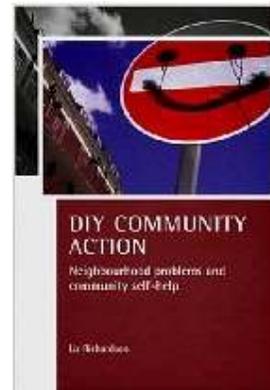


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DIY Community Action: Neighbourhood problems and community self-help

Liz Richardson (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2008)



This book explores collaborative community engagement for local well-being initiatives, and is substantially based on the experiences and perspectives of activist groups in low-income neighbourhoods across the United Kingdom. It gives a voice to people in precarious communities and “helps to explain the strong desire that people feel to organize themselves at a level below that of official structures, no matter how low or lowly.”

The value of volunteering, how groups organize, what gives groups the right to organize, obstacles and barriers to self-help, and supports that can maximize the potential for self-help groups, are all canvassed. The book provides significant insights into, for example, personal motivations behind participation; the ongoing significance of community to residents; ways in which governments, formal organizations and employed staff can undermine groups, rather than support engagement; and the attributes of effective community self-help groups.

The book concludes with the lessons from the overall research and a range of recommendations for promoting a broad community building framework that gives equal weighting to the following four factors:

- Facilitation of self-help groups
- Good quality services and management of neighbourhoods
- Civic engagement, democratic renewal and local accountability
- Stable and strong communities.

DIY community action is defined as “informal groups of people, acting on a voluntary basis, working together to solve problems by taking actions themselves, and with others.” The qualitative and stimulating information in this

comprehensive book is sourced from wide-ranging interviews with 300 community volunteers from 82 deprived areas, and material from many others who participated in a national program of intensive training and small grants to stimulate and facilitate self-help actions. This five-year project, carried out between 1996 and 2001, was funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation.

Whilst focused on lower-income areas the scope of the book is wide and its content will be of interest to all those residents, activists, organisations and governments interested in community building, community well-being, neighbourhood renewal, and local social and political advocacy.

The book's nine chapters of nearly 300 pages clearly set out information, analysis, figures, information boxes, explanatory tables and summaries which should assist the reader to come to a more in-depth understanding of the complexity of broad concepts such as community, local empowerment and social exclusion. At the same time the book provides easy access and insights into specific topics which may be of relevance to particular readers, for example, team work and leadership, and the value of volunteering.

The project activists involved in this research impress as resilient, resourceful and down-to-earth people. They see the importance of strong community spirit and attachments to place, whilst at the same time admitting that there can be negative impacts for broader social inclusion in tight-knit, insular communities. Their comments indicate that they are cognizant of the many local difficulties and tensions surrounding them as they tackle, albeit on a small scale, the problems that directly impinge on the quality of life of their communities, such as poor services, bad design, management and maintenance of estates, and anti-social behaviour.

It is acknowledged that the self-help group members studied represent only a small proportion of the population; but rather than simply seeing the activists as the "usual suspects," or what others may term "squeaky wheels", and accordingly dismissing their efforts and inputs, the book argues that they constitute a legitimate part of the participatory process. On this basis the book constructively puts forward a number of accountability and transparency suggestions that could enhance legitimacy of the groups in their direct and informal relationships, in the neighbourhoods, and also in interfacing with the wider community and external bodies: for example having other residents help raise funds or give financial backing, reaching out to the wider community, more openness to outside scrutiny, and the promotion of diversity.

It is refreshing to have research and discussion grounded in a clear concept of community, rather than arguing about differing interpretations that tend to negate the existence or validity of communities. Community in this instance is spatial and geographical and a set of social relationships, i.e. both 'place' and 'people.' The definition used "does not presume that neighbourhoods should be a primary focus for residents' careers, leisure time or social lives", but acknowledges that the

quality of neighbourhoods, services, and the behaviour of others impacts upon the quality of peoples' everyday lives, "whether we care about those people, or not." The ability to engage, with the purpose of influencing quality of life community outcomes, is therefore seen as an important aspect of social inclusion and of fundamental consideration in any approaches to community building.

Engagement is also seen as important in terms of the relationship between direct participatory democracy and representative democracy. The book argues that if different forms of accountability and legitimacy were understood and respected between stakeholders then all would be empowered.

Residents can engage and contribute to local democracy, and can start co-producing. They are more likely to be encouraged to make self-help inputs to their own quality of life. Local politicians could be better stimulated to play an effective community leadership role and contribute to local democracy. Local workers and other professionals could be encouraged to problem solve at the front line. This could add professional expertise and feed in evidence to guide options for local actions to raise the quality of the decision-making process.

This view provides a timely challenge, reminding us all that empowerment calls for transformational changes in the way in which people relate and that tinkering with power bases will not necessarily result in sustained changes in community well-being.

The book offers seven lessons about community building which reinforce the comprehensive approach taken in this self-help study. They are:

- Neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion are about more than just tackling poverty
- Neighbourhoods and communities matter to people
- Self-help in all forms is at the base of community building
- Community self-help is a choice by the minority that produces benefits for the majority
- Community self-help in poor communities provides triple benefits, viz. improving mainstream services, contributing to neighbourhood renewal, underpinning democracy through civic engagement in decision-making and civic responsibility
- The legitimacy of community groups was questioned by many other bodies and often misunderstood
- Community organizing is strong, yet fragile.

These lessons are then reinforced with final recommendations for promoting a community building strategy. Add the four community building framework factors and a complete package is provided for enhancing overall community well-being through self-help. In addition, the inclusion of specific suggestions for targeted actions by different stakeholders makes this publication an invaluable resource for all those committed to achieving changes for the better at neighbourhood and community levels.