What is Community Organising – and how complex is it?

Some say it's another form of Community Development. Others say it's more. Some think its complex. Others disagree. Some say the essential drivers are basic. Others think it's about sustainable social change. So what is Community Organising? This simple Toolbox Guidance Note provides you with some basic information about the subject, and provides further resources and further reading at its rear.

Let's start with some basic history:

Community Organising is nothing new. People have been fighting injustice or inequality for years, often in very local settings (localities, towns and Neighbourhoods). Everyone will have heard of, or come across, some local fight against injustice or social conditions. The argument is simple and compelling: Those who are affected by negative social conditions can have a say in what could be improved, and how it could be improved.

For many (but not all), Saul Alinsky is known as the man that gave birth to the concept of Community Organising: He used the traditional trade union methods of the 1930's and applied them to poor communities tackling social issues. He encouraged those who were affected by economic or social conditions to take an equal part in designing solutions for their problems. Born in Chicago 1909, he grew up to become a criminologist. When he studied Gangland Activity across America, he realised that such activity was largely formed through deprivation. Alinsky claimed that in order to tackle some of the social issues prevalent in communities, they needed a form of power: The power came from the collective: People coming together to defeat, treat or improve a social or economic condition. And thus there appears to be two aspects of Community Organising: One is very local (an example might be greater representation for ethnic minorities on a local school Governor Board) whilst the second is very national, and is about resisting external forces and pressures (Be that in this example Government funding, indirect or direct discrimination, or the implications of education and gender), which is a much harder aspect to address, and change longer to sustain.

Terminology:

There are many definitions of the term community organising but for most it's one of these two:

Either:

The work of building relationships and networks in communities: Activating people to create social and political change through collective action

Or:

The process with which a group of people organise: Taking measures to influence the policies or culture surrounding them.

So what does that mean in practice?

If we believe that social fragmentation is a real issue for our localities, areas or neighbourhoods, then the idea of Community Organising could appeal. The question is, and has been for some time, how can we build inclusive local communities that in turn mobilise the people and assets towards vibrant community life, while also holding external forces to account?

Some people think that Community Organising holds some of the answers: The process involves identifying what people care strongly about in a community through 1-2-1 conversations, building relationships and then networks which are strong enough to support a long struggle for change, developing community leaders and mobilising people to take collective action to achieve a shift of power and significant social change.

Strengths:

Many commentators cite the follow strengths of Community Organising as an approach:

- The potential for Community Organising to increase community or collective action, develop new networks or bond with and strengthen existing ones features clearly amongst its identified strengths and opportunities.
- Community Organising can also be seen as A-Political, and could offer a way of engaging individuals or communities disengaged from the current means or route to involvement. It could add to the range and diversity of voices able to influence and shape what happens in local neighbourhoods, areas or localities.
- The statistics around Community Organising are impressive: 540 community organisers recruited to date, 15,000 volunteers achieved, 1,500 local projects supported and 400 Neighbourhoods involved.

But there are some weaknesses:

- Many commentators argue that a principal weakness in Community Organising is over its definition. For many people, Community Organising means different things at different times: Some commentators see no difference between Community Organising and standard Community Development.
- Funding is seen as a major issue: Community Organising has a focus on social change and this momentum can be harder to gain and sustain without funding. Whilst there are a number of current funds available for Community Organising, it is only available in certain areas of the UK and for a limited time. Beyond the initial programme funds, it may be difficult to sustain hard-fought social change. Without funding to support expenses for individual volunteer community organisers or extra resources for the infrastructure needed

to support Community Organising locally then the sustainability of the model becomes suspect.

- Threats include the potential for Community Organising (particularly following Alinsky's rules) to create division, give authority to those with the loudest voice at the expense of vulnerable or minority interests, and to lose any opportunity for creating practical partnership arrangements between communities and other agencies.

Further Information and Resources:

http://www.corganisers.org.uk/

http://locality.org.uk/projects/community-organisers/

https://youngfoundation.org/publications/growing-community-organising/

http://infed.org/mobi/saul-alinsky-community-organizing-and-rules-for-radicals/