

Help from within

An exploration of community self help

by Tom Archer

Introduction

In the late 1980s, parents living in Ladywood, Birmingham bemoaned a lack of nursery provision for their children. In response, two local mums decided to act. They took a course in community business development and formed a group called Babywood. Recruiting volunteers and steering group members, the founders began to seek funding, and eventually secured enough to pay for one of them to work on the project full-time. With a great deal of hard work and significant volunteer hours, Babywood secured a derelict building from the local authority. After refurbishing the building and training staff, they opened in the early 1990s, providing subsidised childcare (MacGillivray et al, 2001). The nursery is still in operation today, employing local people, providing a much needed local service, and helping maintain an atmosphere of mutual support and reciprocity.

In this short example, we see some of the reasons why community self help appeals to both policymakers and communities themselves. Is it the minimal amount of state intervention and resourcing that is appealing? Is it that an issue, identified locally, is being addressed by those who understand it best (i.e. local people)? Or is it that the organisation is harnessing the assets of local volunteers, building their skills and developing social capital more broadly?

While these questions cannot be answered in a single paper, we hope that this will be a first step. Over the coming year, we will be studying self-help projects in close detail. To help guide this work, this paper develops a clearer understanding of what constitutes self help, drawing on the work of theorists and commentators. It explores why self help is winning support from current policymakers and grasps some of its ideological bases. The paper concludes with a set of questions that our long-term work must seek to explore and answer.

Self help: winning favour

In 1999, the Home Office's Policy Action Team on Community Self-Help presented an action plan to encourage greater self help (Home Office, 1999). In the supporting information, they provided a categorisation of the benefits of self help:

- 1 Benefits to the individuals:** including benefits resulting from activity (e.g. support received), as well as benefits from volunteering (e.g. increased confidence and skills)
- 2 Reduction in poverty:** for instance, food co-operatives and LETs schemes can bring cheap, healthy food within people's grasp, and credit unions can lessen reliance on loan sharks
- 3 Filling gaps in public services:** for example, informal care provided by neighbours to older people, or peer support sessions for those suffering a certain health condition, can support and complement the work of public services
- 4 Regeneration of areas and creating vibrant communities:** self-help groups to create an atmosphere of safety and neighbourliness crucial to the success of regeneration efforts
- 5 Community political activity:** organising around local issues can encourage people to engage with public decision-makers, which often leads people into political roles.

In the decade that has passed since the Home Office's rallying call on self help, we are little nearer to a self-help nirvana. However, across the political spectrum there is a commitment to developing informal, grassroots activity in communities. The current Labour government has developed funding schemes, such as Grassroots Grants, to try to sustain and grow 'the smallest, volunteer-led' local community organisations (Office of the Third Sector, 2009). In addition, its empowerment agenda has sought to hand more power to citizens, encouraging the transfer of assets to communities, the use of participatory budgeting schemes and pledge banks.

The Conservative Party has similarly highlighted this issue in its emerging policies, stressing that 'volunteers are the beating heart' of Britain's civil

society. Indeed, the Conservatives see such volunteering as a key part of addressing the social pathologies that, over the last decade, public services have failed to address (Conservative Party, 2007). They emphasise the importance of volunteering, and highlight the issue of 'volunteering deserts' in which they are likely to 'prioritise funding for development work' (The Conservatives, 2008). Similarly, the Liberal Democrats stress the importance of 'informal, mutual activity' in neighbourhoods, and commit to policies such as encouraging 'a network of mutual volunteering exchanges' (Liberal Democrats, 2007). That being said, such policies raise more questions than answers about volunteering and how such policies knit with promoting self help.

The policies above sit within the context of a financial crisis and its multiple side-effects. The cutting of public spending will eventually impact on the resources available for community development, and for self-help activity itself (CDF, 2009). The impact of the financial crisis results in first- and second-round effects. First-round effects include the shrinking of funding for the third sector, while second-round effects include a diminished role for a market economy, providing opportunities for community organisations to fill the gap (Mulgan, 2008). As public spending is squeezed, many policymakers will look to self help as a cost effective way to cover the deficit.

Defining self help and co-production

Self help

So what exactly do we mean by self help? Who and what activity does it relate to? How do we differentiate it from related concepts? It is doubtful policymakers, politicians and commentators are all using the same definition, so it helps to chart the concept's development to arrive at some clarity.

In the mid-1850s, self help began to mean more than just helping yourself. It developed a set of socio-political connotations as a result of the work of Samuel Smiles. Smiles used the term in 1859 as a means to explain our relationship with the state and to define our roles and responsibilities as citizens. He presents self help as an exercise in self

betterment; 'energetic individualism' leads to a better life and collectively to a stronger and more prosperous nation. Smiles wrapped around the basic idea of helping yourself, a set of additional perspectives on independence, responsibility and active citizenship. From this, the idea gained political weight:

'Help from without is often enfeebling in its effects, but help from within invariably invigorates ... where men are subjected to over-guidance and over-government, the inevitable tendency is to render them comparably helpless ... the value of legislation as an agent in human advancement has usually been much over-estimated' (Smiles, 1859).

In recent times the term self help has been refined somewhat, and the emphasis on individualism has been softened. Today, self help is coming to mean something distinctly more social; a much more collective exercise. The 'self' refers not to individuals, but groups of likeminded people in similar circumstances who can support and act together. Such groups may be collectives of people suffering from the same health condition, individuals without housing, or people joining forces to realise economies of scale. Recent attempts to define self help and pin down its essential character have sought to emphasise this collectivism:

"Community self-help activity" is taken to mean: informal groups of people, acting on a voluntary basis, working together to solve common problems by taking action themselves, and with others. While much community self help is organised around neighbourhoods, it can also be organised around a shared concern across neighbourhoods. It is where people do something themselves to directly tackle problems' (Richardson, 2008).

A good example of self help is seen in the work of LATCH, a Leeds-based voluntary organisation that renovates derelict properties for social housing. Much of the work is undertaken by local people and volunteers. LATCH highlights the important relationship between homelessness and disempowerment, and provide opportunities for local people to learn construction-related skills and apply these during the process of renovation. The outcomes go beyond bringing 37, otherwise unused, properties back into

use; approximately 25 local volunteers benefit from skills development each year. At a wider level, the charity contributes community development outcomes, building social capital and complementing key public services.

The above example introduces the important issue of how self help relates to state activity. Clearly, the UK is a much different place to when Smiles was writing, and the growth in co-operation, charity and state services in the 20th century has radically altered what citizens accept as their responsibilities. Indeed, the welfare state is said to have grown from these co-operative movements (MacGillivray et al, 2001), and in the 60 years since the initiation of the welfare state, the state's responsibilities have increased substantially. Issues such as health, education, crime and the physical environment are now deemed almost purely the preserve of public services. This has substantially affected the notion of self help. In modern Britain, self help is now often taken to mean ensuring public services do what you (the collective) feel needs to be done. In this definition, self help embraces less direct action, and more influencing of service delivery:

'Community self help is a form of community engagement – people getting involved in decision making ... it is about informal collective activity, although it is often difficult to say definitively where the informal ends and the formal begins' (Richardson, 2008).

However, such a definition of self help is not universally accepted. Burns and Taylor (1998) define self help and mutual aid as activities carried out directly by people, using their own 'labour, skills and knowledge' and not relying 'on any third party'. Burns and Taylor define self-help groups in the following way:

- they have no staff and do not assign work according to formal roles (although they will often informally assign responsibilities)
- they have no formal relationship to the state – constitutional or regulatory
- they are based on direct rather than representative forms of decision making
- they are based on informal group structures or networks.

The above suggests that when a group has a formal relationship with the state (i.e. it is constituted for or by the state, or is in some way regulated by it), then it is not self help. Equally, if the group is engaged in processes that do not lead to direct decision making, then they are not a self-help group. In essence then, self help is about informal groups acting and making decisions directly, without interference from the state.

So where do we stand on the issue of professional staff? Is an organisation with a management committee of local people and volunteers, but that also employs professionals, not a self-help group? Burns and Taylor (1998) would argue they are not, as they do not meet the first criteria in their definition. However, such a strict definition limits self help to small and informal co-operation, and unnecessarily so. If the self-help organisation is outside of state mechanics (i.e. has no formal relationship with the state, and local people make direct, independent decisions), and local volunteers are involved in the practical activities undertaken, then it should be classed as self help. Employment of professional staff does not invalidate self help; indeed it is a natural next step to increasing capacity to achieve greater outcomes.

Co-production

In several Chicago schools, 16-year-old disaffected pupils are acting as tutors to 14-year-old pupils. The results show improved academic achievements for both sets of students and a reduction in bullying (NEF, 2008). In a Philadelphia hospital, discharged patients are told that someone will come and see them at their home to make sure they are coping. This person is not a professional but another former patient. The result is a substantial reduction in re-admission rates, at no significant extra cost. It is this use of non-professional 'peers' that is at the heart of many co-production projects (NEF, 2008).

The concept of co-production has been gaining currency for some time. There are varying definitions of co-production, but in essence it is a way of articulating the value of assets outside the monetary economy and the state, and a way of understanding how to harness these assets. Indeed, one of the most forceful arguments for co-production is its ability to deliver services that

are additional and complementary public services.

We hear echoes of Smiles in the rationales for co-production. Advocates highlight the 'limitation of government efforts to empower people' because 'neither markets nor centralised bureaucracies are effective models for delivering public services' (NEF, 2008). Applying market-based models to manage and deliver services misses 'the crucial dimension that allows doctors to heal, teachers to teach and carers to care; the relationship with patient, pupil or client' (NEF, 2008).

At the heart of co-production is the idea of the 'core economy'. The concept relates to a different system of value beyond the monetary, and captures the assets and value in the 'home, family, neighbourhood, community and civil society'. Therefore every instance of co-production has to, in some way, build on or realise the assets in the core economy. Some have suggested that instances where staff innovate services and 'co-produce' in conjunction with fellow staff and stakeholders is co-production. However, given that this does not in any way utilise or realise assets existing outside the professional sphere, it is difficult to see how this is co-production. A strict adherence to the notion of the core economy leads to a tighter definition of co-production.

There is significant overlap between the concepts of self help and co-production, and both are grounded in a positive view of the assets within communities. However, the crucial difference is that co-production projects are not defined by the relationship between citizens and the state. Co-producers can have formal relationships with the state, and be excluded from direct decision making, but nonetheless be engaged in co-production. A former patient that takes part in a volunteering scheme to visit other out-patients is engaged in co-production, despite his or her actions being state controlled and organised. Self help, on the other hand, is more narrowly defined as groups organising, acting and making decisions free from state organisation or control.

Self help: tensions

Growing interest in the concept of self help suggests it has significant political currency. In part, this stems from the fact that at both ends of the

political spectrum there is often support for it (Berner, 2005).

At one end of the spectrum, the neo-conservative position asserts that offering resources to those in need (often defined as 'the poor') is only degrading and creates dependency. Maximising the cost recovery of a programme aimed at helping the poor reduces the perception of it as a welfare programme, thereby reducing the sense of degradation. Such an approach saves money on public intervention.

At the other end of the spectrum, the new populist position (Berner, 2005) asserts that communities are capable of almost anything; mobilise them and they can solve any problem they face. In this view, heavy government interventions do not work for the poor, and often autonomous community-led activity has more impact and is more cost effective.

The problem inherent in both perspectives is an underestimation of the macro forces that impede self help. There are 'very real structural and resource constraints operational on communities, most severely impacting on those who may need development the most' (Cleaver, 1999). The neo-conservatives are arguably supporting self help as way to resist redistribution of resources. The new populists' argument that community-led solutions will work regardless demonstrates a naivety toward the importance of resources and macro forces. As Berner (2005) states:

'The community self-help paradigm needs to be refined by a recognition that the poor cannot be self-sufficient in escaping poverty, that communities are systems of conflict as well as co-operation, and that the social, political and economic macro-structure cannot be side-stepped' (Berner, 2005).

Those who support the above view suggest we need to find ways to 'release people's energies without exploiting and exhausting them' (Anzorena, 1995). We need to find ways to provide self-help groups with the crucial resources and support they need, whilst providing the autonomy from state control that demarcates self help:

'... encourage initiatives not by walking away but by offering stable, long term, targeted financial and technical support' (Berner, 2005).

The Home Office's Policy Action Team echoed this sentiment in their suggested approaches to supporting self help (Home Office, 1999). Such suggestions include:

- offering development grants and/or small consultancy support
- providing or facilitating informal training in accessible surroundings
- enabling groups to purchase their own training through 'technical assistance vouchers'
- establishing a community chest over which local residents have decision-making responsibility
- establishing linkages between community groups.

The report asserts the key role played by community development workers in securing this support and resourcing, and in developing linkages between groups.

Identifying next steps

The emerging lesson for policymakers is that self help can achieve impressive outcomes for communities, and in ways that public services cannot. It has the potential to offset support/resourcing costs by making savings for public service providers. For example, LATCH, the self-help housing organisation discussed above, is securing savings for both social housing providers and employment agencies by helping address both the housing needs and employment/skills requirements of people in the local area. However, the aspirations for self help will not be realised unless it is appropriately resourced and supported. Given this, self help is not a costless way of saving money on public services.

Support for self help cannot be made purely on the basis of cost effectiveness. It should be based on a view that self help empowers and builds social capital, enabling communities to take ownership of their locality and improve it, through practical action and collective endeavour. Importantly, it can complement our public services and deliver outcomes that such services cannot achieve. Self help must be seen as supplementing public services, not replacing them.

Using the working definition of self help developed above, we can identify the kind of activity, and the type of self-help group that should be the focus of future efforts. Throughout the course of our work, our attention will be focused on groups that undertake:

- activity that adds to, and complements, the work of public services
- activity that is decided upon, organised and actioned free of state control and organisation
- activity that is not purely about advocacy, but is about action.

However, big questions still remain as to how we maximise the positive impacts of self help. Our future work must seek to establish a more nuanced, practical view of the following:

- 1 What issues are self-help groups most effective in dealing with?**
- 2 What are the critical success factors for self-help groups?**
- 3 What state support and resources for self help work best in practice?**
- 4 What barriers get in the way of self help being more effective?**

In order to answer these questions, we must build a stronger understanding of how self help works in

practice. We will develop eight detailed case studies of self-help groups, working with partners to identify cases in a robust way. Selected groups will be up and running, and showing signs of positive impacts. From the case study data, answers to the big questions facing self-help work will emerge.

As has been the focus of this paper, our future work will concentrate on the role of the state in resourcing and supporting self-help groups. We will look specifically at the role of community development workers in providing such support and leveraging in resources, as well their capacity to develop the collective spirit in communities which is crucial to self help.

Whatever the political persuasion of incumbent policymakers, CDF will continue to provide valuable guidance on inspiring and harnessing the potential of self help to better our communities.

For further information on this paper or CDF's work on community self help, please contact Tom Archer at tom.archer@cdf.org.uk.

This Paper is published by the Community Development Foundation, Unit 5, Angel Gate, 320–326 City Road, London EC1V 2PT. Tel: 020 7833 1772 Email: admin@cdf.org.uk Registered charity number 306130.

Copyright © Community Development Foundation 2009

Typesetting by Meg Palmer, Third Column.