

Henry Tam's Investigations into Cooperative Problem-Solving

(not all links live at time of creation Jan 2015)

Following a seminar with students, international academics, and leading figures from the cooperative and community sectors (convened by FYPD at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, 2012), a shared position statement was issued on why and how cooperative problem-solving should be more widely understood and utilised. This is set out in '[Cooperative Problem-Solving: the key to a reciprocal society](#)', and provides a basis for collaboration between educators, civic activists, and policy makers.

FYPD works with theorists and practitioners to promote greater awareness and utilisation of cooperative problem-solving in improving the way we deal with the social, economic and political challenges we face, and strengthen the intellectual foundation of a genuinely democratic form of life for all.

Guide to Reference Materials

The following articles provide an introduction to the concept of 'cooperative problem-solving' and its application to strengthening democratic collaboration:

- 'Cooperative Problem-Solving: its theory & practice' – See below in document
- '[The Case for Cooperative Problem-Solving](#)'
- 'Rejuvenating Democracy: lessons from a communitarian experiment' - See below in document

You may also find the following documents on 'Together We Can', an extensive government programme carried out between 2003 and 2010 to promote cooperative problem-solving and democratic citizenship of interest:

- 'Together We Can' action plan: the cross-government plan with commitments in the key public policy areas.



<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919132719/http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/151933.pdf>

- Annex to 'Together We Can' action plan: with details of the proposed initiatives. 

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919132719/http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/152822.pdf>

- 'Together We Can' 2005/2006 review: reports from the Secretaries of State and Ministers on progress in 12 Government Departments.



<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919132719/http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/151402.pdf>

More learning materials produced from the Together We Can programme can be found here:

<http://www.hbtam.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/find-our-more-about-together-we-can.html>

Cooperative Problem-Solving: *What it means in theory and practice*

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1.1 The Cooperative Approach to Solving Problems

Whenever there is a problem beyond the capability of individuals on their own to deal with, or the response of one could cause conflict with that of another, it may seem appropriate to suggest that those concerned with the problem should cooperate with each other to find a satisfactory solution. One would expect that with help offered and reciprocated on an equal basis, there would be better outcomes for all involved without anyone being exploited. However, such an approach has to contend with five types of criticism, which in their different ways oppose its recommendation.

First, there is the argument that it is unrealistic. Cooperation, beyond the basic exchange of assistance under the most straightforward circumstance, is regarded by some as inherently at odds with the self-centred nature of human beings, not to mention the long-standing traditions of hierarchical society.

Secondly, the recommendation for a cooperative approach to problem-solving is dismissed as nothing more than a platitudinous aspiration, offering nothing substantial or coherent as a guiding philosophy for how we should go about dealing with the diverse complex problems we have to face.

Thirdly, it can be criticised for not being sufficiently distinct, particularly when advocates of policies, which aggravate social divisions rather than promote reciprocal interactions, also dress their ideas up in the language of 'cooperation' and 'mutuality'. Without robust criteria to identify genuine cooperative problem-solving, superficial talk of cooperating together may actually mask conditions that exploit the contributions of many for the benefit of a privileged few.

Fourthly, it can be undermined by the charge that although it may sound positive to get everyone concerned to cooperate with each other in a reciprocal manner, in practice it would all too often lead to delays in solving problems, and in many cases, far better results could be secured by either letting an authoritative figure or body to take complete charge of the problem, or leaving individuals to sort things out on their own without any presumption they should enter into any formal cooperative arrangement.

Finally, even if all the other arguments can be dealt with, the fact remains that there are too many powerful vested interests which are decidedly against moving away from their favoured arrangements towards much more egalitarian forms of cooperative problem-solving. To promote the latter would only breed false hope and stir up frustration and anger when people would be better off resigning themselves to the hierarchical status quo.

The purpose of this paper is to dispel each of these criticisms, and in so doing, demonstrate why there is a distinct and valuable cooperative approach to problem-solving which should be adopted at all levels of human interactions, from schools and the workplace to institutions operating locally, nationally and globally.

1.2 The Cooperative Disposition: For and Against

If a case can be made for the claim that it is unrealistic to expect human beings to be cooperatively disposed, it may present us with a serious obstacle. Amongst political advocates and social commentators, there is no shortage of those who insist that society can only function properly if people were disciplined by strict authoritarian rule, or those who always want to see problems left to individuals to find their best of

all possible lives in a world of laissez faire (or as the plutocratic-minded would prefer, strict discipline for the poor and total freedom for the rich). For them, any push for more effective conditions to facilitate cooperation is naïve and a diversion from how human affairs should be arranged.

This charge of misguided idealism does not in fact square with the evidence. To begin with, anthropological studies have found that human beings in the most primitive state were already inclined towards cooperating on equal terms with each other on the broad understanding that others would reciprocate. While uncooperative individuals on their own and social units that disintegrated through lack of mutual trust and support fell by the wayside, cooperative groups developed an evolutionary advantage and thrived¹. Far from being instinctively disposed towards looking after their own personal interests and acting without due regard of the consequences for others, tribes exemplified their members' readiness to look out for one another. Inter-tribe conflicts sometimes arose from lack of mutual understanding, but where trust had managed to take root, tribes often cooperated informally or even merged to form larger cohesive social units.

It is undeniable that after nearly 200,000 years of cooperative existence, from around 8,000 BC on, large scale agricultural civilisations began to emerge around the world, and with this development came the sharp hierarchical divisions between ruler and subjects, masters and servants (even slaves), men and women, privileged aristocrats and everyday workers, the rich and the poor. But this does not mean that human beings' sense of how they ought to behave towards one another underwent a complete change. On the contrary, the growing threat against the cooperative mode of interaction fuelled deeper moral reflections that led to the critical refinement and articulation of the Golden Rule in all civilised societies: people were to treat others as they would have others treat them. In the midst of diverse religious doctrines and cultural codes, the Golden Rule was adopted everywhere as the core ethical guide.

Contemporary developmental psychology has found that it is the much longer standing cooperative mindset, rather than the divisive hierarchical mentality, which remains firmly embedded in human disposition. Without the need for instruction, offer of reward, or threat of punishment, children from the earliest age exhibit a consistently cooperative mode of behaviour². Infants are so naturally helpful to others while expecting others to be helpful to them, that to protect them from potential predatory adults, children have to be explicitly told not to trust complete strangers. Suspicion that someone may not reciprocate one's helpfulness may lead one to holding back from cooperation. And the factors which could give rise to that suspicion may help to explain why cooperation can breakdown in practice.

First, one can be ignorant of the intentions of another person, or of the likely effects of the complex arrangements being proposed, especially if they would involve a large group of people including many who are relative strangers. Secondly, through trauma or instilled prejudice, one can become morally insensitive towards one or more groups of people – ceasing to see them as one's fellow human beings. It is a sad fact that when a child's readiness to help others is repeatedly or randomly met with indifference, neglect, or even aggression, that child is at risk of becoming disposed to adopt a similar stance towards other people, including those who try to be helpful to them. Thirdly, power inequality can leave those in disadvantaged positions to think, not without reason based on their experience, that their efforts to

¹ For example, Bowles, S. & Gintis, H., *A Cooperative Species: human reciprocity and its evolution*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

² Tomasello, M., *Why We Cooperate*, Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2009.

help others would not be accorded equal respect or properly reciprocated. They may have to do what they are asked to do because the threat of force or destitution leaves them little choice, but they would not be acting in a spirit of cooperation.

When relatively simple social groups were merged into the expanding complex hierarchies down to around 500 BC, the changes aggravated all three factors. With new methods of food production and larger scales of social organisation, more possibilities of human interaction presented people with more unknowns. Lack of knowledge as to what might or might not be genuine cooperative partnerships led to uncertainty. At the same time, the combination of settlements growing substantially in size with new divisions proliferating through a variety of status criteria meant that rivalry bred prejudices, and without these being more readily corrected by the familiar daily exchanges more typical in small groups, they could brew into toxic insensitivity towards particular groups (the poor, the enslaved, women, foreigners).

But while these two trends could over time be balanced respectively by the improving capacity for knowledge acquisition and the spread of a cosmopolitan outlook spurred by increased interactions with diverse people, they were often exacerbated by the accelerated transformation relating to the third factor. Power inequality widened with the rise of cities and empires. Those who wielded arms to protect agricultural communities from external raiders soon discovered the same power could be used to impose submission on those within the boundaries they controlled. By incorporating priestly/scholastic experts into their service, members of the ruling elite were also able to promote cultural norms and beliefs that presented them as worthy of obedience, while channelling disgruntlement amongst the populace towards vulnerable scapegoats. Above all, they could forbid attempts to question their favoured belief system as sacrilegious, and under the halo of their own contrived legitimacy sanctified the antithesis of the Golden Rule: do unto others as they please without ever worrying what others might do in return.

However, hierarchical exploitation could not extinguish the embers of cooperative disposition, because ultimately the inquisitive human mind will sooner or later discover that a mutually supporting group of equals can come up with better answers than a few who seek to dictate to others how they should live. If the institution of democracy in Athens and the advocacy for egalitarian mutualism by Mohist philosophers in China, did not last long beyond the fifth and fourth centuries BC, the resurgence of the cooperative ethos in challenging ignorance, moral insensitivity and power inequality was fully re-ignited by the 17th and 18th centuries. Dogmatic pronouncements were displaced by scientific research sustained by cooperative enquirers; conflicting religious injunctions were superseded by a renewed moral focus on the Golden Rule of reciprocity; and the unaccountable regimes serving their privileged elite were challenged by democrats who demanded an equal say by all in determining who should govern.

While it took nearly 2,000 years for the cooperative struggle to be rekindled, it took under 200 years for the revival to reach every form of human association. By the middle of the 20th century not only was there a worldwide momentum towards democratic governance by people as equal citizens, children were beginning to be respected as learning partners in progressive education, cooperative enterprises flourished, income inequalities were being significantly brought down, and decolonisation gathered pace with the United Nations providing a global platform for democratic interactions between nations. It was far from unrealistic to expect

problems at any level of society to be addressed through the cooperative participation of those concerned³.

1.3 The Communitarian Philosophy of Cooperation

The ascendancy of cooperation in democratising power relations and building mutual trust did not last long. Beginning in the 1980s, hierarchical domination was on the rise again. Instead of donning an old aristocratic guise, however, it now appeared in a fully-fledged plutocratic form. The power to make profits out of transactions under market conditions structured to favour profiteering was to trump all other powers. It would hold as allies those legal, media, political, religious, and military agents who were prepared to serve its interests – from defending the freedom of profit-makers to act without constraint, to diverting public frustration to vulnerable scapegoats. Its underlying tactics were not that different from those used by ruling elites of the past, but by its relentless focus on wealth accumulation, its insidious subjugation of virtually all major human activities to financial control, and its use of information technology on a global scale to magnify the power of money against public scrutiny, it rapidly established itself as a hegemonic force. From its base in Britain and America, plutocracy spread in the 1990s and 2000s to the rest of the world.

During these decades the spirit of cooperation was increasingly stifled by the drive to deregulate businesses, make workers and consumers increasingly powerless to contest corporate decisions, redistribute resources from the poor to the rich, demutualise friendly societies, widen the income gap, exacerbate the plight of the poor by cutting down collective support, and undermine the mutual security guaranteed by the public sector by privatising more and more of it to profit-makers unencumbered by any duty to the common good. Provoked by the damages inflicted by these changes, a critical philosophy emerged to challenge the plutocratic worldview and the market individualism it promoted as its justification.

To understand this communitarian philosophy, which argues for unjust forms of power relations to be replaced by structures of human association supported by the cooperative participation of all concerned, it is essential to distinguish it from the motley collection of inchoate views about community life that are sometimes lumped together under the label 'communitarian' just because they feature terms such as 'responsibility', 'civic participation', 'common values', and of course, 'community'. Three markers should help to sift out pseudo-communitarian ideas: A. they exhibit a nostalgic attachment to traditional communities, viewing them in a romanticised version of the 'good old days'. B. they are silent on the need to check the destabilisation of interpersonal relationships by corporate powers and the importance of redistributing power in favour of the vulnerable. C. their authors never describe themselves or their ideas as 'communitarian'.

By contrast, what unites communitarian thinkers (e.g., Jonathan Boswell, Charles Derber, Amitai Etzioni, Philip Selznick, Henry Tam) is a critical analysis of why contemporary society needs to move forward to a more democratically mature state where people can deliberate together and shape their collective wellbeing much

³ For an extended treatment of the historical development of democracy and cooperation in the face of hierarchical domination, see, Harman, C., *A People's History of the World*, London: Verso, 2008; and Tam, H., *Against Power Inequalities: reflections on the struggle for inclusive communities*, London: Birkbeck, 2010, <http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resources/against-power-inequalities>.

more as equal partners⁴. Their diagnosis finds the central problem of uncooperative interactions in geographical and organisational communities, not in the fading of deference to arbitrary customs or doctrines (which was to be welcome), but in the disempowerment of people by socio-economic structures that increasingly marginalised them. While a small elite amassed more power to shape decisions to favour themselves, often at the expense of others, a growing majority were losing their job security and family stability (because of the intensifying demand for greater labour flexibility). The latter found that even when their productivity went up, their share of national income diminished. Corporate irresponsibility threatened their health, their pensions, and their environment. At the same time, their government which has previously (through the New Deal or the founding of the welfare state) begun the process of reducing gross inequalities and giving all citizens a decent standard of protection, shifted its priorities more and more towards the concerns of the financial markets, and the demands of national and global business interests.

The communitarian prescription is for the social bonds of cooperation to be re-connected through the development of more inclusive forms of community life in every sphere of human interaction. The three guiding principles for this development are cooperative enquiry, mutual responsibility, and citizen participation⁵. Each is devised to counter respectively the three obstacles to reciprocal association: ignorance, moral insensitivity, and power inequality.

The principle of cooperative enquiry

The principle of cooperative enquiry requires anyone making an assertion to be judged with reference to the extent to which informed participants deliberating under conditions of thoughtful and uncoerced exchanges would concur. Any provisional consensus reached by one group of individuals must in turn be open to possible revisions subject to examinations carried out with input from other groups. The ultimate strength of any truth claim rests with the likelihood of that claim surviving the critical deliberations of ever expanding circles of enquirers.

If people were not aware that by cooperating in a certain way they could help each other, they might well decline any request to enter into that mode of cooperation. This becomes even more problematic when the collaborative arrangements and their causal impact are too complex or opaque. Potential cooperators can be put off by uncertainties over the efficacy of what they are being asked to do. For example, a mutual insurance scheme may in principle make sense, but if the claims and assessment process is too difficult to follow it could leave people thinking that it would not deliver the assurance worthy of the resources they have to commit to it.

As ignorance can arise out of countless situations, it cannot be countered with reference to a single source of knowledge covering all matters. It can only be curtailed reliably through cooperative enquiry. People in powerful positions may at any time on the grounds of religion, corporate confidentiality, national security, or some other 'unquestionable' edifice, seek to declare what is known or allowed to be known on a given issue. It is essential that the veracity of their claims can be examined in the light of changing evidence. For this to happen, we need the

⁴ For an critical analysis of the differences between various views described as 'communitarian' by media commentators, and the actual ideas of communitarian thinkers, see Hale, Sarah, *Blair's Community: Communitarian Thought and New Labour*, Manchester University Press, 2006.

⁵ Tam, H., *Communitarianism: a new agenda for politics and citizenship*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998.

cultivation of citizens' deliberative skills and institutional safeguards for open and critical discussions to take place.

The principle of mutual responsibility

The principle of mutual responsibility requires all members of any community to take responsibility for enabling each other to pursue those values which stand up to the test of reciprocity. What an individual may value cannot expect to command the respect from others if its pursuit is incompatible with the realisation of goals valued by others. The range of mutual responsibilities would expand over time to cover direct and indirect care for dependents, help to those who would otherwise be neglected, safeguards for verifiable evidence and coherent reasoning, and cultivation of personal abilities not inimical to those of others. Omission to support, as well as action to harm, would be deemed a breach of the responsibility owed to each other.

Once hierarchical divisions arose in history, prejudicial views about women, foreigners, the poor, the disabled, those with different religious beliefs or sexual dispositions are formed and passed down the generations. Where these prejudices are embedded in the young, they would grow up to discount any potential reciprocal cooperation with anyone belonging to these groups as irrelevant. Their natural sensitivity to the joy and suffering of other people is displaced in such cases by a cold indifference or in some instances a visceral hostility.

Instead of accepting such disruptions to moral sensitivity as the prerogative of autonomous individuals or groups, they need to be treated as akin to the injurious suspension of a normal human faculty, which we come across when victims of abuse, sufferers of brain damage, or targets of psychological conditioning, lose the ability to see others as equally human as themselves. Their empathy needs to be restored so they could view others as potential partners with whom they can engage in reciprocal and hence mutually beneficial cooperation.

The principle of citizen participation

The principle of citizen participation requires that those affected by any given power structure are able to participate as equal citizens in determining how the power in question is to be exercised. All those subject to potentially binding commands should be entitled to learn about, review, and have an equal say in the decision-making process. This applies to not only government institutions, but also businesses, schools and community organizations. It follows that power relations should not retain structural or cultural barriers which hold people back from accessing information, putting forward their suggestions, questioning proposals, or sharing in decision-making.

Since equal participation would be difficult to achieve when some in society have much more power as a result of their wealth, status, or the coercive forces they command, while others are placed in a disadvantaged position, power inequality has to be substantially reduced.

People with less power cannot make their voices count. They might fear they would be penalised, or they simply cannot afford to purchase the additional support the elite can direct at their preferred outcomes. By contrast, a cooperative decision-making structure would minimise the gulf between the strong and the vulnerable, and ensure that any remaining power differences are kept in check so that any irresponsible attempt to exploit that difference can be readily detected and held to account.

It is sometimes argued that inequalities are necessary because superior rewards are needed to motivate the high achievers who would end up benefiting everyone, and there have to be penalties to deal with those who do not contribute as much as others. However, reciprocal cooperation does not require complete equality in all aspects of life. Some people can earn more than others where a reasonable degree of differentiation would really aid motivation. Some deserve to be penalised if they have committed offence against others in the light of a just and transparent legal code. But how the distribution of resources and authority, which constitute power in human interactions, is to be carried out must itself be shaped by the participation of citizens on equal terms if it is not to become an arbitrary and oppressive structure controlling how we live together.

Communitarian development of cooperative communities

What the communitarian philosophy demands is the progressive development of citizens, institutions and policies, in line with the three principles outlined above. The extent to which the character and behaviour of individuals and groups help or hinder human interactions in relation to the conditions advocated by those principles provides the reference point for judging their acceptability. Given that the term 'communitarian' originated from 19th century description of the cooperative ideas and practices inspired by Robert Owen (when these were introduced in America), it is not surprising that the communitarian vision for social transformation is focused on the nurturing and embedding of cooperative interactions in all forms of human association. Far from being vague or nostalgic, it poses a radical challenge to replacing divisive hierarchies by problem-solving collaboration based on joint deliberations and equal respect, that will help to resolve persistent conflicts, help realise our respective potential, and expand our shared horizon.

In practice, this means that for any given community, neighbourhood, or organisation, all those connected with them should be given the confidence, skills, support and opportunities to engage in shared deliberations regarding what they think are problematic, what they make of the available evidence and testimony, what suggestions for change are to be put forward, how conflicting views and priorities are to be resolved, and what conclusions are to be drawn from their own experience and available data about the impact of the selected actions.

1.4 The Characteristics of Cooperative Problem-Solving

Distinguishing the communitarian philosophy of cooperation from motley remarks arbitrarily labelled 'communitarian' helps to articulate a clear alternative to the plutocratic conception of hierarchical social structure. But on this foundation we still need to set out what would actually bring about cooperative interactions. This task is made more difficult by the many vague, and sometime disingenuous, deployment of terms like 'cooperative', 'mutuality', or 'co-production'. It is not surprising that some politicians, sensing the positive association these terms possess, should try to use them to cover up their underlying policies to polarise society even further between the rich and the poor. It makes it all the more critical to explain what would truly count as cooperative problem-solving.

All forms of hierarchical domination rely on presenting limited options for responding to non-reciprocal demands as 'cooperation'. From emperors who ask their subjects to labour in harsh conditions to build palaces in return for not being beaten; bosses who increase their own salaries by getting workers to do more for less pay in return for not being made redundant; large companies who convince their small suppliers to sign contracts with the most unfavourable terms in return for not being pushed into

bankruptcy; the same pattern has recurred when power imbalance has given rise to iniquitous pressures which few would dare defy. Combined with the targeted cultivation of ignorance and moral insensitivity, the powerful can keep others in a relatively docile state of compliance indefinitely.

The cycle of oppressive control can only be broken when the conditions for human interactions are radically reformed. Drawing from the experience of movements directed at displacing oppressive exploitation by genuine cooperation – pressing governments to give an equal vote to every citizen; leaving autocratic firms behind to set up businesses where all workers have an equal say; holding service administrators to account by empowering users to voice their concerns, not as supplicants, but on an equal footing – we can delineate the key elements which need to be secured by any effective reform.

People can be said to be engaged together in cooperative problem-solving if their interactions contain all the following four elements. First, they share a readiness to explore how a specific problem of concern to all of them can be solved. Implicitly (where they have worked together effectively as equal partners over time) or explicitly (where it is likely a competent facilitator is needed to ensure no one could exert any power advantage over others through the use of threat, coercion, bribery, or any other form of corrupt influence), they follow ground rules that require respect for all those involved, give everyone an appropriate amount of time to express their thoughts and feelings without allowing any undue monopolising of the discussions by one or more individuals, and exclude abuse and malicious disruption.

Secondly, once the initial emotions and views have been openly shared, consideration is systematically given to the input from any relevant witness, expert, and those with related responsibility to explain to the participants what possible solutions there might be. After listening to the pros and cons of going along with different options, and what constraints there might be to taking other courses of action, the participants are able to ask each other and invited specialists any relevant question to advance their understanding of how their shared problem may be tackled. The process is structured so as to prevent anyone using their status, resources, or access to tools for manipulating opinions, to intimidate or mislead others.

Thirdly, participants are encouraged to contribute any suggestion of their own, and question those formulated by others, before considering how those which convince them as the most promising are to be ranked in order of priority. At this stage, participants have the opportunity to learn from one another what additional implications they might have to deal with if particular options were chosen. Instead of individuals simply voting for whatever they think would suit themselves personally most, they are to give due consideration to what others might gain or endure before giving their support for any given option. Whereas under exploitative pressures, to compromise is often to concede as a result of one's weak bargaining position, to compromise with others who have an equal say is to engage in reciprocal give-and-take that is at the heart of authentic cooperation.

Fourthly, on the basis of the options shortlisted, participants use the selection process they have agreed to (by majority vote, entrusting to delegates, or unanimous vote – which method to use for different situations can itself be addressed by cooperative problem-solving) to choose which solution they back, agree to the responsibilities each has to take on, and plan ahead for reviewing how well the solution works in practice. The on-going feedback will then guide future assessment on whether the adopted solution is to be retained or revised.

These generic features of what we have termed 'cooperative problem-solving' are what underpin objective scientific investigation, democratic decision-making, community development, and cooperative enterprise. Without them, instead of reaching a free and informed consensus of what are justifiable claims, society would end up either mired in dogmatic assertions or perpetually held up in a state of suspended belief. Similarly, electoral processes without these elements are often reduced to a personality contest or a competition in propaganda output. And many residents feel they have no say over their locality because no one takes their concerns seriously, while most workers are familiar with being treated as a mere cog when their employers do not regard them as having a share in the business⁶.

Public policies and private actions can both be judged in terms of how far they promote or hinder the conditions for facilitating cooperative problem-solving. For example, Consensus Conferences have been run by the Danish Board of Technology to incorporate the considered views of citizens in its assessment of new and often controversial scientific and technological developments. Such conferences have led the Danish Parliament to exclude transgenic animals from the first governmental biotechnology research and development programme⁷.

Deliberative Opinion Polls, devised by James Fishkin, have been used in America and other countries to provide civic decision makers a source of information based on what people think, not as isolated individuals without any relevant knowledge, but as citizens deliberating together in light of the key evidence and testimony⁸. The Healthy Communities Initiative has spread from Canada and a number of European cities with the help of WHO (World Health Organisation). The Colorado Communities Health Initiative, for example, brought citizens together through a state-wide council to steer legislators on the priority issues to address and projects to support (ranging from land use, teen issues, support for elderly people)⁹. Since the 1990s, Participatory Rural Appraisal has been used in over 100 countries across Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe, whereby people who are meant to benefit from development programmes get to play a central and informed role in shaping the design and delivery of those programmes¹⁰.

Provided they retain the key elements outlined above, cooperative problem-solving in different forms can bring people together to find out what would really be to their common interest, reconcile contrasting viewpoints and even hostility, and provide a level playing field for inclusive and deliberative exchanges.

1.5 The Effectiveness of Cooperative Problem-Solving

Despite the appeal of fellow human beings arriving at shared solutions through open and mutually respectful deliberations, cooperative problem-solving is still only

⁶ See, for example, Selznick, P., *The Moral Commonwealth*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992; Derber, C., *Corporation Nation*, New York: St Martin's Griffin, 1998; Tam, H., ed., *Progressive Politics and the Global Age*, Cambridge: Polity, 2001.

⁷ Smith, Graham, *Beyond the Ballot*, London: the Power Inquiry, 2005.

⁸ For a consideration of Fishkin's approach, see Fishkin, J and Laslett, P. *Debating Deliberating Democracy*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

⁹ Siriani, C. and Friedland, L. *Civic Innovation in America*, Berkeley: University of California Press (2001)

¹⁰ See Singh, K. 'Handing over the stick: the global spread of participatory approaches to development' in Edwards, M. and Gaventa, J. *Global Citizen Action*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers (2001)

adopted in a minority of cases. One of the most frequently deployed objections is that its costs in time, resources and disruption to established power relations, outweigh what benefits it might bring. This can be looked at in general and specific terms.

In general terms, it has been observed that the approach of reciprocal cooperation delivers the best overall results in diverse forms of human interaction. Game theory analysts using tools such as the 'Prisoners' Dilemma' tests have been able to demonstrate that a cooperative strategy – always being ready to help others, and continuing to provide that help so long as others reciprocate with commensurable help in return – tend to produce the most beneficial results for the participants¹¹. For those attempting to exploit others by not reciprocating, they may gain a relative advantage in the short term, but they still lose out when what they manage to secure is ultimately less than what they could have obtained by cooperating with others.

These findings are further confirmed with the help of computer models, tracking the gains in terms of being helped by others and losses in terms of being ignored or penalised by others in relation to one's readiness to help or penalise others over varying lengths of interactions. Most people are inclined to follow the cooperative strategy and secure the greatest mutual benefits. A minority, however, prefer to rely on accepting help from others while constantly seeking to avoid giving help in return, and they are the ones who routinely perform the worst in terms of actually securing the least benefits for themselves.

If the game theory analysis is too abstract in the general claims it makes, we can look at more specific areas where the effectiveness of cooperative problem-solving has been widely recognised in relation to alternative approaches. Let us take five types of example from education, enterprise, regeneration & development, to service prioritisation & improvement, and conflict resolution.

Education

Students and teachers gain from a learning environment where key issues are addressed through cooperative problem-solving. Research commissioned by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and the Carnegie UK Trust into the impact of student participation in schools and colleges found that¹²:

- students in more democratic schools were happier and felt more in control of their learning;
- where students gave feedback on teaching, it had the twin effect of teachers' practice improving and students gaining in awareness of the learning process;
- participation enhanced skills of communication and competence as a learner;
- disruptive behaviour in class was reduced.

This has been reinforced by members of ATL (Association of Teachers and Lecturers) who have confirmed that well-structured participation which genuinely gives voice to students leads to increased self-confidence and feelings of empowerment, and a greater sense of responsibility. They point to children's insight into the ways they learn best, and the ideas they have for changes to lesson content or style, and to the life of the school, in order to meet their needs. Many also identify

¹¹ Axelrod, R., *The Evolution of Cooperation*, London: Penguin Books, 1984.

¹² Lynn Davis, L., Williams, C., and Yamashita, H., *Inspiring Schools: Impacts & Outcomes*, Carnegie UK Trust, 2006:

http://www.participationworks.org.uk/files/webfm/files/rooms/education/inspiring_schools_impacts_and_Outcomes.pdf

a positive impact of student participation on their own work. Furthermore, student involvement in decision-making is considered welcome in relation to resources and equipment, school rules, timetabling and uniform, as well as extra-curricular activities and pastoral issues, such as behaviour policies and practice.

Organisations such as Pupil Voice in Wales have reviewed existing research and concluded that student involvement in decision-making is likely to lead to better relationships, more relevant and effective policies, and better learning. The benefits extend to interactions with the wider community, while familiarisation with democratic deliberations improves skills and confidence for civic engagement.

In higher education, there is also growing expectation that universities need to engage the wider public in shared deliberative processes to improve the understanding of researchers and citizens more generally. Academics who produce their findings in isolation are likely to encounter passive disinterest or even strong distrust from others who have had no involvement in their research agenda. However, systematic involvement of the public in discussing the problems research is being designed to address and how a solution may be reached, can transform a deep sense of public remoteness towards incomprehensible 'experts' into a mutually rewarding learning experience¹³.

Enterprise

Although many business leaders still behave like monarchical rulers of the past in insisting that they cannot concede to the 'anarchic' demands of granting everyone involved in their business an equal say, cooperative and other forms of worker-led enterprise have shown that democratically run organisations function better both socially and economically. Not only have cooperatives like Mondragon in Spain, and others in Italy, France, and the UK steadily grown for decades, they have weathered the severe economic downturn better than their undemocratic counterparts¹⁴.

Workers who are respected as an equal member of a firm are willing and able to deliberate with others in guiding the direction of their business. Instead of short term profit for shareholders constantly threatening to take their money elsewhere (thus cutting investment for the business), workers are prepared to build up long term capital, not only for themselves, but for other cooperative businesses which may become important suppliers and/or customers in the future. They are ready to extend the application of cooperative problem-solving to federation and consortia structures which promote wider cooperation and solidarity with other cooperatives, thus widening the pool of goodwill, advice and direct support.

Semco in Brazil has demonstrated since 1983 how entrusting workers with an equal say improves morale, productivity, adaptability and the long term success of the business¹⁵. It is the workers themselves who deliberate together and agree on key decisions from pay rates and pay differentials, production arrangements, to strategies concerning investment or development into separate autonomous units.

¹³ See, e.g., 'How engagement enriches an institution's teaching, research and learning', National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2012: https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/How%20PE%20enriches%20research%20teaching%20and%20learning_0.pdf.

¹⁴ Globally, the cooperative movement has been estimated to involve nearly 1 billion people (see: <http://2012.coop/en/ica/co-operative-facts-figures>).

¹⁵ <http://www.semco.com.br/en/content.asp?content=1>

In the UK, the deeper resilience and readiness to learn stemming from a culture of cooperative problem-solving helped the cooperative sector to grow while the economy as a whole was plummeted by plutocratic policies into a double-dip recession. Between 2008 and 2011 the number of cooperatives grew by 23% to nearly 6,000, while individual members grew by 19.7% to 13.5 million. During that period, as the UK economy shrunk by 1.7%, the turnover of the cooperative sector expanded by 19.6% to £35.6 billion¹⁶.

The more effective performance of cooperative enterprise is generally attributed to greater commitment by workers to goals they help to shape; positive attitudes arising from being respected as an equal; better decision-making leading to enhanced outcomes; less time and resources required for inspection and supervision; and the concern for sustainable employment and long term customer relations produce strategies less vulnerable to shareholders' shifts.

Regeneration & development

Poverty, neglect, and inadequate infrastructure have posed perennial challenges to regeneration and development projects in rich and poor countries alike. In many instances in the past, experts have planned such projects while professionals are then entrusted with delivering them. They are then surprised to find that what they have put in place fail to address local needs, and quickly cease to provide much benefit without the support of the people they are supposed to serve.

International development has since the 1980s come to recognise that the cooperative participation of those living in the targeted communities is essential to its success. So long as the engagement is one that leads to the meaningful involvement of residents as equals, and not gives some a privileged seat while interacting with others just tokenistically, it increases the likelihood substantially that the options chosen would deliver what local people really need. Residents of poor communities understand what hurt them most, and what would galvanise people in backing changes that would really help them. Being cooperatively involved in devising the solutions also means that they take ownership of those solutions and are more prepared to help implement them on the ground.

One of the most frequent objections to opening up development to cooperative problem-solving is that it would add to the costs because it would take so much longer to organise. However, the World Bank and other leading development agencies have found that any increase to the initial planning and management costs are more than compensated by savings in the later stages of the projects. Furthermore, there are significant efficiencies in avoiding wastage of project funds that fail to deliver, and not having to make costly corrections¹⁷. The FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) has recommended that agricultural co-ops should be given a central role in food security and poverty reduction. Not only would they help to engage communities in democratic decision-making, they are more disposed towards joining forces with others in speaking with a single voice and increasing their communities' influence in policy making¹⁸.

¹⁶ Details from Co-operatives UK: <http://www.uk.coop/performance-co-operative-economy>

¹⁷ See, for example, Jackson, E.T., *The Strategic Choices of Stakeholders: Examining the Front End Costs and Downstream Benefits of Participatory Evaluation*, paper for the World Bank Conference 1999.

¹⁸ See <http://www.thenews.coop/article/fao-calling-support-co-operatives>.

The same principles apply in developed countries, and regeneration work in the UK, for example, has achieved higher impact and better sustainability where local communities are empowered to contribute to the deliberations and decisions that shape the changes brought to their areas (e.g., reducing unemployment and improving the local environment with the help of resident engagement carried out by Include Neighbourhood Regeneration in Liverpool, or Great Yarmouth's neighbourhood level partnership)¹⁹.

Service prioritisation & improvement

People's trust and satisfaction in public services are correlated with how extensively they have been engaged in cooperative problem-solving as partners of the public bodies in question. On top of this, effective participation improves prioritisation and reduces wastage. The National Audit Office stated that "community participation is vital in ensuring value money in public services. Services designed and delivered without community input risk wasting public money because they will be unused or underused if they are not what people need. Local people must have the opportunities to identify their needs and contribute to finding solutions, rather than feel powerless in the face of public authorities that deliver services on their behalf."²⁰

Participatory Budgeting, originating in Brazil as a tool to enable people living in poor areas to have a real say over how public funds are to be spent to meet their needs, has been adopted in the UK by many local authorities. Not only do people gain a greater sense of ownership and satisfaction with the spending priorities they help to shape, feedback has consistently shown that the participatory process has engendered a new sense of solidarity amongst those involved²¹. Far from people with contrasting characteristics refusing to listen to each other, young people were found to suggest switching provisional allocations to projects for elderly people; whites and Asians offered support for one another's proposals after hearing why they were needed.

The use of 'Audit to Action' technique, involving bringing police and elected councillors together with the residents of the areas being policed to discuss crime reduction priorities and options, has in many parts of the UK led to closer collaboration between public officials and citizens, and significantly reduced crime and the fear of crime. In Bexley, London, for example, crime fell across the board while the percentage of residents of the neighbourhood in question feeling safe after dark went up from just 22% to 93%. In Birmingham, its deployment in five targeted wards over a fifteen month period reduced crime across those areas by an average of 14%, twice that of other comparator areas, and cut dwelling house burglary by 41%, over three times the rate in other parts of the city²².

The question is no longer if citizens should be enabled to participate in cooperative problem-solving with public policy makers, but which participatory technique should be used in each situation to facilitate it. The Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection reviewed the evidence and concluded that there is "a remarkable consensus among patients, the public and [NHS] trusts on the benefits of effective

¹⁹ A useful summary of UK-wide cases can be found in 'Review of the impact of community engagement within regeneration', the Scottish Government, 2010: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/04/29130243/3>

²⁰ *Getting Citizens Involved*, NAO report, 2004.

²¹ A selection of case studies has been compiled by the Participatory Budgeting Unit: <http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk/case-studies/case-studies>

²² <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmhaff/80/80we33.htm>

engagement - people and communities feel valued and health services provide better care.”²³ This important observation is basically true of all public services – from tenant involvement in housing management to resident participation in neighbourhood improvement²⁴.

Conflict resolution

Although it is sometimes suggested that cooperative problem-solving only works with people who are not divided by serious differences, it actually has an excellent track record in enabling people to resolve their differences. For example, the technique of ‘Planning for Real’ (devised by the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation) has been frequently used to deal with divisive planning issues affecting neighbourhoods. Residents and businesses, who cannot at the outset agree on what they want or oppose in draft plans put forward, are invited by Planning for Real facilitators to build and use a 3-D model of their neighbourhood as a focal point to exchange ideas on their preferences, their reasons, and scope for revisions. The result is a reciprocal, informed give-and-take that gradually enables people who had at the outset taken quite different positions to sign up to a revised plan²⁵.

In cases where the differences have manifested themselves in heated disputes, the technique of Community Conferencing (pioneered by the Thames Valley Police) has been deployed with the help of a trained police facilitator going into an area where residents in a neighbourhood have had serious disagreement with each other. The facilitated discussions enable all concerned to explore possible solutions, consider their implications, and try out mutual commitments to find a way forward²⁶. In most cases the original dispute is displaced by calmer relations. Thames Valley Police invested in the use of the technique because it was far more effective and less costly than alternatives such as repeatedly sending police in to prevent tension from erupting into violent disorder.

Even where differences have passed into deep-seated hostility, cooperative problem-solving has proven to offer a way back for the affected parties. For example, with the help of Restorative Justice, pupils who have committed harmful acts against others in a school have been brought together by a facilitator with those who fear or resent them. They discuss the problem of the damage which has been done and explore how relationships can be restored. Both the perpetrators and victims have a chance to offer solutions. Research found that 93% of these facilitated sessions led to an agreement on what changed behaviour should be adhered to, and in 96% of the cases the agreement were kept²⁷. The problem-solving efficacy of this approach is substantially higher than the conventional techniques of standard punishment such as detention, exclusion from school, or the crude insistence that the perpetrator is to issue an apology. Offences are seldom repeated, and the confidence of all concerned in more relaxed and respectful relations in the future is enhanced.

²³ *National Study of how well healthcare organisations engage local people in planning and improving their services*, the Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection, 2009.

²⁴ See, e.g., *Neighbourhood Management: an overview of the 2003 and 2006 Round 1 Pathfinder Household Surveys*, DCLG, 2006.

²⁵ For more information, see <http://www.planningforreal.org.uk/what-we-do/what-sets-us-apart/>

²⁶ ‘Mending Fences’, a paper on community conferencing, by the Thames Valley Partnership, 2002: www.thamesvalleypartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/mending.pdf

²⁷ Research conducted by the Youth Justice Board in schools which had adopted the practice (2001-2004)

1.6 Learning to Overcome the Obstacles to Cooperation

We have established that it is not unrealistic to pursue cooperative problem-solving since it is in fact a mode of human interaction embedded in our evolutionary growth, and endorsed by moral reflections in all cultures. Far from being an abstract aspiration, it has been developed into a critical communitarian philosophy which sets out what would be required for the proposed form of reciprocal cooperation to be realised. Its practical characteristics, based on its application in diverse fields, have been identified and provide a guide for how it can be promoted and instituted. Its effectiveness and benefits have been widely studied and recorded. The one objection, which may still remain, is that the most serious blockage to cooperative problem-solving – namely, the plutocratic tendency to fuel widening power gaps to enable exploitative relations to trump cooperation – is not going to disappear.

Some amongst the rich and powerful may have the foresight and moral appreciation to see that the corrosively divisive hierarchical arrangements before us need to be drastically altered. Yet the majority appear to favour the status quo, which is not a static position, but a relentless drive to amass more power for the corporate elite so that the rest of the world have to live and work on the terms they set. Their implacable opposition to any major redistribution of power may strike some as an insuperable barrier. On reflection, however, it is the depth of this recalcitrance that leaves no doubt that it is necessary to press for cooperative reforms resolutely.

Throughout history, people who champion progressive changes draw on the understanding and determination they have developed to advance the frontiers of cooperative problem-solving. Anyone with an educative role in teaching, training, or sharing ideas and practices on reciprocal cooperation has, therefore, a vital responsibility to inform and motivate others in:

- Building familiarity and confidence with the cooperative culture
- Organising for power redistribution
- Maintaining vigilance

Building familiarity and confidence with the cooperative culture

The learning environment in schools, universities, or lifelong education establishments should offer regular and well-facilitated opportunities for participants to experience cooperative problem-solving. Most of the techniques that have been mentioned can be applied or adapted so that teacher-learner interactions can help to familiarise those involved with how cooperative problem-solving works and the impact it has. To achieve this, those in charge of educational institutions need to show that they are themselves committed to relating to the teaching staff as well as their students in this manner.

Institutions with a research function need to engage with those who seek to learn from their findings so that the latter can contribute as a cooperative enquirer. The gulf between complex modern life and what we are supposed to believe without question has grown so large that trust in established authority has been eroded by a rise of scepticism against 'experts' in politics, advanced technology, and organisational management. This trend can only be reversed by expertise becoming underpinned by the cooperative involvement of those it is supposed to guide.

In parallel with tackling scepticism about expert findings, it is also necessary to steer the media away from behaviour which breeds cynical distrust, and towards more open and transparent communication with the public. Regulation of journalism, advertising, public relations, art and entertainment will always be a sensitive issue.

But it is no different from recognising, for example, that doctors or engineers should be prevented from, and if necessary, penalised for, passing on unwarranted information, especially with a view to persuade others to act in what on the evidence would be detrimental to them. It is not only possible to identify, but also appropriate to censure, flagrantly false or harmfully misleading information. And instead of invoking some unlimited freedom to deceive, the culture of the media has to shift to a much greater willingness to scrutinise and, where justified, halt the dissemination of lies and distortions which, particularly when backed by the richest corporate machines, can render attempts to find answers cooperatively virtually impossible.

Organising for power redistribution

As we have seen, cooperative problem-solving requires an inclusive structure which accords all those involved equal respect. Many social and organisations systems do not possess such a structure and will persist in tying people down to varying levels of marginalisation within their rigid hierarchies. If this is to change, those who are committed to cooperative problem-solving should help others learn how to devise campaigns, strategies and movements to reform undemocratic institutions or set up new ones with far less divisive and exclusionary arrangements.

Efforts to democratise government bodies often tail off after the basic demand for one person/one vote has been secured. But many citizen groups have increasingly come to see that formal elections separated by long intervals actually give people very little real influence over the development of policies that affect their lives. Government bodies at the national and local levels should be pressed into giving citizens meaningful participatory opportunities so that cooperative problem-solving can proceed. Furthermore, beyond the democratic state, only a minority of organisations such as worker cooperatives and partnerships have complied with the principle of one person/one vote.

The basis for conferring rewards or authority, deciding how much greater they are to be compared with what others will have, and curtailing them should circumstances change, must be critically considered and universally applied. And there has to be a ceiling otherwise unlimited superiority will lead to corruption and distortion of relationships making genuine mutual respect and cooperative problem-solving impossible.

Equally a guaranteed floor level or safety net has to be set to prevent those with the least in society or in an organisation sinking to a level where they are dependent on the mercy of others that they have neither the capacity or confidence to engage with an independent mind in considering what should be pursued for the common good. Contrary to the misguided argument that the safety net should be relentlessly lowered to make people work harder, what would make people work harder are real opportunities to secure better conditions of life. Since power is a relative force, the more resources and influence are to be at the disposal of those higher up in absolute terms, the safety net has to be relatively lifted to avoid it becoming a token gesture.

With the help of organised efforts to press for well-defined reforms, more inclusive decision-making structures can be brought in so that everyone can agree the basis of different rewards and penalties, trust in the consistency of their application, and dedicate themselves to promoting collective success with which they can identify their personal interests. Resistance from those who want to preserve their privileged position is to be expected, but that is why individuals must learn to organise themselves into a common front in demanding the conditions for reciprocal cooperation.

Maintaining vigilance

Without a democratic power structure, it can be difficult to engender cooperation. But without on-going efforts to make sure the structure operates fairly and openly, cooperation will not be sustained. There have been too many examples of citizens losing interest in voting because political representatives have lost touch with them; democratic elections being exploited by anti-democratic groups; mutual enterprises surrendering their core principles when their members are bought off with a bonus; or community organisations losing impetus when they fail to sustain engagement with their activities. The participation in informed deliberations must be vigilantly maintained. As soon as people overlook how decisions affecting them are made without their involvement, the risk of those decisions going against them escalates.

Citizens should learn to watch constantly for any sign that the conditions for reciprocal cooperation are being undermined. The signs may come from individual whistle-blowers or activist investigators, who need to be given encouragement and protection to share their findings. There should be readily accessible collective resources to ensure those with power cannot perpetrate and hide any attempt to take unfair advantage of others in any form.

Detection in turn has to be backed by the appropriate response to secure redress and deterrence. This is relevant to the criminal and civil law, but also to local bylaws, company rules, and standards and procedures established by large federations or neighbourhood groups. Cooperative problem-solving should be applied to both the process for determining what in general would constitute an offence and what would be a suitable penalty, and that for judging the claims and counter-claims relating to any specific case. By its very nature, there can be no *a priori* cooperative guide to what laws and rules there should be in all different circumstances. What is required is a vigilant review of the extent to which existing or proposed processes respect the core requirements of cooperative problem-solving.

1.7 Together We Can

When society is constantly polarised by the aggrandisement of the plutocratic elite, the politics of defiance is not enough. Protest and disruption may provide channels for intense frustration, but ultimately the imbalance of power has to be rectified. In every form of human association, in every sphere of life, any relationship loaded to favour the exploitation of those lower down in the rigged hierarchy must be replaced by one which gives all involved equal respect and operates through cooperative problem-solving. The possibility of this transformation is daily demonstrated by the work of enlightened reformers and cooperative activists.

From small community cooperatives, democratic tenants and residents associations, cooperative schools, through community-led development schemes, cooperative enterprises of all sizes, to statutory based bodies at the local and national levels that have in addition to the relatively remote interactions of electoral democracy built up systematic involvement of citizens in participatory decision-making, there are many examples as we have seen of cooperative problem-solving being mainstreamed into how we organise our lives.

The challenge is to have more of them, more quickly, more intensively established. And to do this, the diverse champions in different sectors should join forces to build up a greater momentum than any they could individually achieve. In a number of localities this has indeed been attempted. At the national level, the British

Government between 2003 and 2010 provided the leadership for one of the most comprehensive examples of a systematic campaign for reciprocal cooperation. The seven-year initiative, taken forward by the Civil Renewal Unit through a nationwide Community Empowerment Delivery Programme, was best known under its campaign title of 'Together We Can'²⁸.

It contained three elements: raise understanding of and interest in good practices; provide support to help targeted groups build their capacity; and put forward policies to facilitate the development of cooperative participation in problem-solving.

First of all, to promote wider understanding of and interest in promoting cooperative relationships, a consistent flow of research findings was channeled to civic leaders, managers, activists in public organisations and community groups. Central Government and the Local Government Association set up the network of Civic Pioneers (local authorities sharing similar objectives). The Councillors Commission was convened to raise awareness of how community participation could strengthen representative democracy. Through the Community Development Foundation, support was given to a wide range of initiatives such as the Regional Empowerment Partnerships in bringing local authorities and their community partners together to make use of the most effective techniques in cooperative problem-solving.

Secondly, to provide support to targeted groups to build their capacity, community organisations were invited as partners in developing and delivering appropriate schemes on the ground. For example, the Participatory Budgeting Unit (part of Church Action on Poverty) was given support to help local authorities and their communities learn how to enable citizens to deliberate together in setting priorities for the use of public funds. A partnership was developed with Housing Justice in setting up Guide Neighbourhoods where residents from different parts of the country could learn from more established neighbourhood groups which had a good track record in involving local people in shaping and improving the public services in their respective localities. The Development Trust Association was enabled to set up the Asset Transfer Unit to help communities take over public buildings when they could add greater value in meeting local needs. A range of community-based partnerships advanced the Active Learning for Active Citizenship (later to be known as 'Take Part') project to help diverse citizens and groups learn how to bring their influence to bear on matters of common concern to them. With Co-operatives UK, the experience of raising community shares to set up community cooperatives was reviewed and shared with others to apply in their own localities.

Finally, to develop government policies and practices to facilitate effective cooperative participation, officials from across government collaborated to learn from each other and maintain the momentum for change. Young people were proactively sought to become involved in the development of integrated children services, employment training, sports-based social inclusion and library design. The Active Citizens in Schools scheme increased the number of pupils taking part in public campaigns and community projects, learning to care about their local communities.

²⁸ The *Together We Can* action plan can be downloaded from <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/151933.pdf>; the annex to the plan is available from <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/152822.pdf>. The context for its development is outlined in Tam, H., 'Rejuvenating Democracy: lessons from a communitarian experiment', *Forum* journal, Volume 53, Number 3, pp.407-420. <http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/academicgroups/equality/forumyouthparticipation/HBTa mRejuvDemocracy.pdf>

More people from diverse backgrounds were encouraged to become magistrates, members of youth referral panels, probation board and police authority members. Innovations in voter registration (such as using young urban artists to drive up the registration of 18-24 year olds) were promoted. Older people and people with disabilities were invited to serve as advisors on government policy development groups. Parental involvement became standard in the development of Sure Start projects (for children). Support was given to engaging local people in 'myth busting' campaigns to tackle racism and misinformation, and to the use of mentors from within communities to work with refugee and build mutual understanding.

Policies introduced to enhance community safety included the rolling out of neighbourhood policing teams with a strong focus on seeking community views; the development of Community Justice Centres with locally based judges who regularly met with local people; the promotion of restorative justice processes to engage offenders with their victims to cut reoffending; and the engagement of local people, families, victims and young people through Targeted Neighbourhood Prevention Programmes in preventing youth crime. While policies relating to health promoted initiatives such as the development of Healthy Communities Collaborative which brought community workers, health professionals and local residents together to work out how to reduce problems such as falls, diabetes, and malnutrition²⁹.

Although there has been no systematic promotion of cooperative problem-solving on the scale of 'Together We Can' since the change of government in the UK in 2010³⁰, the lessons from a multi-sector drive to break down resistance, share effective techniques, and reform conditions unfavourable to reciprocal cooperation remain to be applied. These lessons have one notable common theme: whatever the barriers are to people working together on mutually supportive terms, they can be overturned; and when reciprocal cooperation is put in place in a school, a community, a business, or a democratic government, even the most divisive and seemingly intractable problems can be more effectively dealt with. While the original 'Together We Can' campaign could have achieved progress on an even larger scale had there been more time and resources available, it demonstrated how dedicated advocacy could raise understanding and transform mindset, policies and organisation structures to bring about the conditions for cooperative problem-solving. For those of us who want to make the cooperative way of life a reality for everyone, there is every reason to believe that we can together deliver just such a form of advocacy.

Henry Tam, Cambridge University, 2012

²⁹ For more details on what the *Together We Can* campaign achieved, see <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/151402.pdf>

³⁰ Unlike the 'Together We Can' campaign, the so-called 'Big Society' agenda was primarily an attempt to cloak public sector diminution with pro-community rhetoric. See Tam, H., 'The Big Con: reframing the state-society debate', *PPR Journal*, March-May 2011, Volume 18, Issue 1: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1744-540X.2011.00638.x/pdf>.

Rejuvenating Democracy: Lessons from a Communitarian Experiment

Henry Benedict Tam

Abstract

Democracy has been weakened in the UK by citizens' growing frustration at not being able to shape government decisions in any meaningful way. State actions at the local and national level are at risk of becoming even more influenced by vested private interests. This poses a major challenge to the democratic health of the country. However, something can be done to strengthen collaboration between state and citizens. This article recounts a large scale communitarian experiment conducted by the author as a senior public official in local and central government between 1995 and 2010, with the aim of empowering communities to become real partners in public policy making. It draws out five key lessons to be learnt from the experiment for anyone concerned with rejuvenating democracy in the UK.

Democracy in Decline?

Since political power – the power to make decisions binding on society as a whole – can neither be safely left to an unaccountable few nor feasibly exercised by all citizens on a daily basis, representative democracy has come to be regarded as the most balanced approach to collective governance.

From the storming of the Bastille in 1789 to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, there was an apparent trajectory of arbitrary rulers being increasingly displaced by democratic institutions. But it was precisely when this trend was interpreted by some as the irreversible triumph of democracy, marking the end of political evolution¹, that less sanguine observers began to raise concerns about the weakening of representative democracy itself. In the oldest democratic states such as the UK and the US, the gap between the general public and those elected to public office was widening. Fewer people joined political parties which had hitherto been a key link between ordinary citizens and those they are prepared to vote for. More and more people refused to believe that politicians would act in the interest of society as a whole. In the UK, for example, the proportion of people who felt they had a civic duty to vote fell from 70% in 1991 to 56% in 2010 as more concluded it would not make any difference². The 2005 Citizenship Survey found that only around a fifth of the public believed they had any influence over decisions affecting their country. In that year, more people abstained from voting in the general election (39%) than those who actually voted for the winning party (36%).

Around the late 1980s and early 1990s, a common set of ideas began to gather momentum on both sides of the Atlantic, arguing that representative democracy could only fulfil its core mission of enabling the public to exercise well-informed control over the decision-makers acting on their behalf, if a deeper culture of democracy was cultivated with citizens as members of inclusive communities. The proponents of these ideas were variously described as progressive communitarians or civic republicans, but whatever label was used, we shared three important

¹ For example, Fukuyama, F. *The End of History and the Last Man*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992.

² British Social Attitudes Survey (1991-2010): the 2010 figure for young people was 41%.

features³. First, we upheld the progressive tradition in democratic thought, propounded by the likes of L.T. Hobhouse, Jane Addams, and John Dewey, which maintained that people could not attain a better condition of life unless they cooperated with each other as equal citizens in pursuit of their common good. Secondly, we valued the reduction of income inequalities and spread of community development practices from the early 1960s to the late 1970s as key conditions for sustaining a fair and vibrant democracy, and opposed the relentless marketisation of society that took off in the Thatcher-Regan years, leading to the growing polarisation between the powerful corporate elite and people trapped in low wage, insecurity and unemployment. Thirdly, we advocated concerted civic renewal actions by the state to signal a readiness to welcome and support civic activists in engaging citizens in shaping public policies.

Unfortunately, through the 1990s and 2000s political development has by and large gone in the opposite direction to that favoured by communitarian advocates⁴. With transnational corporate interests becoming ever more dominant (through their funding of political parties, control of commercial media, lobbying of legislators, etc), the need for countervailing forces skyrocketed just when such forces were being substantially diminished. Trade unions had their powers curbed by pro-business governments; political parties converged on making it a key priority to accommodate the demands of the corporate sector; the media (with the few notable exceptions not owned by large business groups), instead of putting a spotlight on unaccountable corporate powers, increasingly focussed on a mixture of celebrity trivia and routine scapegoating of the vulnerable and disadvantaged; local authorities were weakened with their finances tightly restricted by central government.

Consequently, many citizens viewed state institutions as unresponsively remote, and rather than entrusting their wellbeing to political leaders who would not listen to their concerns, they decided that they should rely on their own individual efforts to make it in the only arena which appeared to count – the marketplace. Notably, where the political leadership was most antithetical to a culture of social solidarity – by the mid 1990s, the UK had joined the US in having higher income inequality rates than all other developed countries in Western Europe and North America⁵ – people's attitudes shifted towards a corrosive 'devil take the hindmost' individualism. A higher percentage of Britons and Americans than others in the developed world tend to blame poverty on people's laziness rather than on social injustice⁶. As democratic efficacy came to be increasingly regarded as illusory, people looked upon the state less with hope than with suspicion. Between 2002 and 2007, the proportion of

³ In addition to myself, this group included colleagues such as Benjamin Barber, Robert Bellah, Bernard Crick, Charles Derber, David Donnison, Amitai Etzioni, William Galston, Bill Jordan, David Marquand, Stewart Ranson, Philip Selznick, John Stewart, and William Sullivan.

⁴ I use 'communitarian' as a generic term here for the ideas and practices promoted by the aforementioned thinkers (instead of the somewhat clumsy 'progressive communitarian/civic republican'), though I recognise that the term is not consistently used by academics or policy commentators. A detailed exposition of communitarian thinking is given in Tam, H. *Communitarianism: a new agenda for politics and citizenship*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998. The application of these ideas to a range of political issues is illustrated with contributions from European and American theorists in Tam, H. (ed.) *Progressive Politics in the Global Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001. More recently, similar ideas have been put forward under the term 'republican democracy' in White, S. and Leighton, D. (ed.) *Building a Citizen Society: the emerging politics of republican democracy*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2008.

⁵ Luxembourg Income Study. www.lisproject.org, 9 June 2003.

⁶ According to the 2001 Eurobarometer poll, 23% in the UK believe that people live in want because they are lazy or lack will power, while the 1995-97 World Values Survey found 61% in the US subscribing to a similar view.

people in the UK who believed the government has too much control went up from 54% to 64%⁷.

It is not surprising that the British Conservative's Big Society rhetoric and the American Republican Tea Party champions should exploit these trends and propose to deal with the insufficiently democratic state by shrinking it to the point where it is little more than a servile aide to corporate interests⁸. However, the communitarian case for rejuvenating democracy still stands, and instead of allowing democracy to weaken further, thus giving way to total plutocratic rule, we should consider what lessons can be learnt from a communitarian experiment which achieved significant impact in the areas where it was carried out.

A Communitarian Experiment in Rejuvenating Democracy (1995-2010)

In the early 1990s, in addition to writing on communitarian ideas, I was also working as a chief officer in local government. It occurred to me that if I could secure the support of a political leader, at the local or national level, I would be in a position to develop and implement a communitarian programme of democratic renewal. At the time, most people in public office either did not consider the democratic deficit as a significant issue worthy of priority attention, or they regarded civic disengagement as an unavoidable feature of modern complex society which could not in any case be reversed. If the problem was to be tackled, it needed a strategic response backed by political will at the highest level. As it turned out, I was able to obtain the necessary support: first, at the local level from 1995 to 1999 with the Labour administration at St Edmundsbury Borough Council; and then at the national level from 2000 to 2010 with the Labour Government in the UK.

This communitarian experiment – which for the first time brought political and theoretical concerns with democratic renewal together in a coordinated public policy programme – was designed to test out if citizens could attain greater democratic influence and satisfaction with collective actions through the state as a result of three related strands of work. First, people were to be given the encouragement and support to deliberate as fellow citizens and put forward their views on public policy priorities affecting them. This must be distinguished from the unreflective feedback through basic surveys and focus groups, which drew on uninformed opinions and prejudices rather than what people would think after due consideration of others' as well as their own needs. Secondly, community groups were to be assisted in developing their vital role as hubs and facilitators in bringing people from diverse backgrounds together to exchange views, assess challenges, and organise for actions. This should not be confused with the common focus on promoting volunteering or commissioning voluntary organisations to deliver public services. The emphasis here is on communities engendering common goals to be pursued in partnership with, not in isolation from or merely as a contractor of, the public sector. Finally, public servants were to undergo a culture change whereby the people they serve are not treated as supplicants or customers, but above all as citizens whose informed views should ultimately shape public action. This contrasted strongly with what often passed as 'public service reforms' which sought to alter public services as

⁷ Figures taken from the Pew Global Attitudes Survey (2007). Significantly the corresponding figures for Germany, for so long a model social democratic state, went up from 61% to 74%. This coincided with the plutocratic push to marketise German society following reunification. According to a report in the Guardian (9 August 2011), 2 million German workers are now paid an hourly rate below that of the British minimum wage.

⁸ See Tam, H. B., 'The Big Con: reframing the state-society debate', in *PPR* journal, March-May 2011, Volume 18, Issue 1; it can be accessed via: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291744-540X>.

determined by professional experts and present the results as improvements to the public. Community-orientated public services would enable civic-minded citizens to have a real say in their prioritisation and development.

In the next section I will outline what the experiment involved, and I will draw together the key lessons in the final section. Before I do, it would be useful to set out the circumstances under which it became possible to take the experiment forward.

The first phase took off when the Labour Group won control of St Edmundsbury Borough Council in the 1995 local elections. Not only was the new council leader, Councillor Gerry Kiernan, attracted to communitarian ideas, his political team included many who were well-disposed to the agenda of democratic renewal. As the chief officer responsible for community and corporate development, I thus had the opportunity to work directly with the council leader to turn our communitarian aspirations into a practical programme. The programme, 'Working with Communities', was sustained over the council's four-year term (1995-1999) and, as we will see, had a transformative effect across the borough. In 1998, a review of the programme⁹ was published during the country's annual Local Democracy Week along with the announcement of it as the most comprehensive approach to democratic community involvement in England. A year later, in 1999, it won the Best Practice Award for engaging young citizens from the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair.

The second phase began in 2000 when I moved to central government where, following Labour's electoral success in 1997, a number of disparate policies relating to community and civic engagement had been initiated in different departments but did not operate as one joined-up programme. I initially worked as a director for community safety and regeneration to bring overall coherence to the initiatives across the East of England region, demonstrating how a better connected approach could give communities greater control and confidence in securing the public outcomes they sought. Then in 2003, the opportunity arose for devising a nationwide strategy when the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, was looking to launch a programme for Civil Renewal, to be taken forward by the government and its partners for the whole of England. I was appointed Head of Civil Renewal, and worked with Mr. Blunkett and a number of other Ministers¹⁰ in devising the 'Together We Can' action plan for rejuvenating democracy¹¹. In 2006, the lead responsibility for the programme was transferred to the newly formed Department for Communities and Local Government, and I continued to steer its delivery until 2010¹². The achievements and limitations of this evolving programme inform the key lessons I will be drawing out in the final section.

What the Experiment involved

⁹ *Working with Communities*, published by St Edmundsbury Borough Council, 1998.

¹⁰ These included Hazel Blears, Fiona Mactaggart, and Kay Andrews.

¹¹ *Together We Can: people and government working together to make life better*, the government action plan, published by the Civil Renewal Unit on behalf of HM Government 2005; and *Together We Can: Annual Review 2005/06*, published by the Civil Renewal Unit on behalf of HM Government 2006.

¹² The Conservative-led Coalition Government drastically cut Labour's previous commitments to empower communities down to a very small number of initiatives and labelled the rump its 'Big Society' programme. Apart from the difference in scale, it should be noted that whereas civil renewal was concerned with strengthening the democratic partnership between state and citizens to act together, 'Big Society' is largely about leaving social problems to volunteers and under-funded community groups to sort out by themselves.

The experiment involved four elements. The first, implemented during the initial local government phase, was to demonstrate how a locally elected council could provide the community leadership to cultivate a more collaborative relationship between citizens and democratic institutions serving their interests. All the leading councillors spoke consistently of their commitment to work with communities, and built public engagement into all aspects of policy development.

Instead of calling for public meetings which were of little interest to people, or simply responding to the lobbying of the most vocal groups, St Edmundsbury Borough Council reached out to all groups and adopted the most productive means of engagement with each to address what concerned them most. Youth workers played a major part in working with young people in improving local facilities, enhancing community safety, raising interest in civic participation through video projects in schools, and developing projects such as the Cangle Foyer to meet the housing needs of young people. Although the Borough did not have many areas with widespread poverty, it contained pockets of high deprivation which suffered particularly from the alienation of being surrounded by much more prosperous neighbourhoods. In one town with above average unemployment, a community-based partnership brought young and old people together to identify regeneration priorities which over time boosted economic development and social cohesion. The council, the police and neighbourhood representatives considered how to target public resources on problems based on shared evidence. Contested development or traffic management proposals were resolved with deliberative techniques such as Planning for Real¹³. Community groups were given support through access to public buildings¹⁴, long term investment, and information networks to develop their capacity to help local people work together to anticipate and respond to local problems. Key public information was routinely provided in an interesting form (for example, through the award winning council newspaper, *St Edmundsbury Times*) to local people, and opportunities to give feedback were given via ward members, public service points as well as the web. The good communication between citizens and the council helped to shape new initiatives from public drinking byelaws to the development of pioneering recycling policies.

The next phase of the experiment built on the success of St Edmundsbury and a number of other councils, which had effectively strengthened community engagement in one or more policy areas, to promote the wider development and adoption of such practices nationally¹⁵. This in turn contained three elements: raise understanding of and interest in good practices; provide support to help targeted groups build their capacity; and develop government policies and practices to facilitate democratic engagement. I will outline some of the changes brought in under each of these elements.

To promote wider understanding of and interest in renewing state-citizens relationship, a consistent flow of political encouragement and research findings was channeled to leaders, managers, activists in public organisations and community

¹³ Planning for Real was a technique developed by the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation to bring people in any given neighbourhood together to make a 3-D model of their locality, which then serves as a focal point for people to express and consider their respective priorities before moving towards a shared understanding of what development should or should not go ahead. It was one of a range of techniques used by the Borough Council.

¹⁴ The transfer of Borough property to community groups was also pioneered, setting an example for the work I later promoted on a national scale.

¹⁵ Some of these ideas were set out in Stewart, J. and Tam, H. *Putting Citizens First: how to develop more citizen-focused local government*, published by Municipal Journal Ltd on behalf of SOLACE (Society for Local Authority Chief Executives), 1997.

groups. Support for the civil renewal agenda was reiterated by not only the lead Secretary of State, but the Secretaries of State of other Government Departments, through regular publications and both national and regional events involving community groups. We worked with the Local Government Association, set up the network of Civic Pioneers (local authorities volunteering to help promote our shared agenda), and convened the Councillors Commission, to raise awareness of how community participation could strengthen representative democracy. With the help of the Citizenship Survey, the Active Citizenship Research Centre, and systematic policy reviews, we disseminated information on socio-political trends, and the approach and impact of practices such as neighbourhood management. We also invested in the Community Development Foundation, which supported a wide range of initiatives such as the Regional Empowerment Partnerships in bringing local authorities and their community partners together to make use of the most effective techniques in citizen involvement.

To provide support to targeted groups to build their capacity, community organisations were invited as partners in developing and delivering appropriate schemes on the ground. For example, we worked with the Participatory Budgeting Unit (part of Church Action on Poverty) to help local authorities and their communities learn how to use participatory budgeting (a technique invented for community engagement in poor areas in Brazil) to enable citizens to deliberate together in setting priorities for the use of public funds. We collaborated with Housing Justice in setting up Guide Neighbourhoods where residents from different parts of the country could learn from more established neighbourhood groups which had a good track record in shaping and improving the public services in their respective localities. We enabled the Development Trust Association to set up the Asset Transfer Unit to help communities take over public buildings when they could add greater value in meeting local needs. Through a range of community-based partnerships we advanced the Active Learning for Active Citizenship (later to be known as 'Take Part') project to help diverse citizens and groups learn how to bring their influence to bear on civic matters.

Finally, to develop government policies and practices to facilitate democratic engagement, we established a cross-government group to share learning and maintain the momentum for change. Young people were proactively sought to become involved in the development of integrated children services, employment training, sports-based social inclusion and library design. The Active Citizens in Schools scheme increased the number of pupils taking part in public campaigns and community projects, learning to care about their local communities. More people from diverse backgrounds were effectively encouraged to become magistrates, members of youth referral panels, probation board and police authority members. Innovations in voter registration (such as using young urban artists to drive up the registration of 18-24 year olds) were promoted. Older people and people with disabilities were invited to serve as advisors on government policy development groups. Local authorities were given incentives to engage local people more widely and effectively in neighbourhood and parish plans, spatial planning framework, and Home Zones (for residential street design). Extended schools were developed to draw the wider community into activities utilising school facilities. Parental involvement became standard in the development of Sure Start projects (for children). Support was given to engaging local people in 'myth busting' campaigns to tackle racism and misinformation, and to the use of mentors from within communities to work with refugee and build mutual understanding.

Policies introduced to enhance community safety included the rolling out of neighbourhood policing teams with a strong focus on seeking community views; the development of Community Justice Centres with locally based judges who regularly

met with local people; the promotion of restorative justice processes to engage offenders with their victims to cut reoffending; the involvement of communities in prioritising local environmental projects for offenders to carry out; and the engagement of local people, families, victims and young people through Targeted Neighbourhood Prevention Programmes in preventing youth crime. While policies relating to health covered initiatives such as the Communities for Health programme enabling local people to set health promotion priorities; the development of Healthy Communities Collaborative to bring community workers, health professionals and local residents together to reduce problems such as falls, diabetes, and malnutrition; the involvement of people with mental health problems and their families in raising service providers' understanding of stigma and where improvements were most needed; and the devolution of greater power to local NHS trusts.

Key Lessons for the Future

We can see that from what has been outlined above, the communitarian experiment in question took place on a much larger scale and across a far longer period of time than many of the ad hoc projects relating to democratic or community engagement that are taking place currently or appeared for just two or three years in the recent past. Although this makes it more difficult to sum up what the wide range of activities had collectively achieved, a number of lessons can still be drawn from it to inform how policy makers and community leaders can rejuvenate democracy in the face of civic disengagement and community fragmentation. In this final section, I will draw out five key lessons in response to the five questions most likely to be raised:

- Do people really want to be involved?
- Is it really worth involving them?
- Have we got a formula for democratic community engagement?
- Why not just leave it to people to deal with their problems locally?
- What is most needed to renew democracy?

Lesson 1: the involvement people want

Terms such as 'involvement', 'engagement', 'participation' are often used interchangeably and yet with widely varying meanings, denoting activities from giving one's opinions, taking part in decision making, to volunteering, being a member of a community group, or simply engaging in sporting activities. And publications, which quote widely different figures with conflicting definitions, only confuse matters further. What we have learnt is that people want different levels of involvement in affecting public decisions and actions depending on their own civic interest and their perception of how effective their involvement would be in making a difference. Often around 10% of the adult population are found to have a strong interest in being directly involved in advising/making decisions as lay members of public bodies (i.e., not as appointed members of staff); 20-30% would be interested in participating in community groups/forums provided (but the figures vary depending on the track record of those bodies in influencing public decisions); 60% or more would like to have relevant government proposals explained to them and given the opportunity to express their views if they so wish when the issues arise, and not just at the time of elections; and the vast majority (80-90%) are against the suggestion that those in charge of government institutions can be left to make decisions without seeking what people think (corresponding roughly to the figures for those registered to vote)¹⁶.

¹⁶ These figures are based on my own interpretations as arithmetical averages are impossible to calculate without a common definition in different research reports published over the years.

While the Labour Government up until 2010 promoted effective engagement with a few million people, many in the most deprived areas, it did not reach enough of the country's overall population, and critically, there were insufficient resources to ensure that the involvement opportunities created were always of the right kind to meet citizens' needs (see Lesson 3 below).

Lesson 2: the value of involvement

In local government, the expenditure relating to elected councillors (their elections, meetings, etc) was recorded as 'the cost of democracy'. But there was never a corresponding column for 'the benefit of democracy'. There is a similarly one-sided account of the role of democracy at the national level. We are reminded of the costs of MPs and Ministers, but not the value they add to what would otherwise be a technocracy of self-appointed experts on how the country should be run.

What the communitarian experiment revealed was that the value of democratic involvement was considerable in social, political and economic terms, and it was invariably underestimated or overlooked completely. Examples abound of how well executed engagement processes led to greater benefits¹⁷: Birmingham City Council's community involvement initiative for safer neighbourhoods led to a reduction of 14% in all crime in the project areas compared with a 7% drop in other comparator areas in the city; with youth crime reducing by 29% compared with a 12% drop elsewhere; and achieved a saving of £6,406,000 for an investment of £600,000 after just one year of operation. In the East of England, 231 communities developed plans in partnership with public bodies, setting out over 9,000 individual actions to improve their locality; 47% of these actions were taken forward by the communities themselves with the remaining 34% carried out by public service providers. Portsmouth City Council closely involved local communities in its £9 million Copnor Bridge project, and was able to complete it one month early, minimise traffic disruption, and achieve a 10% savings on the budget.

What is found in these and numerous other examples is that where people are given meaningful opportunities to reflect and contribute their views on the development of public actions, there is a good chance it would lead to more satisfactory and cost-efficient outcomes. As for whether inequalities in society mean that the poor and marginalised would lose out through possessing less capacity to be involved, experience has shown that inclusive engagement could provide the opportunities and support to all citizens, especially those who might otherwise be unable to get themselves heard, and ensure their views have a bearing on what their public bodies do as a result. Inequalities could certainly be a barrier if ignored, but it would be erroneous to suppose that engagement would be futile until inequalities have been eradicated. Indeed extensive democratic community engagement is an important means to build collective support for tackling inequalities¹⁸.

The spread of neighbourhood management practices, particularly in deprived areas, led to higher levels of satisfaction with the police, street cleaning and the local area

¹⁷ Examples are taken from 'Empowerment delivers more efficient outcomes' the annex to *Community spirit in a cold climate*, published by the Department for Communities & Local Government, 2009.

¹⁸ Effective democratic engagement can pave the way for reducing inequalities provided, as Lesson 4 explains, the political will is there. Nonetheless, power inequalities are highly damaging for society and should be drastically reduced through all forms of social and political action. See Tam, H., *Against Power Inequalities: reflections on the struggle for inclusive communities*, Birkbeck, London University, 2010. Available as a free download from the Equality Trust:

<http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resources/against-power-inequalities>

as a place to live¹⁹. More widely, the impact of engaging communities in shaping public actions were found in all policy areas: cut in reoffending rates, reduction in use of hospital emergency services, consensus building through collective deliberations, raising education attainment, boosting local economic development, higher tenant satisfaction with housing management, and increased trust and confidence in public bodies²⁰.

Lesson 3: the approach to engagement most likely to work

Building democratic relations is more akin to education than medicine. The tendency amongst some politicians and officials to ask for a standard treatment to be dispensed is unhelpful when what is needed is a commitment to cultivate the conditions for active learning. These conditions will vary according to the different circumstances prevailing in different communities. What the communitarian experiment helped to engender is a substantial output of materials on democratic community engagement²¹. Drawing from their findings, the broad outline of a reliable approach can be sketched out.

Engagement should begin with people being given structured opportunities to talk about the things that most concern them. The identification of concerns should be followed by facilitated discussions so people can, under conditions of courtesy and reasonableness, ask each other and invited experts questions to examine the real causes of the problems they face. Participants should be enabled to share any proposal with others, while options put forward can be challenged on grounds of effectiveness, feasibility, and relative priority compared with options for tackling other problems. There should then be a transparent process for agreeing the priority actions to be taken with those present signing up to commitments in return for the outcomes they now jointly seek to pursue. Feedback is to be provided on the implementation of the agreed actions and impact made, including any obstacles encountered in taking the actions forward. Finally, the effects of the agreed plan of action are to be kept under review with further action developed under similar deliberative conditions to attain the agreed objectives.

Conversely, any attempt that goes against the key ingredients of this approach (e.g., meetings with no clear agenda; talking at but not seriously listening; failing to explain parameters or providing proper facilitation of discussions; allowing agitated voices to dominate without room for respectful deliberations; not identifying agreed actions; not giving feedback on progress; breaking off communications arbitrarily) would very likely deliver nothing except alienating the communities in question even more.

Lesson 4: the partnership between state and citizens must be strengthened

Partnerships between state and citizens are not easy to build. It requires patience, skills and considerable emotional intelligence. If the initial level of trust is already

¹⁹ *Neighbourhood Management: An overview of the 2003 and 2006 Round 1 Pathfinder Household Surveys*, Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006.

²⁰ See, for example, Rogers, B. and Robinson, E. *The Benefits of Community Engagement: a review of the evidence*, published by the Active Citizenship Centre on behalf of the Home Office, 2004.

²¹ See, for example, *People & Participation: how to put citizens at the heart of decision-making*, published by Involve (based on research funded by the Home Office Civil Renewal Unit), 2005; Pitchford, M., Archer, T. and Ramsden, S. *The Duty to Involve: Making it Work*, London: Community Development Foundation, 2009; Gardiner, T., *Community Engagement and Empowerment: a guide for councillors*, London: IDeA (part of the LGA), 2010. A wide range of freely downloadable resources are also available from the National Empowerment Partnership/Community Development Foundation at <http://www.cdf.org.uk/web/guest/nep>.

low, and the grasp of appropriate techniques poor, then the challenge is going to be tough. But for that very reason it must be met with dedication and a readiness to learn – from those with engagement experience and the communities concerned. Unfortunately, in addition to the risk of those in government shutting people out from their decisions, there is now a growing danger with the Conservative-led coalition government simply passing the buck to communities.

Instead of following the ethos of 'Working with Communities' and 'Together We Can', the post-2010 UK Government has adopted more of a 'Leave Communities to it' approach. Its 'Localist' agenda has been widely criticised for its incoherence – leaving local communities to shoulder the responsibilities for tackling public problems, but cutting their funding, preventing them from raising their own revenue, and arbitrarily telling them how to run their waste management, or stopping them produce local newspapers to raise public awareness of key issues. Proponents of subsidiarity have always argued that where decisions can be more effectively taken at a level closer to communities, they should be passed to that level. However, not all decisions, especially those involving equity of resource distribution or requiring substantial collective capacity, can be made or carried out effectively by individuals in any given neighbourhood.

Politicians should work with communities to establish a framework for assessing what can be left to individual citizens and community groups operating on their own, what can be entrusted to local authorities and local people working in partnership, and what has to be the shared responsibility of central and local government, and the communities they both serve²². Attempts to pass endless social and economic burdens to individuals who cannot cope without collective political support, are nothing more than an abdication of democratic responsibility. To do it under the pretense of building a 'big society' insults our civic intelligence, and betrays the citizenry who had assumed the state was there to serve them.

Lesson 5: the key to successful democratic renewal

In conclusion, bearing in mind the aforementioned lessons, what holds the key to successful democratic renewal is civic leadership. For those who stress the importance of having a groundswell of active citizens in sustaining democratic vibrancy, this might sound paradoxical. But whether it is widespread sceptical disengagement from public bodies or mass protest degenerating into mindless violence, the pitfalls of random public action/inaction can only be avoided if there is dedicated energy in organising and sustaining the pursuit of inspiringly articulated goals. Where the communitarian experiment achieved notable results it was always with the drive of committed civic-minded leaders.

At the political level, without council leaders or government ministers who understand the value of democratic renewal and are determined to press for communitarian actions to engage communities more widely and effectively, time and resources would be diverted to other issues. I have seen how a lack of interest in, let alone hostility to, community empowerment amongst political leaders blocks any significant development, or in cases where progress had been made by their predecessors, rapidly puts an end to any prospect of further work. Within organisations, having senior officials or chief officers who grasp the importance of democratic renewal and

²² And indeed what has to involve higher level jurisdiction at the European or international level. An outline of how devolution to the local level could be advanced while retaining the key role of the central state in matters only it can handle effectively in partnership with communities can be found in Tam, H., 'The Community Roots of Citizenship', in Crick, B. (ed) *Citizens: Towards a Citizenship Culture*, London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001.

who would provide the leadership to steer institutional and policy changes is also vital. Otherwise, at best you have officials who carry out the letter of political instructions without exploring how to maximise their impact in accordance with the spirit behind them, or at worst the political will would be frustrated by cynics who cannot wait for an opportunity to jettison what they believe to be a waste of time and resources since, for them, communities can never know better than public officials.

Last and certainly not least, within communities themselves, effective leaders who can combine outreach and listening skills with the ability to bring people together under a banner of common objectives are indispensable. This is not to say that community leaders who have held their positions for many years are automatically the ones to help make democratic renewal possible. Some of them, with an entrenched disposition to ignore the views of others, are more of an obstacle. But one of the most common causes of failure for communities to attain a coherent influence over public policies affecting them is the absence of inclusive leaders who are able to speak for their communities, not by imposing their priorities on them, but by enabling them to articulate and unite behind a set of genuinely shared goals.

Such leaders – political, organisational, community – do not come from any exclusive background. A commitment to democratic values can be nurtured, and the ability to play a leading role in improving community engagement can be learnt. Developing the next generation of politicians, public servants and civic activists so they acquire the leadership skills needed to help close the gap between state and citizens is undoubtedly one of the most crucial factors in rejuvenating democracy²³.

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²³ Materials relating to civic leadership can be accessed at the Take Part website (developed with the support of the Civil Renewal Unit): www.takepart.org. See also Tam, H., 'Democratic Participation and Learning Leadership', paper commissioned for the EEA funded project *Civic Participation: Diagnosing Barriers and Creating Tools Upgrading Good Governance* (led by the Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Warsaw, Poland). The paper can be downloaded from: www.is.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/Tam_paper_English.doc