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First of all I'd like to thank Ben Lee for inviting me to make this presentation. My talk is essentially concerned with the role of community development in the empowerment of communities, and the untapped potential that many others involved in public services could and should play in fostering empowerment. I am also concerned with the political context we are likely to face over the next few years, how this might impact on the empowerment agenda and what might be done to meet the challenges. But I also want reflect on the last 13 years of this Labour Government. What are the lessons we must learn that will help us in the future?

I'll also talk about the work that Gabriel Chanan and I have been undertaking for the HCA Academy over the last couple of years as we believe it could play a significant role in helping take community empowerment forward in the future.

Those of us involved in and committed to community empowerment face paradoxical and perilous times.

Empowerment or its siblings, engagement and involvement, have been an important element of the Labour government's rhetoric and policy from the moment it was first elected some 13 years ago, that is at least up to the time of the publication of the White Paper 'Real People, Real Power' in July 2008. However, interest in empowerment seems to have disappeared from the government (or at least the CLG) since then. It's as if a balloon has been pricked, and poof - there goes empowerment!

Maybe I'm oversimplifying, but it's no coincidence that the loss of interest in community empowerment occurred when Hazel Blears left office. It's a sobering fact that it still seems that the empowerment agenda in national and local government remains dependent on a relatively small group of committed champions driving the agenda; champions who recognise that empowerment requires more than rhetoric, but the development of a policy and strategic framework to begin to make the empowerment real.

At the moment we can't really tell where community empowerment stands with the current Labour leadership, although many leading Labour politicians continue to employ the rhetoric, as is clear anytime you watch 'Newsnight'.

Unsurprisingly there is considerable fear amongst those of us who are committed to community empowerment that the agenda will be destroyed in the face of the predicted 15 to 20% cuts in public spending. These cuts

might result in the closure of many community development and engagement initiatives.

In these circumstances community empowerment champions could be decimated. We face the possibility that the tentative legislative structure so painfully developed to foster and underpin the early beginnings of a comprehensive move to empowerment will become an empty shell.

But here is the paradox. The main political parties, especially the Tories, are still talking about their commitment to community empowerment. Labour also continues to debate the issues although this increasingly seems to be taking place in the left leaning think tanks and among politicians such as John Cruddas.

The Liberal Democrats have been interested in community empowerment for a long time, and the Tories, as we shall see, have, on this issue, a pretty radical agenda that has potentially huge implications. Conservatives have set out their stall in relation to the role of local government and the empowerment of communities in a green paper called *'Control Shift: returning power to local communities'* that was published in February. The Tories say that: *'By giving people more power and control over the services that are delivered in their areas, we can inspire a new spirit of civic pride in our communities'*

In his speech at the Hugo Young memorial lecture recently David Cameron fleshed out his vision for what he called 're-imagining the state'. In the speech he outlined what the Tories want to do. Cameron has a pretty big ambition, no less than 're-imagining' the state to be about 'actively helping to create the big society; directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising social renewal'. The state should 'help communities come together to solve problems' because 'non-state collective action is more effective than centralised state solutions in solving community problems'.

A key task will be to 'redistribute power and control from the central state and its agencies to individuals and local communities'. And 'where it doesn't make sense to give power directly to individuals, we will transfer power to neighbourhoods' or to the lowest possible level of government organisation.

There are three key elements to this strategy:

Firstly, supporting social entrepreneurs by working with them to help them run social programmes in communities of greatest need. Secondly, supporting community activists. Cameron says that the importance of community organisations and the role of community activists in them has not been recognised or properly supported and that the state must provide proper support such as helping people set up neighbourhood groups, get the information they need and understand 'the dynamics of social activism'.

Finally Cameron shared some thoughts about the role of civil servants (and by implication local government officers): 'We need people capable of

engaging with social entrepreneurs and civic institutions, who can agitate and encourage social action, and help people build the type of sustainable organisations we need'. Whilst the phrase 'empowerment' and community development are not used they are certainly implied.

Looking Back

It's sometimes said that it's important to look back in order to go forward, so I want to spend a little time looking back over the last 13 years of the Labour government, and how community development has responded.

It seems to me that whilst the government has been quite keen on the concept of empowerment they have rather struggled to define it and to develop consistent ideas on how it might be encouraged and implemented. The government tends to think that empowerment is a good thing, and has launched a string of short term measures to build it up but has had limited understanding of what this might mean as a universal long term principal.

The last 13 years are scattered with hundreds of initiatives, policies and strategies relating to community engagement and empowerment. Many of these initiatives were very good, but they also tended to have a short shelf life. The New Deal for Communities and Neighbourhood Renewal were exceptions, and certainly made a lot of noises about the community controlling the individual programmes. But many NDC projects became mired in a bureaucratic reporting nightmare. Those projects that managed to maintain and nurture some level of community control did so against considerable odds.

So what has the role of the vanguard of community empowerment, the national leadership of the community development sector, been during these 13 years? Well, they have doggedly promoted community development values, and guarded the integrity of the community development approach. But all too often the national organisations that claim to represent the best interests of community development have come across as narrow and dogmatic. It's almost as if they are part of an exclusive sect that is certain it has the way, the truth and the light and has little to learn from anyone else.

Admittedly this is a little unfair. The people who work for the national CD organisations are deeply dedicated, they work extremely hard and have spent a lifetime arguing for and promoting community development and empowerment, often against a wall of indifference. But I believe that these organisations have not corporately shown enough interest in taking community development forward and encouraging new ideas and thinking about its role, practice, purpose and values.

Part of the problem is that much of the thinking is locked into a paradigm that seems to discourage new thinking. Government policies are measured against how they compare with a supposed 'golden age' of community development of the 60s. And community development is defined only as something that designated community development workers do in local

communities. Others who do not fit this narrow definition tend to be viewed with suspicion. Finally, as community development has its roots in opposition to authority and power (see works by the US CD guru of the 60s, Saul Alinsky) it also tends to view managers and elected members with suspicion rather than as potential allies.

This train of thought has not done community development any favours. I have heard many people not involved in community development, but deeply committed to empowerment, complain that people in the CD world come across as negative and all too often alienate those people who should be their close allies. Such an attitude cripples community development and effectively prevents an open and essential debate about the nature and role of CD in the early part of the 21st century.

The Community Development Challenge report, produced by a working party including the three nationals, and published by CLG in 2007, did take tentative steps to address some of the key issues. The idea was that the report would focus outward and look at key issues such as funding and training, along with the contribution CD makes to extending democracy, but also inward, looking at issues such as management and the need for a strategic approach.

The report was well received, and the working party subsequently published several reports focusing on particular issues, including my book on managing CD, *The Community Development Challenge: Management*, Community Development Foundation, 2008.

My research for the book revealed that effective and high quality community development management is about a lot more than support and supervision of practitioners. It showed that the most effective managers were also deeply engaged in taking forward community empowerment at an organisational and strategic level. In so doing these managers have helped develop and enrich community development so it is more fit for purpose in the early 21st Century. The main problem is that these innovative ideas and approaches, such as tying together CD practice in neighbourhoods with strategic, policy and operational approaches by other departments and agencies, are largely unrecognised in the CD discourse, particularly at a national level. These hard won innovations and insights are not being picked up in new thinking and approaches at a national level.

Why is this important? There are two main reasons. Firstly it means that these innovative approaches largely take place in isolation from each other, so that managers and teams are forced to invent their own approach in isolation. Secondly it has a profound impact on the way in which the national organisations, who are supposed to represent and advocate on behalf of the CD world, do so from a poorly informed basis.

This neglect of how CD in practice has developed over the last few years has deeply affected the development of important initiatives such as the National Occupational Standards for Community Development (CD-NOS). In

the standards, community development remains largely refracted through the neighbourhood practitioner lens, that is to say CD is seen simply as something that individual practitioners do in local neighbourhoods, rather than as a holistic approach to transforming the relationship between people and the state. The new CD-NOS are a big advance on the old in that they mention management and coordination but these give the impression of being afterthoughts.

So what's going on?

The people involved in promoting, supporting and representing CD to the world are deeply committed to it. They are passionate about the need to empower communities, and many have devoted their entire careers to the CD cause, as is the case for many practitioners. I think part of the problem is that they are trapped into a self-confirming paradigmatic loop. Many of those involved at a national level have roots as practitioners working in neighbourhoods. This has the virtue that their views are based on ground-level experience but the limitation of trying to generalise without drawing on strategic level experience. As a consequence debates in many CD conferences and seminars are aimed almost exclusively at practitioners. The paradigm helps frame who is asked to speak, how the workshops are run and what questions are asked. Similarly the research commissioned by these bodies is framed in the same way, as are articles that are written, newsletters published etc.

It's a comfortable world where everyone understands everyone else, where presuppositions are a given and rarely challenged, but where the views and experiences of others are unconsciously filtered out.

It might be comfortable but it is also an abdication of leadership and has caused harm not only to community development but also to taking forward empowerment. Leadership is not just about advocating the virtues of community development, best practice, and values. It is also about helping and encouraging the field to meet current and future challenges and thinking in the context of key issues in society, government policy and development of new approaches. It is about encouraging change and innovation.

The insistence on this narrow view of CD as being the only legitimate means of achieving community empowerment is still prevalent within the CD world. On the other hand there is a legitimate fear that the CD occupation will be watered down, people will be prevented from undertaking the work, the freedom of the CD worker to work with communities in a flexible way is becoming increasingly difficult and the skills and knowledge of the CD worker are not being valued or understood. This is why, despite its weaknesses, CD-NOS is so important. For the first time we have a framework that seeks to identify and systematically describe best practice in community development.

Unfortunately even with CD-NOS many employers simply do not understand what CD workers do, and know nothing about the skills and knowledge they need and the context they work in. It is an ignorance that poses a significant threat to the profession, particularly as we face hefty cuts in local government spending.

But a threat can also be turned into an opportunity. The very fact that community development cannot possibly achieve the development or empowerment of communities on its own may help it survive in the future. An empowerment strategy requires a coherent programme, underpinned by a well thought through long-term strategy that recognises the complex nature of the task and the contribution that every public sector employee and elected member can potentially play in achieving this goal, but where community development must continue to play a central role in partnership with the other elements.

The opportunity is the need for public services to mobilise all their staff and managers in the empowerment of communities. This became increasingly evident through work by Gabriel Chanan and myself on the ‘Empowerment Skills for All’ report over the last couple of years. The HCA Academy commissioned us to undertake the work in response to the brief section in the 2008 empowerment White Paper (section 2.25, p41) which stated an intention to *‘work with the Academy for Sustainable Communities [later the HCA Academy] to ensure (that) appropriate training in community development and community empowerment skills is available to relevant public sector officials’*.

Our role was to examine the range of knowledge and skills that are necessary to enable public sector workers and managers to work in an empowering way. We focussed on 6 occupational groups:

- Housing Officers
- Planners
- Police
- Police Community Support Officers
- Neighbourhood Wardens
- Neighbourhood Managers

We undertook desk research, a survey and a variety of meetings focussing on the content of existing training programmes in these occupations, and produced a map of empowerment skills summarised under 12 headings as follows.

E. PROACTIVE CUSTOMER RELATIONS / GUIDING INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT	G. MANAGING CD/EMPOWERMENT WORKERS OR TEAMS	I. HELPING PUBLIC AGENCIES OR SERVICES ENGAGE WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS	K. HELPING PUBLIC AGENCIES DEVELOP STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITIES
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A. GENERIC BASIS: VALUES AND PRINCIPLES, UNDERSTANDING HOW COMMUNITIES WORK, AND OVERVIEW OF EMPOWERMENT AIMS & FUNCTIONS	B. HELPING PEOPLE WORK TOGETHER ON COMMON ISSUES, AND HELPING C – GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS	C. HELPING NETWORKING AND COOPERATION BETWEEN COMMUNITY GROUPS	D. FACILITATING COMMUNITY INFLUENCE ON LOCAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND SERVICES
F. ADVISING LOCAL THIRD SECTOR ORGANISATIONS AND NETWORKS ON EMPOWERMENT	H. ADVISING VARIED FRONT- LINE WORKERS ON EMPOWERMENT	J. FACILITATING THE INPUT OF COMMUNITY GROUPS TO JOINT WORKING WITH PUBLIC AGENCIES	L. COORDINATING EMPOWERMENT ACROSS A LOCALITY

The boxes do not read across in any simple way to separate occupations. The important thing is that all these functions need to be considered in any generic skills framework whilst training in each occupation should also consider which particular functions they can contribute to.

We placed the community development elements in the centre of the grid because they form the core that must underpin a national framework. This does not mean that we believe that CD should only concern itself with the activities outlined in the central row, just that these are, in practice, its common ground.

The other four boxes on the left (E, F, G, and H) are broadly about advising, managing and customer relations, and the remaining four boxes on the right (I, J, K, L) broadly about strategy, culture change and coordination

There is another important point in the report. Community Development has always had at its heart the belief that collective action and activity, usually through community groups and organisations, forms a key component to community empowerment.

The need to support and maintain a robust and healthy network of community organisations lies at the core of our thinking. But the Empowerment Skills for All report recognises that whilst the existence of a thriving network of community organisations is essential to the empowerment of communities, it is not enough on its own. Public service staff and managers need to sustain and support such a network in myriad forms, from direct work with groups to developing and nurturing an organisational environment where a healthy and open relationship and understanding can be nurtured, and appropriate structures developed (for example Neighbourhood Management Teams).

The key danger that community groups face is that they are increasingly being lumped together in the catchall definition of the third sector. This approach has a major flaw. There is an assumption that all these organisations are broadly similar, community groups are simply smaller versions of the bigger charities and voluntary organisations. But they are not. On the whole they do not employ staff, they do not have contracts with local authorities, and the services they deliver are those they have initiated, not services devolved from public institutions.

Community groups and organisations are usually quite small, they cover a limited geographical area, local activists and volunteers run them, and the best are democratic, open and accountable to the community. Community groups provide their own forms of service and they organise activities that have multiple outcomes in terms of social capital. Some are very specific, such as a choir or a Saturday football group, whilst others act as a collective voice for the community on a variety of issues, such as community associations, resident associations, and action groups.

The role these groups play in the community is largely unsung but of critical importance to healthy communities, and indeed a healthy society, and we neglect them at our peril. They help foster and encourage social cohesion, a sense of belonging, a collective voice, and a place where people learn a vast range of management, organisational, democratic and practical skills.

Community groups also play an important but unrecognised role in helping extend and foster democracy, both in terms of developing internal and local accountability mechanisms, but also acting as a bridge between community members and public services.

The National Survey of Third Sector Organisations (www.nstso.com) contains much information about community groups that has not been analysed. But here are some findings we have identified using the online cross-tabulation facility:

- The great majority of organisations in the sector are small community groups or voluntary organisations with no employees and little money. Nevertheless they produce as much volunteering as voluntary organisations with five, ten, twenty or more paid staff.
- The largest part of these smaller organisations are ‘below the radar’ - not registered charities nor found in formal lists of organisations, and could not be captured by the survey. Nevertheless, these smaller kinds of groups also form the majority of respondents even *above* the radar, ie respondents to the survey.
- What matters most to most third sector organisations about the relationship with local public bodies is not money but contact,

influence, being heard, being valued and practical advice and support. Money is also important but comes after these.

- If you draw a line between organisations on the basis of having above or below £25,000 a year, or having up to two or more than two employees, those below the line, amounting to well over half the respondents, have less contact, encouragement and recognition from local public bodies than those above the line.

And whilst performing a critically important role, community organisations are highly economical in terms of resources and support. The *Firm Foundations* report published by the Home Office in 2004 identified five key factors needed to help these organisations to flourish:

- Accessible and affordable space for meeting and activities
- Skilled community development support
- Networking between the individual groups and communication with other bodies both in and outside the sector
- Availability of small grants
- Availability of learning about citizenship

Whilst community development, as we showed in the *Empowerment Skills for All* report, is key to a healthy community sector, it requires the mobilisation of all public service staff and managers, with the appropriate skills and support to enable community organisations to play their part in the broader objective of empowering communities.

This then may form the basis of a new strategy to ensure that community empowerment remains on the agenda even at times of significant financial strain. It is a strategy rooted in the best traditions of community development but also fits with the way that local government may well be developing in the future. As the political parties' spotlight increasingly falls on the third sector, we must marshal our argument that community groups are fundamental to empowering communities but in turn require support from the whole front line of the public services.
