Mapping economic potential in North East Glasgow

Exploring the case for Asset Based Community Development

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The Case For Asset Based Community Development

Glasgow North East is an area of multiple deprivation. It is no stretch of the imagination to consider that regeneration strategies in Glasgow have not worked for the most deprived areas. For example, Possilpark, in the northern area of the constituency, has consistently ranked as one of the lowest scoring areas of multiple deprivation since it started being monitored by the Scottish Government in 2006.1 Socioeconomic inequality, which is ingrained and persistent, needs an approach which directly challenges the status quo. The Asset Based Community Development approach utilises an alternative perspective: what if we look at the area not as a problem, but as an opportunity?

Just off a major motorway, a strategic location within an hour of Scotland’s largest cities, with a rich industrial heritage and an increasingly diverse demographic, the case for investment and development in the area is clear, before we even start to consider the means of doing so. This report makes the case for development in Glasgow North East, and for that development to be asset based.

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is the theory of utilising a community’s skills and strengths (including those not traditionally included in conventional economic analysis) to empower and motivate the community to build a better, more prosperous environment. Communities are not problems that can be fixed within a specific time frame; and equally, lasting change is not something which can be ‘done’ to people. This means of achieving change advocates a pro-active, citizen-led approach, as opposed to citizens being passive recipients of policies which have led to gentrification, unaffordable housing and unsustainable models of employment such as low wage jobs in large retail outlets.2 This is problematic on several fronts; low wage employment means that people are unable to break the cycle of poverty, and profits are extracted out of the local area, leaving communities on aggregate no better off. Asset based community development advocates small local businesses and social enterprises which create jobs and keep the flow of money in the local economy.

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So why has this strategy not been pursued historically in this area? Patterson (2014) has argued that while asset based community development may make communities stronger, it can do so in ways that cannot be measured in terms of GDP. An example of this is the sharing of assets and skills through time-banking, where one person can exchange an hour of practical labour, for instance, with an hour of babysitting. Although this is of considerable benefit to communities and cities, all of this may occur without exchange of money. As long as the economic performance of governments is judged in terms of GDP growth they have little incentive to champion alternative approaches.

A toxic combination of neglect at local authority level and macro policies pursued by successive distant governments has seen potentially beneficial policies being overlooked in favour of ‘topdown’ regeneration policies which encourage gentrification and the pushing of marginalized people further to the fringes of the city, with too much reliance on multi-national companies to create jobs.

Asset based community development has attracted criticism for ‘capitulating to neoliberalism’, as its practice could, in theory, shift responsibility for inequality and injustice from the government onto private individuals.3 Friedli (2013) made reference to the possibility of these theories being touted as a smokescreen to excuse the withdrawal of public services.4

This is a valid concern given the context of UK Government austerity depriving communities of essential access to services, but ABCD should be seen as additional access to and mobilization of community resources, something that is complemented by having strong, universal access to government services. We don’t, here, make the case for David Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ where the state has fewer obligations and communities must fend for themselves, instead we’re describing an attempt to embolden communities to take what is rightfully theirs, aided by and protected by the state to shape their own futures and make their own lives better, in line with their own priorities. ABCD should ideally be a practice in self-determination, facilitated by rather than imposed on by the state.

A useful example of this kind of ‘empowering’ ABCD we can look to is Kretzmann & McKnight’s (1993) vision of ‘mapping’ the assets already existing in a community and utilising them to help citizens attain their goals.5 The assets are the institutions, talents, resources and social capital which exist in that community. They advocate ABCD as an alternative to the ‘deficiency-based’ approach we’ve seen in strategies for regeneration for generations. Deficiency-based approaches lead to viewing communities as lists of problems and can reinforce two devastating ideas; firstly, that things must always get worse before anyone will intervene, and secondly, that the only real help to a community comes from outside experts.

Further problems with the deficiency based approach are identified in Dr John McKendrick’s paper for Common Weal, ‘A Red Road to Regeneration’, in which he cites persistent evidence of failed regeneration strategies in Glasgow. McKendrick cites the example of the botched decision made by Glasgow City Council to blow up Glasgow North East’s Red Road flats as a centerpiece to the opening of...
the Commonwealth Games in 2014. The stunt was intended to make a statement, according to the council at the time, of ‘dramatic rebirth’ and to show the city’s commitment to regeneration. There was no consultation with residents of the area to do such a thing, and the backlash was strong, and embarrassing to the council who backed down and reversed the plan.

This kind of ‘top-down’ regeneration strategy has failed people living in some of Scotland’s most deprived areas. It’s time to look at community-led regeneration and see our communities not as problems to be solved, but assets to be developed and nurtured.

McKendrick argues that this kind of decision making, which involved many organisations such as Safedem, Police Scotland and Glasgow Housing Association, but failed to explore the most rudimentary of public consultation, is an example of the ‘worst kind of regeneration, i.e. something that is ‘done to others’ by city elites.’

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Mapping Glasgow North East

Bound to the arbitrary (for our purposes, at least) geographical lines drawn by the Boundary Commission, our team took to the task of mapping derelict land in the Westminster constituency of Glasgow North East. The constituency takes in several areas of poor socio-economic outcomes. Our list, while covering a great deal of the area, is not a thoroughly comprehensive one, and the aim is to create an open-sourced publicly edited database of derelict sites both in Glasgow North East and all over urban Scotland, which can evolve with the city’s regeneration.

The constituency is one of seven of similar size in the Glasgow city boundaries, a relatively small geographical area of Scotland. Around 85,000 people live there.6

The constituency is not a homogenous group of people; many of the communities identified in a pre-election survey said that they feel isolated from each other. This feeling is compounded in an area with low car ownership and poor public transport links. It’s crucial to consider this when contemplating the kinds of services that people are able to access in their communities. Often if a service is not offered locally, people will not access it at all, so the need for community facilities and green spaces is perhaps more imperative in this constituency than in some others in Glasgow which are occupied by a more mobile population.

Our team photographed around forty derelict buildings or substantial patches of ground which could be redeveloped for community use. Some sites were too large to photograph, and mostly the photographs were taken around main streets and thoroughfares, so there will be inevitable oversights within housing areas. At a conservative estimate, there are more than 40 sites which could be utilised for community purposes.

Glasgow North East is home to many talented social entrepreneurs, and we will come to explore the services that these organisations are providing in the area. If some of these organisations could be replicated even just ten times, the difference that this regeneration could make to people’s lives has the potential to be significant, both economically and socially. If the rest of the derelict sites were to be used for green spaces, for example, the potential benefit to the communities in Glasgow North East could be measured in terms of health and well-being, access to fresh produce, sporting opportunities, air quality as well as the broader economic and social benefits of living in a greener, more pleasant environment.

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If childcare facilities, employability clubs, sports grounds, play areas, community gardens, credit unions and community halls had their own space and resources to operate across the communities, there would be an opportunity to create a circular economy where the inputs and outputs benefit everyone in the area, not just direct users of facilities.

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A map of derelict sites in the area with photographs can be located [here](#).
A selection of photographs of the derelict sites. To view more, contact mhairilove@gmail.com:
The Community Empowerment Act, And Its Place In Economic Democracy

Economic democracy has to some extent been taken seriously in Glasgow, with participatory budgeting sessions for local authority areas already occurring. Labour and SNP, as part of 2017 Scottish council election manifestos, have also committed to millions of pounds to be devolved directly to communities.

Newly elected Member of Parliament for Glasgow North East, Anne McLaughlin, held a largescale participatory conference six months into her tenure, with facilitated discussions from local people and groups to formulate an ‘Agenda for Change’ for the parliamentary term. Overwhelmingly, two of the key things that emerged were the inadequacy of green spaces for the population, and a desire to have a greater control over decision making and budgeting for their communities. Both of these issues are directly relevant to the provisions set out by the Community Empowerment Act.

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The aims and aspirations with regard to democratic control over economic decisions articulated by the people of Glasgow North East are not specific to that area, indeed there has been a shift in this direction for quite some time all over Scotland and beyond. Participatory budgeting is a popular concept where ordinary citizens can partake in direct democracy in town hall meetings or similar. They are forums to decide what local authority budget priorities should be in their community.

The Christie Commission in 2011 made the recommendation to the Scottish Government that local communities be more involved in decision making:

“The Commission heard a consistent view that the potential benefits of a local partnership approach are far from being fully realised; that there are significant variations in the effectiveness of community planning partnerships; and that, for the most part, the process of community planning has focused on the relationships between organisations, rather than with communities.”

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2016 represents a welcome step in the right direction for advocates of asset based community development, as part of a wider landscape of economic democracy. The Act holds several provisions to lend power to communities that aren’t strictly relevant for our purposes, but a few which are quite useful here. The Act holds provisions for the strengthening of community planning which proposes to give communities greater say in the provision of services, with an obligation being placed on Community Planning Partnerships to ‘make all reasonable efforts to secure the participation’ of relevant community bodies when undertaking decision making processes.

The Act also confers new rights enabling communities to identify their own needs and priorities and to request that action be taken on these decisions, with a community group being awarded the power to make a ‘participation request’ should it believe it can improve the outcome of a public service, and the local authority being required to agree unless there are reasonable grounds not to.

The Act also extends a community’s right to buy or otherwise to have greater control over assets. This is as part of an amendment to the 2003 Land Reform Act which extended existing Right To Buy legislation to urban as well as rural land, and to community groups as well as limited companies.

However, most interestingly, for our purposes, the Community Empowerment Act allows for Community Right To Buy abandoned and neglected land, and establishes the Scottish Land Fund by extending it to urban areas, which provides a funding stream for groups applying for Right to Buy. This allows for community groups to buy land without a willing seller in some cases, with approval from the Ministers of the Scottish Government. The great benefit of this scenario is that should the case be subject to legal obstruction, it is the Ministers who are liable, and not the community group, making it much easier for community groups to pursue. The spirit of this part of the legislation is perhaps best summed up in the consultation:

“The prevailing view was that communities should have a compulsory power to buy neglected or abandoned land where the public benefit is clearly justifiable and where reasonable efforts had been made to contact the landlord. It was commented that this may happen in circumstances where the landlord is absent, or has gained planning permission but then failed to take the plans forward.”

The process of making an ‘Asset Transfer Request’ is ostensibly straightforward but could be made to run smoother with the co-operation of the landowner;

1. First, the applying community group (‘community’ here is not limited to a geographical community, groups can be formed by common interest or shared characteristics) approaches the relevant authority for detailed information about the property before making a formal request.
2. Once a request is made, the authority must assess the proposals, and take a decision based on the economic, social and environmental benefits and any other relevant factors.
3. The Presumption exists that the relevant authority must agree to the request, unless there are 'reasonable grounds' for refusal. As this legislation is in its infancy, presumably the 'reasonable grounds' wording is yet to be tested in the courts. Crucially, for the legislation to work as intended, any applicants subject to a legal challenge are to be represented by ministers of the Scottish Government.

4. An appeal mechanism exists if the request is not granted.

Some aspects of the Act have yet to be worked out in practice, for instance when there is no set time frame for response to a participation request, this can give the responding authority opportunity to obfuscate and delay proceedings. Again, though, there currently exists very little jurisprudence in this area and it is very likely that these issues will be ironed out over coming years.

The most common criticism heard by community groups when researching this paper was that the Act is long and very confusing, and lacks clear, concise and straightforward instructions for applying groups as to the process and their rights. It is clear some work has to be undertaken to engage and educate groups as to what their rights are in order to achieve the goals of empowerment as set out by the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government have provided an 'easy-read' guide to the act, but this is more of a broad-brush simplistic guide to the whole act, and not an explanation of any specific bit.

Iain Cairns (2014) set out challenges for the road ahead for the Community Empowerment Act, using the example of the Castle Toward attempted buyout. The community development company had made a business plan (which, incidentally, would've created 80 jobs in the area) based on a valuation of £850,000, which included £750,000 from the Scottish Land Fund, and inward investment in the area of £10m. The council (the landowner, in this case) had an alternative valuation conducted which gave a value of £1.7m. The bid failed, despite attempts to rescue the deal, and the council ‘only succeeded in hanging on to a liability costing £20,000 per month, and rejected the possible economic benefits to the area which proponents of the project had established.’

Cairns makes the point that the backdrop of austerity can incentivise landowners to hang onto properties when they perceive losing them to be an economic loss, even if in practice they are operating at a loss for an indefinite period of time. This won’t be the case with every proposed buyout, of course, but it does highlight an unintended consequence of the legislation: the need for at least some degree of willing co-operation from landowners. It could be argued that this dependency doesn’t give communities as much power as was intended by the creation of the Act.

On balance, however, the potential for this legislation to change lives and communities across Scotland, and particularly in low SIMD areas, may be significant. The spirit of the legislation is still very much on side with the communities of Scotland, and it must be considered that many of the ideas contained in the act are new concepts in this country and the experience that grants practical knowledge and application is yet to be learned.

### Positive Case Studies From North East Glasgow

Anne McLaughlin MP’s maiden speech in the House of Commons refers to the precise nature of this paper:

“Sadly, residents of my constituency are never very far from a derelict building or waste ground, the best and worst example of both beauty and dereliction being the Winter Gardens in Springburn. It seems to me that the Scottish Parliament’s Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 was written with my constituency in mind, and I look forward to working with those communities as they empower themselves and transform the constituency. What we do have in abundance in my constituency is resilient people. From projects that have risen from the despair, such as LoveMilton to Ruchazie Poverty Action Group, St Roch’s football club, which I should mention not only gives free community space to all community groups in its area, but gave me a free season ticket—[ Interruption]—that was my declaration—to the Everlasting Arms food bank based in the street in which I live in Dennistoun, an African church feeding local people.”

“In Possilpark, project manager Ann Lawrence at Young People’s Futures has built an organisation led by the community from the ground up. There’s a job club, a free community café, a youth activity programme, family support centre and a learning suite with free access to ICT equipment.”

While there is no dispute about the abundance of resilient people in Glasgow North East, we could go a step further here and consider the entrepreneurial spirit of some of the projects in the area. Academics often cite pulling oneself up ‘by the bootstraps’ as a hallmark of entrepreneurial activity, and making a successful enterprise or organisation with limited resources should clearly be valued. There are many examples of this in Glasgow North East and the individuals and groups involved are surely what can be described as an asset in the purest sense. Aside from some already mentioned in Anne McLaughlin’s speech, there are a number of other examples:

In Barmulloch, we see BCDC, the Barmulloch Community Development Company, being the first organisation in Scotland to receive funds from the new legislation to perform a community buy out of a disused church hall. The company holds regular welfare advice clinics, has community facilities, holds classes for women who have...
been victims of trauma, hosts community engagement processes, as well as fun family events like 'C in the Park', their annual community festival. BCDC have started from nothing and were led by the community in establishing itself as an institution providing services for everyone in the area to enjoy. In Possilpark, project manager Ann Lawrence at Young People's Futures has built an organisation led by the community from the ground up. There's a job club, a free community café, a youth activity programme, family support centre and a learning suite with free access to ICT equipment.

Although recently moved from the area, social enterprise MsMissMrs was located at Balgrayhill Community Centre for several years. The project is run by Sylvia Douglas, from Springburn, who makes 'empowerment pants', superhero-style underwear and reinvests the profits into running 'self-empowerment' based programmes for girls and women to encourage them to fulfill their potential.

In these examples, individuals have shown not just resilience but real entrepreneurial skill, business sense and an ability to listen and allow the community to shape their own futures. If there is a means for governments, reserved, devolved, or local, to support organisations like this then it must be grasped, because we have seen from numerous past examples that top-down models of regeneration with no grassroots support or democracy are not making the changes necessary for these communities to thrive.

In practice, when utilising the Community Empowerment Act and other measures to engage and empower citizens, communication is the key to success. Resources have to be put in place not only to inform citizens as to their rights, but to inform landowners of their obligations. Follow-up procedures must be drawn up to ensure that local authorities and landowners can't obfuscate, over-complicate or otherwise unnecessarily draw out the participation request process, whether intended or just as a result of ignorance in understanding the legislation.

"People in Glasgow have been living with derelict land or buildings for years, and attention must be explicitly drawn to the routes to address the issue."

Communities must be specifically informed of their rights - if we look at an example across the pond, projects in New York City have placed signage on undeveloped land, stating 'This Land is Your Land', with the details of the city agency responsible for it underneath along with a link to a website explaining the rights of communities. People in Glasgow have been living with derelict land or buildings for years, and attention must be explicitly drawn to the routes to address the issue.

Conclusion

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