

**ARTICLE**

**Sustainability in community organizing: lessons from the Community Organisers Programme in England (2011 – 2015)**

**Andie Reynolds & Lucy Grimshaw**

Department of Social Work

Education and Community Wellbeing,

Northumbria University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK.

Correspondence to: andie.reynolds@northumbria.ac.uk



This article presents findings from an impact evaluation case study of the UK Coalition government’s Community Organisers Programme (2011-2015). Whilst the program achieved some of its objectives, case study participants raised concerns of how sustainability was understood and practised. Five elements undermined the program’s sustainability: (i) a weak definition of sustainability; (ii) the short duration of the training contract; (iii) an over-emphasis on autonomy; (iv) insufficient training and support for volunteer community organizers, and (v) a lack of progression opportunities. The article concludes the lack of conceptualization of sustainability within the program, and the Coalition government’s commitment to austerity, enfeebled a trailblazing experimentation with state-funded community organizing.

**Introduction**

This article assesses the ambiguous use of sustainability throughout the Community Organisers Programme (COP) (2011-2015) in England, which was introduced by the UK Coalition government (2010-2015). On May 12<sup>th</sup> 2010, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats formed a coalition government.

This followed a hung parliament general election result five days earlier. They quickly announced a program of public sector reform and austerity to reduce the 10% deficit they inherited from the 2007/8 financial crisis (Taylor-Gooby & Stoker, 2011). Prior to the election, the Conservative Party leader was delivering speeches about the need to reduce big

government by creating a Big Society (Cameron, 2009). This became a significant policy driver for the COP. Big Society was introduced as the antithesis of the previous New Labour government's 'excessive' public spending, bureaucracy and unwelcome interference (Alcock, 2010). Big Society offered citizens, communities, the voluntary and community sector (VCS), and the private sector more opportunities to run British public services without excessive red tape (Alcock, 2010; Cabinet Office, 2010a). Three policy offshoots - social action, localism and social enterprise - germinated from this overarching policy agenda (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2013; Dean, 2013; Thornham, 2015). The Localism Act 2011 assisted communities, the VCS and the private sector "...to take over public services, community assets and influence planning and development" (My Community, 2012, p. 1; Featherstone *et al.*, 2013). Thus, public sector, VCS and private sector professionals, and voluntary groups could legitimately 'bid' to take over council assets - including community youth and children's centres - and galvanize social action to run them as social enterprises. Social action was defined as: "... people giving what they have, be that their time, their money or their assets, knowledge and skills, to support good causes and make life better for all" (Cabinet Office, 2010b, p. 4).

The adoption of austerity as the Coalition government's principal economic strategy steered these agendas. Austerity proposed £81 billion in spending cuts over five years, with £53 million cut from government departments and local

government budgets alone (Clayton *et al.*, 2016). This resulted in the closure of two hundred and eighty-five public bodies, including the Community Development Foundation and the Sustainable Development Commission. The previous New Labour administration set-up, and funded, both to independently monitor and advise UK governments on their progress in community and sustainable development (Levitt, 2015; SDC, 2010). In 2011, the Coalition government assigned the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to mainstream sustainable development and embed it "at the heart of each Government department" (Cabinet Office, 2011b, p. 3) whilst also reducing DEFRA's budget by 30% (Wheeler, 2015).

The Department of Communities and Local Government was the hardest-hit department with its budget slashed by 51% over the five-year span. This resulted in local governments in England making one-third to one-half of its public sector workers redundant (Bailey *et al.*, 2015; Wheeler, 2015). Local government cuts also affected funding available to the VCS, ensuing unprecedented losses in community development and community work infrastructures in both sectors (Clayton *et al.*, 2016; Lowndes & McCaughie, 2013). In response, the Coalition government invested over £40 million in volunteering and social action projects, with half allocated to the COP (Cabinet Office, 2013; Fisher & Dimberg, 2016).

This article presents findings from a case study of the COP in one local

authority in England. It concludes that the program's weak conceptualization of sustainability – driven by the Coalition government's unwavering commitment to austerity and public sector cuts - compromised its impact and legacy. To achieve this, this article divides into five sections. The first introduces the COP, its objectives, methodology and understanding of sustainability. The second presents an overview of how sustainability and sustainable development came to underpin community organizing and development methodologies. The third then discusses our methodology. The fourth section presents the findings and argues that five elements of the COP undermined how sustainability was understood and practised. The final section concludes that the COP's problematic interpretation of sustainability – driven by the Coalition government's pledge to austerity - enfeebled a trailblazing experimentation with state-funded community organizing.

### *The Community Organisers Programme (2011-2015)*

The £20 million state-funded COP set out to train 5,000 community organisers over four years. Five hundred paid, trainee community organisers (TCOs) were trained for fifty-one weeks and were tasked to recruit and train 4,500 volunteer community organisers (VCOs). In 2011, two national civil society organizations working in partnership were commissioned to deliver the program. *Locality* led and managed it whilst *RE:generate* delivered the training.

*RE:generate's* training had yet to be tested on such a large scale (*Imagine*, 2014; 2015a). TCOs were based in local VCS organisations known as host organisations, and allocated to small geographical 'patches' in low income neighbourhoods in England (*Cameron et al*, 2015). Their aim was to work "...closely with communities to identify local leaders, projects and opportunities, and empower the local community to improve their local area" (*Cabinet Office*, 2011a, np).

The COP's methodology fused the works of Saul Alinsky, Paulo Freire, Edward Chambers and Clodomir Santos de Moraes who set out to resist and challenge state authority and power. This was trailblazing for a national, state-funded program (*Fisher & Dimberg*, 2016). The COP also incorporated "...long traditions of English radicalism and self-help" (*Locality*, 2010, p. 2). Although community organizing is traditionally associated with the left, it has a range of theoretical underpinnings and practices across the political spectrum (*Fisher and DeFilippis*, 2015). Posthumously, *Fisher & Dimberg* (2016, p. 100) have labelled the COP the "moderate middle" of community organizing methodologies and strategies.

The COP's objective was to support the delivery of Big Society and localism through working directly with local people to help raise community spirit; encourage local community action; promote indigenous leadership in local communities; create new, locally-run community groups and social enterprises; and inspire democratic and social change (*Locality*, 2010). To achieve this, *Locality*

set the TCOs four targets to complete in fifty-one weeks. First, to listen to at least five-hundred people in their patch on doorsteps. Second, to recruit at least nine VCOs. Third, to co-produce with local residents three to five community projects.

Fourth, to establish community holding teams of VCS organizations and other local leaders to listen, research, plan and take coordinated action (Cameron *et al.*, 2015). Locality also set nine impact indicators to assess each TCO's impact in their patch.

**Figure 1** Nine impact indicators for the Community Organisers Programme

1. *Individual possibility* – moving individuals from apathy to agency, and building a sense of possibility
2. *Early wins* – early wins that inspire and invigorate
3. *Community spirit* – sense of community spirit, coming together and overcoming isolation
4. *Activating networks* – using the network to solve problems, either one-to-one connections or by mobilizing numbers
5. *Neighborhood housework* – extending the tidying up and caring work that goes on in households into the wider neighborhood
6. *Influencing decisions* – influencing decisions about resources and plans for the neighbourhood
7. *Assets and services* – community takeover of assets and services
8. *Enterprise* – starting up new businesses, services and projects
9. *Democracy* – inspiring and transforming democracy

(Locality, 2014, p.1)

Engagement with sustainability is not explicit in these indicators. This is surprising due to the Coalition government's vow to stimulate sustainable development (Cabinet Office, 2011b) and a prominent COP figure claiming community organizing "... is necessary to the long term sustainability of our neighbourhoods" (Gardham, 2015, np). The Coalition government defined sustainable development as "stimulating economic growth and tackling the deficit, maximising wellbeing and protecting our environment, without negatively impacting on the ability

of future generations to do the same" (Cabinet Office, 2011b, p. 2). Reflecting the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental, the Coalition government argued these pillars should not "be undertaken in isolation because they are mutually dependent" (ibid). Arguably, impact indicators 3, 4 and 9 could be included under the social pillar, which includes civic and political activity (Cabinet Office, 2007; 2011b); 7 and 8 under the economic pillar, and 5 under the environmental pillar. But, this is not explicit in national policy

documents discussing the COP nor materials released by Locality and RE:generate. There is also no clear definition of sustainability or how the COP understood sustainable development. This article now turns to explore conceptualizations of sustainability that underpin community organizing methodologies.

### **Sustainability, Sustainable Development and Community Organizing**

In the US, UK and beyond, increasing numbers of community development and organizing bodies support the three pillars of sustainable development model by demanding that "...all development should be inherently sustainable, that is, seeing economic and social development within an environmental framework that conserves resources and is carbon neutral" (Beck & Purcell, 2012, p. 24). This coincides with appeals for social and environmental justice to underlie community organizing and development strategies (cf. Beck & Purcell, 2013; Ife, 2016; Ledwith, 2016). Community organizing's growing interest in sustainability, sustainable development and environmental justice stems from both the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Beck & Purcell, 2013; Blewitt, 2015). Introduced in 2000, the MDGs were eight international development goals proposing to "improve the health, nutrition, and well-being of some of the 1.2 billion humans who live on less than the equivalent of a dollar a day"

(Nelson, 2007, p. 2041). In 2015, these were superseded by the SDGs which placed further emphasis on environmental sustainability through supporting more participatory and sustainable models of development on a global scale (Ziai, 2016). Both goals have been endorsed by the UN, The World Bank and at least 193 governments worldwide (Nelson, 2007; Ziai, 2016).

Before the arrival of the MDGs, environmental sustainability and sustainable development were mainly practised separately in community development and organizing methodologies. Throughout the 1940s and 50s, both US community organizing and UK community development aimed to create empowered and sustainable communities through professionals cultivating indigenous community capacity and leadership skills (Alinsky, 1989; Miller & Ahmad, 1997). Thus, both community organizers and development workers were tasked "to work themselves out of a job" (Miller & Ahmad, 1997, p. 275; Alinsky, 1989) through fostering indigenous leadership and capacity in communities until professionals were no longer required. Community organizer Saul Alinsky (1989) criticized 'do-gooders', public administration workers and charities who remained in community leadership roles for years. Established by Alinsky in 1940, the US community organizing network, also known as the *Industrial Areas Foundation*, advocated a golden rule: "no one should ever do things for people that they can do for themselves" (Pyles, 2014, p. 79). Inherent within this

statement is a debate about capacity in communities for leadership; specifically, who already has it and who can develop it. UK community development echoed this through its explicit commitment to community capacity building (cf. Batten, 2008; Mayo, 2008). Banks (2011, p. 6) defines capacity building as “the promotion of self-help and participation in civic life on the part of residents in local neighbourhoods.” In the 1990s, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) adopted capacity building as their principal development strategy and, in conjunction with The World Bank, strove to create active, entrepreneurial and self-reliant citizens that participate in public life (UNDP, 1993; Ziai, 2016). Both community organizing and community development methodologies became more mainstream in the majority and minority worlds to build-up community capacity to cultivate indigenous leadership and self-reliant citizens that participate in civic life. This remained a shared definition of sustainable development in mainstream community development and organizing until the MDGs and SDGs in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Beck & Purcell, 2013; Ife, 2016).

Although a focus on environmental sustainability and its benefits for local communities is not new to community development or organizing (cf. Blewitt, 2008; Downie & Elrick, 2000; Fisher, 1994),

was never a dominant paradigm prior to the SDGs (Beck & Purcell, 2013; Ife, 2016).

Yet, in 1987, the Brundtland Report identified “environmental justice and social deprivation as very real problems for many communities” (Blewitt, 2015, p. 113). The Rio Earth Summit followed in 1992 and released Agenda 21, also known as the *Earth Action Plan*. This asserted that local people and communities were core to achieve environmental sustainability, and needed to “foster a sense of personal environmental responsibility and greater motivation and commitment towards sustainable development” (UNCED, 1992, p. 267). Due to their shared principle of fostering self-reliance in communities, both community organizing and community development were identified as facilitative processes that could develop such ecological communities; characterized as respecting all life and nature, and committed to reducing their dependency on depleting natural resources (Blewitt, 2008; Ife, 2016; Ledwith, 2016).

Following the methodology section, this article moves on to scrutinize how sustainability and sustainable development was understood and practised in the COP.

### **Methodology**

Data was collected during an impact evaluation of the COP in one local authority district in England. We evaluated



**Figure 2 Five stages of data collection**

1. Initial interviews with TCOs and host managers (September to October 2014)
2. Shadowing TCOs for one day (January to February 2015)
3. Interviews with VCOs (April to May 2015)
4. Final interviews with TCOs and host managers (April to May 2015)
5. Questionnaires with local residents in each 'patch' (June to July 2015)

it against the nine impact indicators outlined in *figure 1*. Nationally, fourteen cohorts of community organizers trained in groups between October 2011 and June 2015 (Cameron *et al.*, 2015). Other evaluation (*ibid*) and research (Imagine, 2014; 2015a; 2015b) focusses primarily on the earlier cohorts. This case study includes one of the final cohorts. The data consisted of semi-structured interviews with six TCOs, two host organization managers and five volunteer community organisers (VCOs); and questionnaires with fifty-seven residents across the six patches. Participants were asked to participate based on their informed consent and pseudonyms were given to assure anonymity. *Figure 2* outlines the data collection stages that coincided with the TCOs fifty-one week training contract.

### Sustainability in community organizing

Elements of the COP received considerable praise. Most participants viewed the door-knockings, listenings and newsletters as successful in engaging with hard-to-reach local people and promoting community spirit. These were core to the COP's methodology, called Root Solutions-Listening Matters (RSLM), which emphasized listening to and then supporting people in their communities to

develop collaborative solutions (RE:generate, 2009). The listenings followed residents answering their doors and responding to questions written by RE:generate and delivered by the TCOs. Topics frequently raised were: (i) environment, spaces and places (litter, overgrown trees, speed limits, parking, flooding and dog poo); (ii) well-being (noise, community spirit, sport facilities, anti-social behaviour); and (iii) public services (changes in council services such as children's centres and libraries; need for activities for children, young people and the aging population). TCOs then compiled these responses in newsletters and distributed them locally. These encouraged residents to form local groups and work together to overcome issues raised. TCO Matt noted:

"Some [local residents] actually say to you [that] you are the first person whose ever came out and asked me about the area, about the community. So, it's knowing that you're giving people a voice."

A local resident concurred: "[the COP] is essential. It can change people's lives for the better". TCOs, VCOs, host managers and some local residents applauded such methods for initiating new

relationships, recruiting new volunteers and reaching those previously inaccessible. This resulted in fifteen community projects developing across the six patches; ranging from litter-picks and park clean-ups to developing petitions, and creating youth services provision and additional needs groups.

Overall, the TCOs impressed the host managers. Ally commented their TCOs “were very mature individuals... and we had good communication”. Nicky, the second host manager, praised two TCOs for successfully organizing a Christmas party for older, socially isolated community members recruited solely through door-knockings. Nicky reflected:

“Now, a year before [the HO] ran a project for older people in the community centre and, over the year, you might get three, four, five people coming in a week. But, in one day [the TCOs] managed to fill the hall. And it gave me a thought, well, you know, it can be done.”

Discussed more were concerns regarding how Locality and RE:generate understood sustainability; with TCOs, VCOs and host managers providing converging accounts of how this compromised the COP’s impact and legacy. Locality and RE:generate’s understanding of a VCO was criticized; defined as local residents taking “social action” resulting from a RSLM listening to become “new leaders in their community”. TCO Heather elucidates:

“I question [Locality’s] definition of a volunteer. [The TCOs] were told a volunteer is someone who takes any form of action for the community. So, that could be introducing you to someone, handing out some leaflets... like handing out your business card to someone and them taking it. Or, someone who handed flyers out for you. That counts as a volunteer.”

Most TCOs, VCOs and host managers agreed this definition was unsustainable and surprising, given that volunteers were the lifeblood of the program and to whom its legacy was dependent. Ally had emailed Locality and challenged them on this definition, explaining that a volunteer “is someone who has actively engaged in an activity on a regular basis” and has “a clear understanding of what it is they are doing”. TCOs Paula, Heather and Gary also raised these concerns with Locality. All four reported not receiving “a satisfactory response”. Similarly scrutinized was the COP’s understanding of a project. Matt explains:

“Some [TCOs] have marked down a single litter-pick or a single coffee morning as a project... But, in my eyes - and the methodology and theory of community organizing - the projects are supposed to be mid-to-long-term in both the development and the results.



Because it is supposed to be a self-sufficient thing with the people in the community doing it for themselves, to continuously do it for themselves. It is supposed to take a little longer to build it up, but it is supposed to last even longer. So, instead of talking two weeks to organise a project and then it runs for three weeks, it's supposed to take six months to a year. And then run for the next ten kind-of-thing."

Matt highlights a discord between more traditional community organizing objectives to build-up long-term capacity, and Locality and RE:generate's more target-driven RSLM methodology. This overlaps with the second element reported as undermining the program: the limited timescale of the TCO training contract. All TCOs, VCOs and host managers concurred fifty-one weeks was not enough time to build-up sufficient capacity in each patch to create new networks. Nicky, who had worked in the area for over twenty years, reflected: "with the kinds of communities that we're working in, the timeframe that there is to really develop something strong and lasting is so minimal". Most TCOs found local residents reluctant to take the lead, with Gary reflecting it was "daunting for anybody to think about setting anything up". Influenced by Alinsky (1989), one of the 'golden rules' of the program was to not do for others what they could do for themselves. As a result, the TCOs were

actively discouraged from taking the lead in burgeoning projects. Matt was critical of this:

"And it doesn't matter if you feel someone *can't* do it for themselves, that's not how [the COP] works. It's that you have to *not* do it for them. So, [the COP] is really saying, if they say they can't do it for themselves, they really can. [The rule] should be: if they can do it for themselves, don't do it. But some people can't until you show them."

Similarly, the host managers appraised the COP as erroneously assuming that capacity and motivation was "latent" in neighborhoods and that residents "just needed somebody just to say what do you fancy doing and they would rise up like an army". To the TCOs, this was a misguided interpretation of Alinsky's methods. To the host managers and experienced VCOs, it was "poor community work". Most participants also questioned the COP's rationale for such a short training contract. VCOs thought it was "too short" as the local area needed "somebody who can work with the community, and the community can get to know them". TCO Gary was adamant that "... training should be at least 18 months... that real results won't start showing until the 18 month period". In fact, Locality and RE:generate's original bid stipulated this (Grimshaw *et al.*, 2018). During training RE:generate informed the TCOs:

“RSLM is supposed to be done over three to five years, rather than a year. So, I think that definitely comes into play, when [RE:generate trainer] says to build relationships she’s kind of coming from a foundation where in the past she’s always had three to five years to do that.” (TCO Paula)

This issue of short-termism is reflected in national research, with TCOs requesting a second year of training (Imagine, 2015a; 2015b). TCOs, hosts and some VCOs made connections between the “too-short” training contract and the austere economic climate. TCOs regularly encountered local community organizations barely surviving on reduced public sector funding who were fearful of closure. Like neighboring community organizations, Ally and Nicky were having to “make-do with less”. They concluded this fate had also befallen the COP, with austerity having “taken over what [the COP] potentially could have become” by scrapping the second year of the TCO contract.

The third issue reported as compromising the COP was that the RSLM methodology encouraged TCOs to work autonomously from their host organization and local VCS organizations. In training, TCOs were advised to remain independent from existing organizations, to not signpost local residents to these organizations and “to organize people separately” from them. This perplexed the participants and

actively worked against TCOs achieving their targets. Matt explains:

“I mean [local residents and I] first talked about doing a litter pick and straight away I mentioned this to some members of [the host organization] and they were saying ‘oh we know this person who will lend you the equipment. We know someone who will arrange collection of the waste...’ But, we’re not allowed to do that. It makes no sense whatsoever.”

TCOs reported challenging Locality and RE:generate on this during supervision and training. Locality’s response was “to keep following the methodology” and focus on creating new networks in their patches rather than use existing networks. This was reported as problematic as TCOs were using the buildings, office spaces and facilities of the host and other VCS organizations. Yet, they were prohibited from becoming involved in work these organizations undertook in case they were “co-opted”. TCOs stated this created uncomfortable working environments for all involved. Host managers responded they did not expect to co-opt TCOs. But, they had (falsely) envisaged the TCOs as a means of bringing of bringing additional resources into a sector suffering austerity and funding cuts. They also imagined the TCOs working less autonomously, building on existing networks and strengthening local community organizations. Not doing

so, they argued, had compromised the survival of both the COP and the local community sector.

TCOs also discussed the ethics of not signposting local residents to existing community organizations. Particularly eye-opening was Locality's chastisement of a TCO for signposting a suspected alcoholic to a local drug and alcohol service. The host managers remarked this was unethical and regularly advised the TCOs "not to struggle with their conscience" and signpost as appropriate. They also claimed it compromised local organizations dependent on new service users to attract increasingly scarce funding. TCO Heather reported frequently "clashing" with Locality for six months on this issue, and added that Locality were "only interested" in local residents forming social enterprises. Through door-knocking Heather met two local residents interested in starting projects; one a French class and the second an additional needs support group. During supervision, Locality advised Heather that both residents should form social enterprises even though "[the residents] didn't want to put in too much time and effort to setting up all that". Heather then informed Locality she had located a local community organization who would allow these residents use their building to run their projects, and offered their charity number to assist funding applications. As this was contrary to the RSLM methodology, Locality insisted that Heather encourage the residents to start a social enterprise. Yet, the empirical findings show no social enterprises were set up in these patches during the training

year. TCOs maintained that the local residents encountered did not have the required capacity, i.e. the time, skills or commitment, to develop fledgling projects into social enterprises. They also concluded the COP was not doing enough to build-up such capacity.

Frustrating to the TCOs after so many clashes, Locality's "goalposts changed" at the end of their contract. Locality were now encouraging TCOs to signpost existing VCOs and fledgling projects on to other community organizations and groups for support. The TCOs speculated this was due to community holding teams not forming in these patches. This exasperated the TCOs who had argued throughout the training year that it made more sense for VCOs and fledgling projects to work with existing provision rather than "setting-up social enterprises". This suggests the RSLM methodology was overly fixated on achieving its targets at the expense of an underpinning in sustainable development where its impact would be measured by how many new projects were still running, at least, a year later. This study recommends that RSLM should be less rigid and embrace more traditional community organizing methodologies rooted in capacity building and development.

The fourth element undermining the COP's sustainability was the insufficient training and support for VCOs. TCOs understood the difficulties encouraging residents to become VCOs, especially in poorer areas. Each TCO managed to recruit two or three and were expected to teach

them about community organizing. Since TCOs did not have a full understanding of the method themselves, they felt unprepared for this. Although training for VCOs developed towards the end of the COP and ran in fourteen areas in 2014/15 (Imagine, 2015c), this was not mentioned by the TCOs. In this case study, VCO training consisted of VCOs accompanying TCOs on door-knockings to learn RSLM. None of the VCOs were in direct contact with Locality or RE:generate and were unsure how they could “keep the principles of community organizing alive” after the TCOs’ left. TCOs Paula and Heather challenged both Locality and RE:generate why the VCOs did not have “access to the training [we] were getting”. They stated they “never received a response”.

All VCOs stressed they would not undertake door-knocking and listenings without the TCOs. VCO safety and lack of direction were key concerns:

“You can’t just expect people to walk the streets as volunteers. The safeguardings are paramount to me. But it’s not just that, you’d need direction. Which comes from having a structure, like a management type structure in place. Somebody to pass down what the aims and objectives are and how they are going to be achieved. There’s no point asking a thousand people what do you think about litter if

there isn’t a plan of action to follow it up with.” (VCO Steve)

In consequence, TCOs reported feeling pressure to continue training the VCOs after their contracts ended. TCO Louise confided that she had “... heard about people who, when they finish their [training] year, have ended up as a volunteer having to support people. I have a problem with that because it’s a job at the end of the day”. The sustainability of the COP is once again called into question; particularly its short-termism and insufficient capacity building of VCOs. For TCO Paula, building knowledge and expertise requires time and money:

“But, I think, ultimately for things to be sustainable, like, you’ve got to pay people to do jobs. We were given a one year contract and that’s just not long enough... I’m against this whole idea of like sustaining things by... just lowering all the costs associated to it. I think sometimes things actually do cost money and it means you have to pay people to do things if you want it to carry on. And that is sustainable.”

By the end of their training contracts, most TCOs, host managers and VCOs concluded that the Coalition government’s commitment to austerity had compromised the sustainability, impact and legacy of the COP. As previously outlined, Locality and RE:generate’s original bid specified TCOs

needed *at least* three training years to sustainably learn RSLM and achieve their targets. Academics and participants in this case study have suggested this pledge to austerity put pressure on Locality and RE:generate to also “make-do with less” (see also Bunyan, 2012; Grimshaw *et al.*, 2018). A likely compromise between Locality / RE:generate and the government was the COP’s part-funded second year. To progress to second year and become a Senior Community Organiser (SCO), TCOs had to achieve their targets and obtain part-funding from a local VCS organisation for a year. This comprised half their salary or at least a quarter contribution towards the salary and additional payments “in kind”. The government would then “match” this. Paradoxically, as previously discussed, the TCOs were encouraged to work autonomously from these potential future employers, thereby lessening their chances of identifying a progression opportunity. This dilemma was also identified nationally (Imagine, 2015a). This was the final element that impaired the program’s sustainability.

Host managers recounted increasing pressure to ‘find’ the TCOs a progression opportunity even though this was not part of their role. Nicky admitted that even obtaining one-quarter of the progression salary was a significant ask as VCS organizations were struggling to locate funding hence “were making staff redundant”. RSLM had also excluded these organizations from working directly with the TCOs. Thus, the benefits of having a RSLM-trained, paid staff member were not obvious. Only one TCO ‘officially’ progressed to SCO. This

progression opportunity came directly from their host manager to use both RSLM and more community development approaches. One TCO did not officially progress but worked for another national community organizing program that used a more “ecological approach to community organizing”. Remaining TCOs decided either community organizing was not for them or could not obtain sufficient funding to progress. This progression rate is much lower than the national average of 60 percent (Cameron *et al.*, 2015). The empirical evidence suggests the RSLM methodology struggled to adapt to this particular local authority and required an additional training year to incorporate more capacity building and development work into its initial stages.

## Conclusions

Our case study provides empirical evidence that the COP’s problematic understanding of sustainability enfeebled a trailblazing experimentation with state-funded community organizing. Although the program achieved some of its objectives, participants recounted five elements as undermining the program’s impact and legacy. First, the COP lacked a coherent, and conceptual, definition of sustainability. It was unclear whether the program endorsed the three pillars of sustainable development, with evidence further suggesting RSLM was not grounded in sustainable development practices committed to longevity. Second, the TCO training contract was too short and required an extension of *at least* one

year to allow TCOs to carry out vital capacity building and development work. Third, the TCOs were discouraged from working with neighboring organizations and networks, and could not signpost local residents to them. This fixation on bypassing existing provision to encourage new projects was reported as compromising the sustainability of the COP and the local community sector. Fourth was the insufficient training, support and resources for the VCOs. Fifth was the TCOs' progression opportunities hindered by an overly autonomous RSLM methodology and severe cuts to public expenditure.

Further analysis establishes these five elements can be reduced to one internal and one external factor. Internally, the COP did not directly engage with sustainable development theory, policy or practice. Whilst the impact indicators outlined in *figure 1* suggest some accountability to the three pillars of sustainable development, this is not explicit in any COP or related documentation. Also, the TCOs never discussed sustainable development as a core component of their training. Whilst the COP's focus on facilitating local leadership is compatible with sustainable development, its problematic assumption that capacity and motivation is solely "latent" in poor neighbourhoods is not. More traditional community organizing and development methodologies appreciate that capacity building needs time, resources and skills. This case study found time and resources to be lacking in the COP. Of the fifteen community projects

developed across the patches, the TCOs predicted only three would be "running a year later". This was due to a deficit of capacity building training within RSLM. Instead, RSLM was consumed by achieving its short-term targets; leaving TCOs, VCOs and fledgling projects struggling to achieve longevity.

The external factor was a policy context dominated by austerity. Most participants deduced the Coalition government's covenant with austerity, and the severity of the public sector cuts, had compromised the sustainability of the COP. Locality and RE:generate's original bid was clear that TCOs needed at least three training years to sustainably learn RSLM and achieve their targets. After winning the bid, this reduced to one year and progression was reliant on TCOs locating part-funding from a local VCS organization. Yet, evidence shows austerity reduced the capacity of the community sector by at least one-third (Clayton *et al.*, 2016; Lowndes & McCaughie, 2013). As a result, only one TCO in our case study progressed to second year.

Nevertheless, the gains of the COP should not be overlooked. In this case study, door-knocking, listenings and newsletters all evaluated as successful means to engage with local residents; bringing them together to forge community spirit. This resulted in fifteen fledgling projects developing across the six patches. At a national level, the COP's targets were exceeded and the Coalition government considered it a success (Cameron *et al.*, 2015). Although the



program ended in 2015, several extensions were granted. In 2015, the Office of Civil Society funded a second round of the program for one year at the scaled-down cost of £500 000. But its focus had changed to providing start-up grants of up to £16 000 to community organizing projects using the powers of the Localism Act 2011 (Cabinet Office, 2015). The Company of Community Organisers (COLtd) - formed in 2015 to continue the legacy of the COP – managed this. In 2017, COLtd then secured a further £4.2 million to increase the number of community organizers in England over three years (COLtd, 2017). Based on our findings, we strongly recommend that this extension program is underpinned by a definition of sustainability that engages with both traditional and modern sustainable development theory and practice. These foundations should be prominent in all training materials and explicitly incorporated into the extension program’s impact indicators and methodology. Finally, future research on this extension program is vital to establish the long-term sustainability, impact and legacy of the COP.

### Acknowledgements

This article draws on data collected during evaluation research commissioned by Locality and funded by Locality and Northumbria University.

### References

- Alcock, P. (2010) ‘Building the Big Society: a new policy environment for the third sector in England.’ *Voluntary Sector Review*, 1(3), 379-89. DOI: 10.1332/204080510X538365.
- Alinsky, S. D. (1989) *Rules for Radicals: A pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*. London: Vintage Books.
- Bailey, N., Bramley, G. & Hastings, A. (2015) Symposium introduction: local Responses to ‘austerity’. *Local Government Studies*, 41(4), 571-581. DOI:10.1080/03003930.2015.1036988.
- Banks, S. (2011) ‘Re-gilding the ghetto: community work and community development in 21st-century Britain.’ In Lavelette, M. (ed.) *Radical Social Work Today: Social Work at the Crossroads*. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 165-185.
- Batten, T. R. (2008) ‘The Major Issues and Future Direction of Community Development.’ In G. Craig., K. Popple & M. Shaw (eds.) *Community Development in Theory and Practice: An International Reader*. Nottingham: Spokesman. pp. 55-65.
- Beck, D. & Purcell, R. (2013) *International Community Organising: Taking power, making change*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Blewitt, J. (2008) ‘Introduction.’ In Blewitt, J. (ed.) *Community, Empowerment and Sustainable Development*. Devon: Green Books, pp. 13-16.
- Blewitt, J. (2015) *Understanding Sustainable Development* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn). London: Routledge.
- Bunyan, P. (2012) Partnership, the Big Society and community organising:

- between romanticising, problematizing and politicizing community. *Community Development Journal*, 48 (1), 119-133. DOI: 10.1093/cdj/bss014.
- Cabinet Office (2007) *Sustainable Communities Act 2007*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2007/23/contents>
- Cabinet Office (2010a) *Building a stronger civil society: a strategy for voluntary and community groups, charities and social enterprises*. London: Office for Civil Society.
- Cabinet Office (2010b) *Giving Green Paper*. London: Office for Civil Society.
- Cabinet Office (2011a) 'Government announces new partner to deliver community organisers.' Cabinet Office, 19<sup>th</sup> February 2011. Accessed at: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/government-names-new-partner-deliver-community-organisers>.
- Cabinet Office (2011b) *Mainstreaming sustainable development: The Government's vision and what this means in practice*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mainstreaming-sustainable-development-the-government-s-vision-and-what-this-means-in-practice>
- Cabinet Office (2013) *Encouraging Social Action*. London: Office for Civil Society.
- Cabinet Office (2015) 'Press release: New funding for Community Organisers announced.' Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-funding-for-community-organisers-announced>
- Cameron, D. (2009) 'Hugo Young Memorial Lecture.' Transcript, 10th November 2009. Available at: <http://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601246>.
- Cameron, D., Rennick, K., Macguire, R. & Freeman, A. (2015) *Evaluation of the Community Organisers Programme*. London: Ipsos MORI.
- Clayton, J., Donovan, C. & Merchant, J. (2016) Distancing and limited resourcefulness: Third sector service provision under austerity localism in the north east of England. *Urban Studies*, 53(4), 723-740. DOI: 10.1177/0042098014566369.
- Company of Community Organisers (COLtd) (2017) 'Massive Expansion of Community Organisers Programme.' Available at: <https://www.corganisers.org.uk/news/massive-expansion-community-organisers-programme>
- Davoudi, S. & Madanipour, A. (2013) Commentary: Localism and Neoliberal Governmentality. *Town Planning Review*, 84(5), 551-63. DOI: 10.3828/tpr.2013.29.
- Dean, J. (2013) Manufacturing Citizens: The dichotomy between policy and practice in youth volunteering in the UK. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 35(1), 46-62. DOI: 10.2753/ATP1084-1806350104.
- Downie, A. & Elrick, D. (2000) Weaving the threads: community development and organizing around the environment – a Scottish perspective. *Community Development Journal*, 35(3), 245-254.
- Featherstone, D., Ince, A., Mackinnon, D., Strauss, K. & Cumbers, A. (2012)

- Progressive Localism and the construction of political alternatives. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37(2), 177–182. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-5661.2011.00493.x.
- Fisher, R. (1994) *Let the people: Neighborhood organizing in America*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Fisher, R. & DeFilippis, J. (2015) Community organizing in the United States. *Community Development Journal*, 50(3), 363-379. DOI: 10.1093/cdj/bsv016.
- Fisher, R. & Dimberg, K. (2016) The Community Organisers Programme in England. *Journal of Community Practice*, 24(1), 94-108. DOI: 10.1080/10705422.2015.1129006.
- Gardham, N. (2015) 'Why Community Organising and Community Building are necessary to the long term sustainability of our neighbourhoods.' Available at: <https://www.corganisers.org.uk/stories/why-community-organising-and-community-building-are-necessary-long-term-sustainability-our>
- Grimshaw, L., Mates, L. & Reynolds, A. (2018) The challenges and contradictions of state-funded community organizing. *Community Development Journal*. Advanced Access. DOI:10.1093/cdj/bsy040.
- Ife, J. (2016) *Community Development in an Uncertain World: Vision, analysis and practice* (2nd edn.). Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Imagine (2014) *Learning and change in the Community Organisers Programme*. Accessed at: <http://www.corganisers.org.uk/stories/c>ommunity-organisers-ltd-learning-reports.
- Imagine (2015a) *Community Organisers Programme Legacy Report*. Accessed at: <http://www.corganisers.org.uk/stories/c>ommunity-organisers-ltd-learning-reports.
- Imagine (2015b) *The Power of Listening: Reflections and Learning Over 4 Years*. Accessed at: <http://www.corganisers.org.uk/stories/c>ommunity-organisers-ltd-learning-reports.
- Ledwith, M. (2016) *Community Development in Action: Putting Freire into Practice*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Levitt, T. (2015) 'The closure of the Community Development Foundation is a setback for the sector.' *Third Sector*, 21st December 2015. Available at: <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/closure-community-development-foundation-setback-sector/local-action/article/1377601>
- Locality (2010) 'Tender to provide a National Partner for the Community Organisers Programme.' Available at: <http://nw.wea.org.uk/assets/files/resources/phmevent/Community%20Organisers%20-%20Successful%20Locality%20Bid.pdf>.
- Locality (2014) 'Nine impact indicators for the Community Organisers Programme.' Unpublished.
- Lowndes, V. & McCaughie, K. (2013) Weathering the perfect storm? Austerity and institutional resilience in local government. *Policy & Politics*, 41(4), 533-49. DOI: 10.1332/030557312X655747.

- Mayo, M. (2008) 'Introduction: Community Development, Contestations, Continuities and Change.' In Craig, G., Popple, K. & M. Shaw (eds.) *Community Development in Theory and Practice: An International Reader*. Nottingham: Spokesman. pp. 13-27.
- Miller, C. and Ahmad, Y. (1997) Community development at the crossroads: a way forward. *Policy & Politics*, 25(3), 269-284. DOI: 10.1332/030557397782453237.
- My Community (2012) *Community Right to Bid: Understanding the Community Right to Bid*. Available at: <https://mycommunity.org.uk/resources/understanding-the-community-right-to-bid/>.
- Nelson, P. J. (2007) Human Rights, the Millennium Development Goals, and the Future of Development Cooperation. *World Development*, 35 (12), 2041-2055. DOI: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2007.02.006.
- Pyles, L. (2014) *Progressive Community Organising: Reflective Practice in a Globalizing World*. (2nd edn.) New York: Routledge.
- RE:generate (2009) *A Guide to Root Solutions: Listening Matters - Engagement That Works*. Action to RE:generate Community Trust.
- Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) (2010) *The Future is Local: Empowering communities to improve their neighbourhoods*. London: SDC. Available at: [www.sd-commission.org.uk](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk)
- Taylor-Gooby, P. & Stoker, G. (2011) The Coalition Programme: A New Vision for Britain or Politics as Usual? *The Political Quarterly*, 82(1), 4-15. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-923X.2011.02169.x.
- Thornham, H. (2015) Constructing communities: the community centre as contested site. *Community Development Journal*, 50(1), 24-39. DOI: 10.1093/cdj/bst088.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (1993) *Human Development Report: People's Participation*. Available at: [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/222/hdr\\_1993\\_en\\_complete\\_nostats.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/222/hdr_1993_en_complete_nostats.pdf)
- United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) (1992) *Agenda 21 - program of action for sustainable development: Rio declaration on environment and development*. United Nation Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14<sup>th</sup> June 1992.
- Wheeler, B. (2015) 'Spending review: department-by-department cuts guide.' *BBC News*, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2015. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-34790102>
- Ziai, A. (2016) *Development Discourse and Global History: From colonialism to the sustainable development goals*. London: Routledge.

