Independent Expert Panel on Community Development

Final report and findings

This report represents the majority views of the Independent Expert Panel on Community Development. Not every point or recommendation can be held to be the view of all panel members. The contents of the report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Community Development Foundation.

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Acknowledgements

Foreword

It is a privilege to have been asked by the Community Development Foundation (CDF) to chair this 'independent expert panel' into the challenges facing community development (CD) at this historic moment of change, challenge and opportunity.

The UK and other Western industrial countries are going through a series of profound global, political, economic, social, technological and ecological changes.

These are confronting citizens, communities and governments with many complex new problems and pressures, to which there are no easy or ready-made answers.

The state, the private market and civil society are all having to adjust to the new challenges, and are searching for solutions to the crises they face in differing ways.

The panel cannot of course resolve these grand challenges, but we have tried to raise some of the key questions, and to make an informed contribution to the debate.

We have tried hard to be an 'independent' panel. This has meant being aware of but not involved in discussions about CDF's specific organisational future. Our brief has been to think about the future of CD in the UK, not of CDF in particular.

Independence also means, in the old Quaker phrase, being 'willing to speak truth to power' when necessary. This report shows that we welcome the coalition government's commitment to grow a 'Big Society'. However, if this is to be effective in strengthening communities, there are lessons to be learned both from history and from current practice in the CD field. It would be a waste if the coalition government were not able to tap into the wealth of knowledge, experience and independent evaluation of CD that has been gained in many different settings, urban and rural, prosperous and poor, over the past 50 years.

We have also tried to be an 'expert' panel. We have a wide range of expertise within the panel itself, but we have also initiated a number of face-to-face and online consultations in order to broaden the base of knowledge we can draw upon. We are very grateful to the hundreds of people and organisations who have given up time to contribute to the panel's thinking. They will not all agree with our conclusions and recommendations, but their various voices have been valuable, and we have listened carefully to the diversity of points of view expressed.

Finally, we have tried to think through what it means to act as a 'panel'. A panel is clearly different from a cabinet, or a jury, or a select committee. A panel suggests the exploration of a range of different points of view, rather than the reaching of a single conclusion. Our panel members have a rich diversity of backgrounds, knowledge, experience and perspectives, and we have benefited from lively debate and friendly disagreement within our discussions.

The fact that these differing emphases have been drawn together in this report is a tribute to the work of the CDF secretariat who have supported our work and thinking – so special thanks to Mark Walton and Alice Wilcock, to Melanie Bowles who prepared the background papers for the panel meetings, and to Jonathan Bradley from Participate who facilitated our discussions.

Finally, let me put on record my warm thanks to my fellow panel members who contributed so generously their time and ideas. This has been 'pro bono' work for us all – so we hope that it will contribute, alongside many other lively voices, to a serious stock-taking about how to promote the common good and greater well being in this country's many diverse communities.

John Benington
Emeritus Professor
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1 Introduction

'The challenge for CD is a fundamental one; how to develop a renewed sense of the public and of the communal, and how to develop new forms of connectivity, which include but are not restricted to locality and place.'

— John Benington, Panel Chair

In June 2010, the Community Development Foundation (CDF) convened an Independent Expert Panel on Community Development. Panel members were invited on the basis of their knowledge and work in social policy and practice. The panel was chaired by John Benington, Emeritus Professor at Warwick Business School.

The panel was asked to offer high-level analysis, observations and recommendations on CD management and delivery in the light of the profound social, political, environmental and economic changes facing communities, civil society and local government.

To aid the panel, CDF produced three discussion papers providing background information on the following themes:

- the current position of CD
- the current political and economic context
- new models of support for community action.

The papers were also published on the CDF website and promoted using a variety of social media. Formal and informal responses were fed back to the panel.

The panel met in September and October 2010 for formal facilitated discussions. Members also attended wider public meetings, hosted by CDF and the Community Development Network for London in October and November, to discuss the issues raised by the panel papers as part of the process.

This report describes the panel's deliberations and its recommendations, including:

Recommendations to government

- **Vulnerable communities must be identified and supported** over the coming years to ensure that the Big Society agenda is not just for the few, or the most influential, but is inclusive, fair and just for *all*.

Recommendations to CD practitioners

- The CD field needs to develop **more compelling evidence** and examples of the impacts and outcomes of its practice.
- There is a need for **an independent review of what has been learned and achieved in communities that have experienced a succession of interventions**, and the long-term support of CD workers, in order to understand whether and how CD contributes to the economic and social development of the community and its citizens.

Recommendations to CD organisations

- **The panel urges the national CD organisations to set in motion positive action to unify the CD movement**, constructively engaging critical voices, and different traditions and practices, on issues of shared engagement.
- It will require **strong, adaptable and resourceful leadership** if it is to seize these opportunities.
- The Panel also recommends that there should be **a review of both the skills needed for the future, and of the existing skills base within CD**.

Recommendations to foundations, trusts and socially responsible business

- Communities will increasingly require the **provision of pro bono expertise, private philanthropy and investment**.
- This will require **new forms of engagement with and from business**, a new focus on social responsibility and on public value and social returns.

Recommendations to civil society organisations and local government

- Common aims and principles should form the basis for **improved local partnerships and new coalitions** based on existing practice, strengthening the relationships between local authorities, communities and civil society.

The next section of this report summarises the three papers produced by CDF, the panel's responses to these papers and the wider responses that we received when the discussion papers were published, which also contributed to the panel's conclusions and recommendations. The final part of this report outlines the key recommendations in detail and sets out the next steps agreed by the panel.

2   The current context for community development

2.1.   Panel paper one: summary

The first panel paper, *The current context for community development* (Bowles, 2010a), set out some of the enduring features of CD, their causes and consequences. It considered why CD has remained small scale, fragmented and increasingly precarious, throughout a period in which involving communities has been brought into the heart of so many policy areas. The paper considered different possible explanations. Does CD lack recognition of its value because it is hard to identify from the outside? Has the increasing adaptation of CD to policy aims weakened its claims to expertise and legitimacy? Has making the case that CD helps with engagement and empowerment undermined specialist CD skills and practice?

The paper highlighted a range of findings from the 2009 *Report on survey of community development practitioners and managers* (Sender et al, 2010). Snapshots include a lack of clarity over capturing the long-term benefits of CD work, and a majority of respondents not members of any of the main regional or national CD networks. It concluded that all the challenges identified were likely to persist under the new government, though in new configurations. Might these enduring challenges also present opportunities for rethinking and reinvigorating the CD worker profession?

2.2   Panel response

In the words of the panel

'Whilst the importance of professional 'values' remains central, it would seem important to recognise that CD has always been contested – and needs to be contested, if it is to stay live and relevant. There have been and will be varying perspectives.'

'Many of us at first lack some of the fundamental thinking on which CD values and practice principles are based. It takes some time to learn it on the job, until you meet the right people to lead and inspire you.'

The panel's discussions encompassed all those who use CD practice, values and principles in their work with communities, whether they are paid or unpaid, engaged in a formal programme of work or informal activism.

While recognising that public policy, and public funding has sought over recent years to support 'engagement' and 'empowerment' it was noted that the social and political context has been one of increasing individualisation, defining the public as individual consumers and users of services, rather than as citizens with collective rights and responsibilities.

At a time when public policy is seeking to redraw which issues are best addressed by the state and which by civil society, it is important to recreate a sense of the public, collective and communal. This will include communities of locality and place, however, it must be recognised that new forms of connectivity are of increasing importance in supporting and enabling the formation of communities of place, interest and identity.

At the same time, new forms of practice and professional support are arising in response to changes in service delivery, such as personalised budgeting in health and social care. Meanwhile it could be argued that debate about CD has become too internally focused to be of relevance and benefit the communities it seeks to support.

When seeking to appeal to those currently disengaged from their communities, CD needs to embrace and harness the potential of individual, unstructured and one-off forms of participation, ensuring that pathways between these and other activities are made easy to travel along.

In addition, while a clear, simple definition of CD and associated training may be desirable, there is a danger that this may reinforce divisions between those who are CD workers and those non-CD workers who are engaged in CD activities. These divisions have always existed and, while they may be important to the field, they may not be helpful in communicating the value of CD to others. Looking beyond these divisions will be important in ensuring that communities receive the type and level of support appropriate to their needs. This raises questions about the dilution of CD and about leadership and representation.

An alternative course of action might be to go more strongly with the flow of plurality, finding numerous ways (with perhaps a lighter touch than the current national standards) to constantly update CD practice and principles, and to apply them quickly and flexibly to a wider range of different settings and professions.

It may be possible to accommodate both approaches by providing comprehensive training and standards for generic or full-time community workers and more specific training or guidance tailored to specialists in other disciplines, part-timers, and people for whom working with communities forms only a partial or intermittent aspect of their work.

The fact that practitioners enter CD from a range of different backgrounds, learning through practice and from the knowledge and experience of others, reinforces the importance of ensuring that any qualifications and accreditation can recognise skills and knowledge gained through practice.

In addition to the issues of training and definition, the panel are concerned at the lack of robust evaluation reported by CD workers and managers and a sense that CD lags behind other sectors in this regard. While recognising the dangers of box ticking, funding of any kind always carries with it a requirement to demonstrate impact: what difference did it make? Anecdotal research cuts little mustard with funders and there is no substitute for

robust independent research based on clear ideas about aims, methods and expected outcomes.

Perhaps most importantly the panel recognises that while resources may be scarce, there is a renewed interest in developing new forms of connectivity and a renewed value in the sense of the public and communal. While there may not be a wider understanding or commitment to CD practice, it is important that CD adopts an open and pluralist approach to those seeking to work with communities rather than adopting a purist 'walled off' practice.

2.3   Wider responses from the sector

In the words of the sector
'There are well-established principles for successful community development which need to be communicated clearly to policymakers: it would be worth creating a short "charter for community development" to get a public commitment from national and local government to these principles.'   *'I'm very worried about the probable removal of checks and balances provided both by the state (elected members, officers) and also lay/community representatives. Engagement strategies weren't perfect but they had the advantage of providing formal platforms for consultation and feedback about the quality of delivery.'*

Responses from the wider CD sector to the first published panel paper – received directly or through online forums – reinforced many of the issues identified by the panel. In particular, the lack of a professional structure, clear progression routes or skills accreditation was identified as an issue for employers and staff, especially in the public sector.

A range of formal reports and evaluations of prior programmes and approaches were submitted. These highlighted the success factors required to support CD (Novas Scarman, 2010), as well as reviews of recent work on influencing public service delivery (ODPM, 2005; SQW Consulting, 2010; Defra, 2007), employment and training for young people (NFER, 2002; DfES, 2004), neighbourhood governance (CLG, 2008; CLG, 2005; CLG, 2006) and third sector support (SQW Consulting, 2010; SQW Consulting, 2010).

The importance of local authority relationships was also raised by respondents. Submissions covered the potential support available from local authorities using new and existing powers of competence and well being. They also provided examples of poor relationship management, which have led to the disenfranchisement or takeover of community-led partnerships and initiatives.

3   The Big Society and the responsive state

3.1   Panel paper two: summary

The second panel paper, *The Big Society and the responsive state* (Bowles, 2010b)*,* considered the challenges and opportunities for CD suggested by the emerging economic and social policy priorities of the new coalition government.

The first half of the paper surveyed policy changes intended to remake relationships between citizens and their communities, such as Community First, National Citizens' Service and the Big Society Day. It considered community organisers as a policy lever for both empowering citizens and nudging them into social action, and highlighted some of the new expectations and uncertainties regarding their role. How will organisers be recruited, resourced, monitored and supported? What relationships will they have with other activists, leaders, and practitioners? Where does responsibility lie for ensuring that they operate in ways that improve – not undermine – inclusion and cohesion?

The second half of the panel paper looked at policy changes in relation to public sector reform, or recasting relationships between citizens and the state. It itemised specific provisions of the Localism and Decentralisation Bill (including the general power of competence, reform of the planning system, abolition of inspection regimes, and the right to bid to take over services) and the Sustainable Communities Act (including local spending reports and representative local panels). It considered the most effective ways for the local state to prepare itself to receive demands for new ways of working from community groups. How can it most effectively target technical support? What processes should it put in place to deal with the results of engagement in a climate of reduced red tape? How can it mediate conflicting community views so as to avoid impasse while ensuring democratic accountability in the process?

The paper concluded by summing up the challenges presented by the new policy context. It emphasised that Big Society and localism policy will be implemented in communities experiencing or recently emerging from economic recession and public spending cuts.

3.2 The panel response

In the words of the panel

'In some ways I think that working in CD with a local authority is the most difficult. The role is to engage, involve, and develop the community however it can be tricky balancing the desires of the community with the policies and restrictions of the local authority.'

'Active Citizens / volunteers / community activists, are sadly often referred to as "the usual suspects" by public bodies because they keep repeating the messages that the public bodies don't want to hear. The input from such individuals can be invaluable to public bodies and policy makers.'

'In these new areas of deprivation there will be an existing community infrastructure that will need to be supported to learn from those with experience of social and economic upheaval. We need to see more shared resources, joint voices, new investment, networking and buddying schemes.'

'Working with groups who have their finger on the pulse of the community requires risk taking.'

'Ward councillors are crucial in any community development process, providing the connection between participative and representative democracy.'

The Big Society

There was concern that the current conception of CD is as an 'occupation' undertaken either directly or indirectly by the state – through local authorities or the publically-funded voluntary and community sector (VCS) – rather than a practice delivered by both paid and unpaid practitioners in a range of formal and informal settings. This reflected a wider concern that the voluntary sector has become closely tied to the state in terms of both funding and policy. State support, however, has the benefit of providing scale and coverage not otherwise achievable.

The role of community organisers was discussed, including the benefits and limitations of not receiving state funding and the potential for them to be truly independent following the Alinsky model. The extent to which emerging coalition government policy seeks to support people on a spectrum between 'the good neighbour' and 'the challenging citizen' was discussed, including the need to balance keeping services running, supporting local groups and challenging structural inequalities and the causes of poverty and disadvantage.

The panel expressed concerns that Big Society initiatives risk engaging only the more affluent, providing additional opportunities to those who are already able to engage and exert influence rather than supporting those most affected by poverty, reduced services and unemployment.

While recognising the importance of addressing immediate and local issues, it was felt that there should be a mechanism to enable communities to gain direct access to central

government. Such a mechanism would help to tackle wider structural issues or in cases where central government aspirations for localism and decentralism were not being delivered in a local area.

Decentralisation and localism

Increased expectations of communities to take on roles in planning, apportioning budgets, and developing plans and visions for the development of their local places will require new forms of support and capacity building. In particular, communities and individuals will need access to specialist skills and information currently located within public authorities and the private sector, such as planning and law.

Developing a cohesive sense of how they wish their areas to develop while accounting for differing and minority voices will present a challenge to many diverse and rapidly changing communities. They will also need to deal directly with statutory authorities, developers and utilities providers, negotiating financial benefits and management or ownership of assets. Issues of balancing short and long-term gain and integrating local aspirations with national or local frameworks will also require support. CD has the potential to address some of the issues of power and inequality identified and can enable competing community voices to be heard.

There is also a critical role to play for local authorities that already employ large numbers of staff in frontline neighbourhood working, including a significant proportion of CD workers. The combined agendas of decentralisation, localism and the Big Society will require robust and imaginative approaches to local partnership development, learning from existing good practice and acknowledging and addressing where such partnerships are currently operating imperfectly. Without such local structures there is a risk that a new raft of place-based initiatives will remain uncoordinated and without clear frameworks for implementation and accountability.

Reduced public spending and unemployment

During any period of reduced public sector spending and employment there are dangers that communities already experiencing deprivation will decline further, while prosperous communities may tip into deprivation or experience widening inequalities. History tells us that feelings of exclusion, division and powerlessness, especially when coupled with economic decline and unemployment can lead to tension and unrest.

There is evidence that effective CD can create communities that are more resilient to stress and, alongside economic development, can help to prevent tensions spilling into unrest. However, we also know that CD tends to be deployed (as with other regeneration interventions) in a reactive way.

Regeneration and the development of community-led initiatives, and even the tackling of civil unrest, are led by key individuals and organisations who are already part of the fabric of the community and are respected and trusted within their communities. However, these

individuals may not be recognised or trusted by local authorities or statutory agencies who may find them difficult or threatening. The role of CD workers is to identify these intermediaries and facilitate their actions.

The challenges facing CD in this context are:

- identifying those communities most at risk of being impacted by unemployment and reduced public spending
- identifying the key intermediary community organisations and individuals and obtaining or facilitating the resources required to support them, including private sector support and assistance from communities who have faced similar challenges in the recent past
- strengthening the role of ward councillors in supporting and delivering CD
- ensuring that local authorities remain supportive of independent community activity.

3.3 The wider sector response

In the words of the sector

'Without an effective and properly resourced infrastructure, the devolution of power to neighbourhood groups could lead to those who are most in need being further marginalised.'

'The point of having communities running services is to ensure that they are appropriate and accessible to community members (not that they are cheap and delivered by volunteers).'

'Difficult issues, whether these are race/travellers, health, or indeed long-term issues such as climate change, need a well-planned and informed process of development if good decisions are to be made locally.'

'Leaving community development out of physical or economic development is like driving without oil or running a machine without lubricant.'

Responses from the sector to the second panel paper covered a wide range of viewpoints. The most significant concerns related to public spending cuts and the differential impacts these were likely to have on the poorest, the elderly, minorities and other communities who are already the focus of much CD work. Reduced resources and increased demand may result in over-burdening existing CD workers and activists.

In addition to challenging the need for cuts and proposing alternative approaches to tackling the deficit in the public finances, questions were also raised regarding the capacity of communities to engage in service delivery and additional voluntary activity. Furthermore, there were concerns that CD, while often operating at a neighbourhood level, needs to be able to support communities to engage effectively with larger statutory or private sector organisations in order to effect change. Changes to the way services are delivered and

managed, and the restructuring of public services being proposed in many sectors, may make it harder for local communities to deliver 'second order' or strategic change.

Fears were expressed that, in devolving and decentralising power, the role of the state in providing a balancing and regulatory function in the delivery of local services will be removed. This would make it harder for communities and citizens to ensure that they are receiving a fair and effective service. There were also concerns that independently funded community organisers would not be accountable to local communities and that very local decisions may result in exclusion or discrimination if only majority or dominant voices are heard. It was noted that new programmes of support, such as the community organisers programme, must be able to engage with existing infrastructure support and established intermediaries (Volunteering England, 2010). The role of the state as an active partner in the delivery of long-term CD programmes was also highlighted (Bamber et al, 2010).

In considering the role of CD in relation to other forms of intermediary support for communities, it was suggested that CD offers specific expertise around involving a wide range of people, tackling discrimination, dealing with conflicts and supporting people to learn from experience. The importance of values, alongside skills and knowledge, was highlighted, as well as the need to ensure that equality and non-discriminatory approaches to community work are recognised and supported.

4 Time for change

4.1 Panel paper three: summary

The third panel paper, *Time for change: New models of support for community action* (Bowles, 2010), explored ways in which CD might need to reconfigure itself in order to meet the challenges set out in papers one and two. It reflected on the types of intermediary support that might be needed in a climate of financial austerity and raised expectations, considering in turn the likely demands of individuals, community groups (as both service providers and advocates of needs), public agencies and private sector businesses.

The paper considered the key roles for intermediaries in refocusing their support on the most marginalised. This might mean establishing entry points for marginalised individuals across a range of active citizenship opportunities, or enabling community groups and individuals to establish themselves as community-based providers of well being support.

The paper also considered the implications of new service delivery expectations on community groups. It argued that intermediary support (such as technical expertise, entrepreneurial skills, bridging between lived and professional experience, and boundary spanning across service areas) can mitigate risks for community groups and enhance services. It stressed the importance of supporting the advocacy roles groups play in highlighting community needs and aspirations, making demands upon authority and power, and holding agencies to account for the changes needed.

Time for change identified three areas of intermediary support for local authorities: help with involving communities in service delivery, help with engaging them in wider deliberations, and help with making sense of the divergent community views that result from that engagement. It suggested ways in which community budgeting, service commissioning, staff training and so on could be shaped in order to create an enabling culture across authorities. It also stressed the ambiguities about accountability inherent in the new policy context.

Finally, the paper described the coalition government's belief that rolling back the state will create space and opportunities for community groups and private enterprise to develop. It considered some of the forms that this colonisation of vacated public space might take, for example providing pro bono work and technical expertise, rooting corporate social responsibility in the local area, providing community benefit through planning and development levies, providing intermediary services to public sector clients, and investing in venture philanthropy and social finance initiatives.

4.2 The panel response

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In the words of the panel

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'CD is about promoting social justice. The focus should be on the poorest and most vulnerable first but all communities need to be included.'

'CD needs to relearn the lessons of Alinsky – CD from below funded by the disadvantaged and the poor to respond to vested and established interests. It needs to be able to respond independently.'

'CD is at a crossroads, it needs to decide what it can do and where it focuses. One recommendation might be a taking stock. What works? What impacts and outcomes has it had? What are the skills and practices that make it effective?'

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The panel highlighted the importance of providing support to communities to make the Big Society happen. It also expressed concerns that decentralisation and localisation could lead to fragmentation. Work will therefore need to be done to bring people and communities together in order to prevent divisive competition for limited resources.

CD has a significant body of skills, knowledge and practice to contribute to this context. However, it must demonstrate its value and the contribution it is able to make to the realisation of the aspirations of communities and the delivery of public policy. This can be achieved through an assessment of case studies, evaluations and descriptions of what has worked in the past. Robust research and evaluation must also be built into future CD work. Communities and funders should be able to come to their own decisions about what is working and what is not.

In the context of reduced public spending, reductions in welfare and significant unemployment, it is important that CD continue to focus on the most vulnerable and support social justice. In doing so, it must work with other communities and the private and public sectors in order to create links and build capacity in communities and those who work with them.

In order to engage a more diverse, mobile and individualised population, CD must remain flexible, providing routes from individual, short-term and virtual activism to more collective and communal forms of action.

At a time of reduced public spending and a reduced role for the state in providing services and resourcing community action, CD must also become more responsive and accountable to communities. This includes being directly responsible and accountable to those it serves, and ensuring that services continue to be effective, fair and accessible. This may increasingly include direct funding by communities.

With a proliferation of other forms of knowledge-based and skilled intermediary roles being undertaken within communities, CD must clearly define its unique contribution while remaining open to working with others to achieve the best outcomes for communities,

learning to work alongside organisers and social entrepreneurs and signposting where required.

The renewed focus on the role of communities provides opportunities to ensure that the wealth of knowledge, skills and experience held by the CD tradition is effectively deployed to ensure that all citizens are able to use new powers and rights. However, to do so in a more contested social and political environment, which is undergoing large-scale structural change, will require flexibility, the formation of new partnerships and dialogue, the adoption of new tools and practices, and effective leadership.

4.3   The wider response from the sector

In the words of the sector
'Communities are being isolated because of the cuts, with good groups being lost in the scramble to go for service delivery and contract management. There's a weakening of community infrastructure.'   *'Interventions need to achieve collective capacity and resilience, nurturing communities as complex living systems while simultaneously ensuring that barriers to free and equal interaction and cooperation are tackled.'*   *'Diversity of people and places requires many models of community development. It would be a mistake to impose one model on the whole country, but there are some common principles or building blocks which characterise effective community development.'*

The wider events hosted by CDF and the Community Development Network for London in October and November 2010 identified the need for civil society organisations to come together to develop a shared response to the changes occurring across the voluntary and community sector and within communities, not just within CD.

There was widespread concern that at the same time as communities were being impacted by changes in service delivery and reductions in public spending, the frontline community-based organisations were also having to deal with widespread uncertainty and changes to funding and infrastructure. In particular, there was concern that while civil society is being asked to take a greater role in supporting communities, much existing infrastructure is currently under threat and a great deal of practice and knowledge is at risk of being lost.

There was a clear recognition of the need for urgent and independent action, for the sector to come together to identify issues with and for communities, and how to respond in a manner that is collaborative rather than competitive. At a local level, this includes meeting with local authorities to discuss how to effectively allocate the limited funds available. It also means discussing how the community can come together to fill the gaps and ensure that the transition to a smaller state and increased responsibility for local government and communities is fair and inclusive.

At both a local and national level, it was suggested that CD practice has a key role in the development of broad-based networks or community coalitions, including businesses, faith groups and others, alongside community chests for small grants and events.

It was acknowledged that during times of change there is a need to embrace risk and engage with new ideas, new partnerships, new technologies, new forms of practice and new forms of support. Such approaches require effective networks for learning and sharing of practice and ideas. It was also suggested that there is a need for leadership and organisations that defend the values and principles of CD and are able to help to demonstrate its effectiveness and impact.

5 Key panel recommendations

It is the view of the panel that:

The role of CD is to support individuals and community organisations to reflect upon and articulate their needs, and to take practical collective action on both the immediate and underlying issues that they face.

It works with communities of place, interest and identity, enabling diverse and competing community voices to be heard. By addressing issues of power, inequality and social justice, it aims to bring about change that is empowering, fair and inclusive.

In order to remain effective and relevant, CD must work not only with the immediate concerns of neighbourhoods but also more strategically with public and private bodies to enable them to be more responsive to the needs of the communities they serve.

It must identify new forms of financial, practical and technological support for community action and organisations, and how these can be used most effectively.

5.1 To government: Learn from experience

'For the Big Society to succeed, the government will need to draw on the strengths and networks of the volunteering, community development and community organising sectors. Such collaboration has the potential to ensure that the Big Society is grounded in current practice, and thereby able to deliver wider social benefits.'

— External submission

The panel welcomes the coalition government's commitment to support decentralisation of power, localism and community action and empowerment, as part of a vision for a better society, with greater public participation and more active citizenship.

However, there is a risk that these positive aims will be undermined by cuts in public expenditure, the restructuring and reduction in public and welfare services, anticipated increases in unemployment and poverty, and a deepening in social and economic problems in areas already suffering multiple deprivation.

There is also a risk that some areas that are currently prosperous will tip into deprivation because of the knock-on effect of public expenditure cuts on private firms and personal incomes. Such changes risk reinforcing inequalities and feelings of division, exclusion and powerlessness, leading to increases in social tension.

It is therefore imperative that vulnerable communities are identified and supported over the coming years to ensure that the Big Society agenda is not just for the few, or the most influential, but is inclusive, fair and just for *all*.

The panel acknowledges the initiatives that are being implemented to address these issues, including Community First, the Transition Fund and the training of 5,000 new community organisers. However, we would also highlight the importance of learning the lessons of past experience and current practice. There are estimated to be at least 20,000 CD workers currently in post, many highly skilled and with many years of experience of working with communities. There are also many communities, such as those in the former coalfields, whose recent experience of significant structural change could provide invaluable learning for communities currently facing social and economic upheaval and the threat of dislocation.

Such experience and hard-won knowledge are of value not only to those government departments with responsibility for delivering the vision of a Big Society, but to all departments wishing to deliver improved levels of public engagement, empowerment and the co-production of more relevant and responsive public and voluntary services in a range of sectors.

The panel believes that there is a direct and crucial link between CD expertise and the government's desire to promote people's self-reliance, confidence and capability.

However the role of CD is not only to support communities to provide self help or to design and deliver better public services. It also has a critical role to play in analysing the underlying causes of the problems facing disadvantaged communities and in developing preventive strategies.

Such analysis, undertaken with and from the perspective of communities, and with a close understanding of the complex inter-connected issues they face, can improve strategic decision making at both national and local levels.

In addition, evidence and evaluations from previous government CD programmes in this country and elsewhere can help to avoid repeating previous policy failures and the consequent waste of public resources.

5.2 To CD practitioners: Evidence impact

> *'The role of new media and information technology has enormous potential to strengthen community development, as well as to fragment communities. This is probably the single most important new area for community development.'*
>
> **— External submission**

The CD field needs to develop more compelling evidence and examples of the impacts and outcomes of its practice. 'Formative' evaluation must be built in to CD practice so that the communities served, and those who finance and support the work, can judge for themselves whether and how CD is helping to contribute to communal action, shared learning, empowerment, social justice, and equality.

The panel suggests that in the short term this should focus on tools such as Public Value and Social Return on Investment, and the contribution of CD work to tackling immediate priorities such as jobs, education, health, and community well being.

There is also a need for an independent review of what has been learned and achieved in those communities that have experienced a succession of interventions and the long-term support of CD workers (paid and unpaid), in order to understand whether and how CD contributes to the economic and social development of the community and its citizens. Importantly, such a review should not gloss over interventions that have failed to deliver expected gains, and should examine why that was so.

CD practice in the UK may also benefit from sharing and comparing experience with its overseas counterparts, particularly identifying methodologies from the global South that could be used in or adapted to UK settings.

In addition the CD field needs to respond to and learn how to work with new forms of community – in particular communities of interest and of identity – whose formation is being facilitated by new social media, technology and the internet.

5.3 To CD organisations: Lead and advocate

'We need evidence of a settlement between the three CD nationals and far greater dialogue with the CD movement.'

— **External submission**

All contributors to our debate are agreed that we face a historic moment of political economic and social change, both for citizens and communities, and for the practice of CD.

The CD field needs clear and trusted channels of communication and coordination, reliable sources of information and analysis, effective informal networks for sharing, comparing and learning from experience in various settings, and high-quality training, development and accredited qualifications.

Government and other organisations, nationally and locally, need to be able to access the knowledge, skills, and experience embodied within the traditions and practices of CD.

The panel is concerned that at present this kind of 'knowledge in depth' about CD is fragmented, and that the lack of a clear and coherent national voice undermines the CD movement's ability to share its expertise with those in government and in the private and voluntary sectors who wish to learn and to contribute to social and economic development.

All three of the national CD bodies and the regional networks in England are currently facing an uncertain financial future. The national CD organisations must address these issues, and honestly confront and overcome the current vulnerability of the CD infrastructure. The panel urges them to set in motion positive moves to unify the CD movement, constructively

engaging critical voices, and different traditions and practices, on issues of shared engagement. The potential for a merger between existing bodies or new forms of coalition, including with other sector infrastructure bodies, should be considered. The panel would be willing to act as honest broker for such negotiations and coalition building.

The panel also recommends that there should be a review of both the skills needed for the future, and of the existing skills base within CD. New CD skills will be needed at many different levels – local, national and intermediary – even where these may not be recognised by all as 'pure' CD. New roles and forms of practice need to be identified, acknowledged and constructively engaged with.

Lessons may be learned from the health sector where new understanding has emerged about how to mobilise movements for radical change with and for patients, users and their families, and innovative forms of practice at the frontline. There are also lessons from the social care sector, where a Skills Academy and Institute for Excellence have been set up to address new skills issues. The experience of the roll-out of personal budgets across social care in England should be examined closely for transferable learning about empowerment of individuals and communities.

Given the constraints on public spending, and the government's new focus on the role of civil society, CD will require new forms of funding, networking and support. The recognition of the importance of collective action, the creation of new rights and forms of redress for citizens, and the lessons from previous attempts in the USA and Latin America to tackle poverty, illiteracy, demoralisation and democratisation (e.g. in the traditions of Alinsky and Freire) provide great opportunities for CD to contribute to the Big Society agenda for more active citizenship, social justice, fairness and equality. However, in the current context it will require strong, adaptable and resourceful leadership if it is to seize these opportunities.

5.4 To foundations, trusts and socially responsible business: Diversify support

'We need to develop US-style community coalitions (including CD networks, VCS organisations businesses and churches) and community chests for small grants and events.'

— Workshop attendee

CD, like much of civil society in recent years, has perhaps suffered from being too closely associated with central government policy and programmes and driven by over-dependence on state funding.

In order to ensure that CD's traditional goals for collective action, social and economic justice and equality are not compromised, and that communities, and those who support them, are able to tackle vested interests and the structural causes of poverty, exclusion and inequality, there is a need for independent funding.

Irrespective of the need for greater independence, reductions in public spending and the restructuring of public services will dictate the development of new models of finance, funding and provision of services and support. Communities will increasingly require the provision of pro bono expertise, private philanthropy and investment. This will require new forms of engagement with and from business, a new focus on social responsibility and on public value and social returns.

CD, with its understanding of the infrastructure, ecology, needs, strengths and aspirations of communities, can help private enterprise deliver real and lasting public benefit.

5.5 To civil society organisations and local government: Collaborate locally

CD is only one form of intermediary support. However it is a critical one, connecting formal and informal networks, enabling the inclusion of minority voices and mediating difference.

CD practice is undertaken across a range of statutory and non-statutory settings (civil society, housing, neighbourhood management, development trusts, and local government). No single sector can provide the support that communities require on their own.

It is important to acknowledge good practice very clearly wherever it exists, and for all those delivering services and providing support at a neighbourhood level to acknowledge and learn from the practice of others. Recognition of common aims and principles should form the basis for improved local partnerships and new coalitions based on existing practice, strengthening the relationships between local authorities, communities and civil society.

6 Next Steps

'It may not be possible to argue a case to the government for more spending on community development. However it may be possible to take the opportunity to seize the moment and do something completely independent. The great moments of community development have been funded outside of the government and state. Perhaps we should be saying not "the government should do this" but "we should do this". Mobilise a movement giving life to the notion of a Big Society.'

— John Benington, Panel Chair

The panel's work to date has been to offer an independent perspective, and to listen to a range of alternative and independent viewpoints at a time of fundamental and complex change.

It does not believe that it is possible or desirable at this stage to prescribe a single course of future action. Its deliberations and this report are contributions to what must be an open ended and contested debate, as the state, the market and civil society establish new terms of engagement and CD itself establishes new forms of practice and infrastructure.

The panel is committed to continuing to contribute to this debate. Over the coming months it will:

- make a clear statement of the value of CD practice to relevant central government departments and opinion formers
- provide a response to the current Office for Civil Society consultation, 'Supporting a Stronger Civil Society'
- explore the potential for the development of a new, independently funded national programme of CD to tackle poverty, exclusion and multiple deprivation. The programme would focus on equalities and social justice, using action research methodologies to explore new and emerging forms of CD practice. It would support some of the most vulnerable communities to address the social, economic and environmental challenges presented by changes in public policy and reductions in public spending.

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List of Submissions

The full text of all formal submissions to the Independent Expert Panel on Community Development can be found on the CDF website at www.cdf.org.uk/web/guest/information-submissions-august-2010.

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