.

There are challenges to reflect on the sector overall. The work outside of service provision had become diluted even before COVID, where some organisations have embraced the charity

model. There is a competitiveness evident in some quarters in place of collaboration. The links between national and local organisation are not always strong or in place.

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