COVID, Social Enterprises and Communities

### Abstract

This contribution projects that many now writing on a period of ‘post neoliberalism’ are describing higher level activity rather than recognising the detailed focus of better resourced, especially ethnographic research approaches which are gathering smaller scale evidence of changes at community level. While several studies write at a higher level on COVID and community as almost interchangeable, those from LSE, the Lottery’s Big Local 150 areas and directly from individual social enterprises and community groups show the emergence of new patterns of behaviour, many generated through COVID restrictions. Many of these have been conditioned through increasing reliance on digital approaches only made possible by these groups, in patterns and processes which will endure. Instead of UK and Scottish Government reliance on funding programmes with top down grant awards to larger organisations which are better equipped regularly to measure and report their impact, local level funding is needed for many smaller organisations whose main problems are continuity and survival.

### Background

A growing number of contributions suggests that because of COVID a period of post neoliberalism has already begun (Davies & Gane, 2021; Durand, 2021; Meadway, 2021). Durand even claims that recent events represent “1979 in Reverse”, overturning IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programmes with their “subordinating industrial relations and welfare systems to the growing power of finance“(Durand, 2021).

Alongside these higher level claims, evidence is slowly emerging that smaller community groups’ significant endeavours during COVID are not properly recognised. From examples below the author seeks to show that recent community developments do not fit this higher level narrative and do not represent a “backlash from below” (Slobodian, 2021, p. 3):

“The backlash-from-below narrative relies on a stark scalar divide between an upper stratum of interlocked states, supranational institutions, and capitalist elites, and a lower stratum of fragmented national populations subject to their decisions”

Instead, as shown below, many small local changes are occurring imperceptibly and almost subconsciously. So Davies and Gane are more accurate in their description of critical areas “where the events of 2020-2021 will alter the conditions of political and economic activity”, based on a Foucauldian “biopolitical techniques for the modelling and influencing of behaviour” and “getting individuals to conform to rapidly established norms so as to limit transmission rates”. These show that “forms of local solidarity, collective responsibility and collective risk reappeared over the course of the pandemic and may not be easily forgotten” (Davies & Gane, 2021, p. 15,16).

Examples below show that many local changes are only latterly being recognised in better resourced research projects. An independent evaluation of the UK Government’s Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF) by the polling company Ipsos MORI forms a context for this lack of recognition. While larger organisations are accustomed to generating evidence of their impact, they do not always produce biggest changes. “(O)ne in 10 grants were won by large charities, including some charities worth more than £100mn a year……47% went to charities with an income between £100,000 and £1mn…a quarter of CCSF funding was distributed to large, major or super-major charities” (Hargrave, 2021).

Because outputs and outcomes from smaller groups’ actions are still building, it is too early to advance an overall theory for these alternative local developments. “What is happening is still at the stage of “weak theory” or “theory that refuses to know too much” about what is or isn’t possible—so that our organizing, and our commitment to face-to-face negotiation and transformation, can be strong” (Miller, 2013, p. 526). Once these new trends are more adequately recognised, many of these organisations, with appropriate funding, can enable communities to reunite and build for their future. “In the future, funding that is flexible and supports the core functions of smaller charities over the longer term should be a model of first resort” This will enable these organisations to “focus on what they do best: identifying and responding to complex social issues and supporting and engaging vulnerable people and communities to achieve the outcomes they desire” (Drayson et al., 2021, p. 41).

UK and Scottish economies are already retreating into post COVID austerity. Without an appropriate funded role for many community organisations, many community problems will get worse. Because many public sector reports on COVID and communities are written about top down service delivery, they may not reflect developments taking place at a local level ‘on the ground’ through the individual vital roles of community groups and social enterprises.

### “New Kinds of People”

A small number of detailed reports on local developments, which are now emerging, are already describing how communities after eighteen months of various restrictions begin to reorientate themselves. “(S)ome of the literature observes how fundamental roles and relationships have been recast and existing rules and norms suspended….. Some of this writing feeds into a nascent and multifaced movement for greater community power (Pollard et al., 2021)” (McCabe et al., 2021, p. 9). In addition to those already experiencing disadvantage, the impact of COVID has also been felt acutely by “new kinds of people, rendered vulnerable by these unprecedented events”. These groups include “care givers, most often women, who are shouldering multiple sets of caring responsibilities; essential workers who are experiencing new forms of stigma; and the elderly who are cut off from those who meet their basic needs” (Bear et al., 2020, p. 103). Examples below show social enterprises and community groups supporting new kinds of people which are emerging but need funding to continue their work.

Restrictions on face to face activity have produced new community difficulties and solutions. Many local social enterprises and community groups understand these new developments only too well, since these reflect their ongoing role throughout COVID. “Our argument is that these economic practices are here already, all around us, and that identifying and assembling them is a first step toward mobilizing and enacting a different kind of economy” (Gibson-Graham, 2014, pp. 83, 85).

These developments show an emergence of “pre figurative politics”, or the “self conscious channelling of energy into modelling the forms of action that are sought to be generalised in the future in circumstances characterised by power, hierarchy, and conflict” (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021, p. 644). With appropriate funding, these “institutionalised practices impact wider systems, for example by altering the momentum of dominant projects, changing perceptions, or shaping spaces and society” (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021, p. 645).

Prefigurative politics are most sustainable when they lead “to wider social cooperation and the institutionalisation of improvisational practice, often but certainly not inevitably in the form of named organisations/movements, and frequently in ways that provide some protection against outside forces. … Those involved in prefigurative politics have been able to create new social and economic opportunities, reshape spatial practice, alter how people conceive of themselves, and influence wider affective atmospheres” (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021, p. 654).

Many of these practices are worth “showcasing and replicating—cooperatively owned enterprises that were organized around solidarity principles” and “commitments to generating more, not less, local jobs; trade networks designed to support the livelihoods of producers and sustainability of their environments; and the practice of combining paid and unpaid labour to piece together livelihoods” (Gibson-Graham, 2014, p. 81).

### Community Champions

More detailed descriptions of the role of smaller organisations during COVID are emerging, especially addressing these areas of need (Drayson et al., 2021, p. 24):

“access to food, isolation and loneliness, information and mental health/wellbeing; and they tailored their response to different groups and communities experiencing complex social issues using their local knowledge and relationships. ….. finding multiple ways to maintain human contact by checking up on people, keeping in touch with them and connecting them to one another too”

Their real value during COVID is that they ‘showed up’ (Drayson et al., 2021, p. 27):

“has been the fact that ’showed-up’ to support the people and communities that needed them the most and have then ‘stuck around’ as the crisis has persisted... ….. deep understanding of needs, enabled them to respond quickly and flexibly to people and communities affected by complex social issues”

In England, some of these have been funded from the UK Government’s Community Champions programme. “Community champions can include local leaders, individuals within community and faith-based organisations, community groups, community health committees, stakeholders and individuals” (SAGE SPI-B, 2020, p. 13). “Community champions also promote access to services, create peer support groups to connect with people in similar situations (e.g. illness), develop social groups to develop skills (e.g. physical activity, healthy cooking) and connect people with activities in the community and signposting to other groups” (SAGE SPI-B, 2020, p. 16). Their activities include “attending members’ meetings, network events, social and print media, and informal one-to-one conversations in local settings which can be effective with local people who are nervous about approaching agencies outside their community! (SAGE SPI-B, 2020, p. 21).

“Local communities and groups are beginning to reorient themselves beyond the temporally-bound demands of the pandemic context, and towards more fundamental structural demands. “(A)t this critical juncture it is crucial that the government policy is not simply shaped by politicians, civil servants and scientists, but communities themselves” (SAGE SPI-B, 2020, p. 30)

The report in January 2021 from the Scottish Renewal Advisory Board makes generous references to “communities and collective endeavour” (Social Renewal Advisory board, 2021, p. 4). It calls for a shift in the balance of power “enabling individuals and communities to have more control over shaping local and national policy, more help to realise the greatest benefit from local assets, and more say in taking funding and grant-making decisions” (Social Renewal Advisory board, 2021, p. 48). But a major difficulty throughout this report, following the direction of the Christie Commission (Christie Commission, 2011), is its emphasis on “service delivery” through existing delivery frameworks.

“Frontline staff need to be empowered to use their professional judgement, optimise compassionate and values-based approaches and make the most of calculated opportunities when they arise. Values-based leadership will enable this transfer of power across the system to both frontline staff and the families they support” (Social Renewal Advisory board, 2021, p. 54). Examples below show that modifying existing service delivery and neglecting changes happening in communities is inadequate.

Other Scottish Government reports also overlook new and emerging social infrastructures during COVID, including in its survey of organisations working in communities. 62 out of 112 community organisations responded, including those working with children and young people, older people, those with disabilities, carers, homeless people, those living in poverty, and those with mental health problems” (APS Group & Scottish Government Social Research, 2020, p. 4). The Report acknowledges its limitations. “(B)ecause of the pandemic and the need for timely information without over-burdening organisations in important supportive roles, this research was brief, and it did not allow for follow up questions to clarify or probe for additional information from participants” (APS Group & Scottish Government Social Research, 2020, p. 4). “Again, this means that although these insights are useful, they are taken from a specific organisational context and on their own do not provide a full insight into the direct lived experiences of people and communities through the pandemic” (APS Group & Scottish Government Social Research, 2020, p. 8).

“Some organisations expressed a desire to consider further how to develop and continue the local and neighbourhood goodwill and support beyond the immediate collective response to the coronavirus pandemic. A couple of organisations highlighted the importance of local democracy and participation, and …. the devolution of power to local communities to be in control of financial and policy decisions to enable communities to recover” (APS Group & Scottish Government Social Research, 2020, p. 11)

However, while recognising its limitations, the Report recognises the difficulties of many community organisations, including “the viability of third sector and community organisations. Issues included: nervousness about future cuts; the impact of reduced services on communities; the combination of an increase in demand and decrease in funding; and the need for new ways of thinking and working to respond to changing needs” (APS Group & Scottish Government Social Research, 2020, p. 14)”

### Big Local Survey

In contrast to these top down approaches, important community developments are being reported in those areas receiving most funding from Big Lottery. “Big Local (BL) a major area based initiative in England. Funded by the Big Lottery and managed by a charitable trust, Local Trust, residents of 150 relatively disadvantaged geographical areas in England have been allocated over £1 million each for a period of 10 years or more to support them in making their neighbourhood a better place to live. “(B)y giving residents greater control over decisions that affect their neighbourhoods, the initiative has the potential to impact on social, psychosocial and environmental determinants of health (Popay 2010; Whitehead et al. 2016)” (Orton et al., 2019, p. 53)

Big Local areas’ individual local area systems include demography, economy (material resources, local economy, employment rates) and social relationships. Local decision making structures, levels of community organisation and the existence and role of public and third sector organisations will shape the kinds of system shifts the intervention prompts. “The level of control afforded to residents in driving local action arguably makes these processes unusually unpredictable and hard to track” (Orton et al., 2019, p. 53).

Emerging reports on these Big Local areas recognise the need to “move away from traditional, centralised, top-down or command-and control approaches, both to planning and delivering services to meet local needs, and to organising emergency support in the crisis. The vibrancy, agility, innovation and responsiveness found at citizen and community level are promoted in contrast to a system dominated by a stultifying, controlling state and other powerful institutions” (McCabe et al., 2020, p. 8). “Through nurturing rich connections between individuals, groups and agencies in their respective communities, their responses to the pandemic, even at the height of lockdown, have extended far beyond crisis provision” (McCabe et al., 2021, p. 4).

In rough alignment, a different approach to local area provision is also advocated by the Scottish Community Alliance (Hardie, 2021), based on the May 1982 Barclay Report on “Social Workers: Their Role and Tasks”. Barclays’s central theme is a return to community social work (Barclay & National Institute for Social Work, 1982, p. 218):

“Community social work may be based on locality (centred on ‘patch teams’ on resource centres or on social workers working in hospitals or attached to general practices or to schools) or upon shared concern (centred on specialist teams at area level or multi disciplinary teams serving a wider population”

A return to the Barclay principles has also been advocated elsewhere (Rhodes & Broad, 2011)

“We should go back to the community social work principles applauded by Barclay and resume our journey from there using a framework of strengths based approaches and Local Area Coordination”

However, while this general approach may be applicable and relevant in the current wider context of the Scottish Government’s current Consultation on a National Care Service (Scottish Government, 2021) it may not be as timely or relevant for the more urgent needs of smaller community organisations where viability and continuing provision of services during COVID has become a major issue.

### LSE Survey in 2020

Two much larger studies, funded and researched at the London School of Economics (LSE), also give detailed descriptions of events at community level. For the first research report, “to find out the lived patterns of UK society under Covid-19”, a six month ethnographic study featured an extensive survey of 3,800 residents across the UK in June 2020, using qualitative and quantitative analysis. Anthropological methods – including ethnographic research, quantitative and qualitative surveys – were used to understand differences in how communities perceive and behave in relation to Government regulations; and triangulates this evidence with data collected by public health bodies, third sector organisations and the Office of National Statistics” (Bear et al., 2020, p. 11). These were matched with semi-structured interviews with ‘local experts’ and mediators who are at the intersection between formalised and informalised varieties of care between March and August 2020. These are people who occupy “dense nodes of connection including: volunteers, advice workers, social workers, mutual aid group members, faith or community leaders, homeless charity workers, small shopkeepers” More focused research was also conducted in Leicestershire, East London and through the Workers’ Rights Centre (Bear et al., 2020, p. 106).

The LSE study continues “We believe that communities themselves should have a role in identifying priorities and co-producing solutions. We suggest immediate investment in social infrastructures at community level, so local authorities, citizen groups and the third sector are able to provide complementary and comprehensive support to the diverse needs of their communities (Bear et al., 2020, p. 13). A centrepiece might be ‘community renewal centres’. “To work with communities, we need to build new spaces of encounter, mutuality and engagement across social boundaries. This can best be achieved through a combination of strategies involving community champions, peer educators, primary care and mutual aid groups. … We think that this can best be achieved through systematic investment in community renewal centres that would be more ambitious than the older Surestart centres. They would create a shared space of encounter in which different groups could negotiate their relations with each other” (Bear et al., 2020, p. 104).

### LSE Survey in 2021

A further, more recent LSE study uses findings from 13 months of ethnographic, participatory, and quantitative research in Ealing, East London (Hackney, Southwark and Tower Hamlets) Leicester City and surrounding counties and Northeast England (South Tyneside and South Shields) and shows how fundamentally things have already changed. “They have adapted and built new networks of kinship and care within and between families, friends, and communities”. These new “social infrastructures” show that economic life and pandemic recovery relies on the strength of these foundational relations” (Bear et al., 2021, p. 3).

The Report further elaborates. “In the UK, local and rapid response initiatives saved lives as voluntary sector, religious organisations, and Community Champions built on these relations of care to provide mental health advice, sign-posting to services and vaccine uptake”. During COVID, the basis of relations and burdens of care has changed. “The ways in which people relate to and care for each other has changed during the pandemic in the UK, generating new forms of mutuality, burdens, stigma, and mental health concerns”. “Social infrastructures have been imagined and acted on in new ways during the pandemic. Some groups have become more connected to social infrastructures of care… so that “third sector, faith-based and grassroots organisations have come together in new ways to meet the emerging needs of families and communities” (Bear et al., 2021, p. 3).

### “Death of the Social”

Worrying signs of digital poverty are arising from increasing reliance for survival on digital platforms in high streets, workplaces, schools, campuses and hospitality spaces (Davies & Gane, 2021, p. 18) “In one study area, the pandemic demonstrated how few people had connectivity or IT equipment, with 78% of adults classified as ‘passive or uncommitted users of the internet’, compared with a national average of 17%” (McCabe et al., 2021, p. 15).

One of the main conclusions of these major LSE Reports is that through COVID there has been a “death of the social”, or a breaking of ties and stalling of life progression. Denied normal education, family and friendship interactions, access to community centres, the ability to mourn, marry or forge relationships, as well as experiencing reduced access to advice and services, people have found creative solutions, many using on digital access. A Glasgow social enterprise known to the author, provided further evidence (Glasgow Social Enterprise Coordinator, personal communication, 7 September 2021):

“Once Covid came along we had to quickly figure out how to ensure our communities were not left behind to become victims of loneliness and diminishing health outcomes. … Only with the help of the Leonard Cheshire Trust were we able to equip our members with the basic skills and equipment they needed to stay involved and motivated. ……. The most positive outcome was our own community members encouraging one another to overcome their reticence around technology by leading through example”.

Essential social infrastructures, which are the relationships through which we care for the young, the unwell, the elderly and recreate the fabric of society, have only been maintained through these (social infrastructure) efforts” (Bear et al., 2021, p. 7). “Voluntary sector organisations, community activists, unpaid carers, middle-aged women, and young adults have picked up the responsibilities of forging and maintaining ties of support” (Bear et al., 2021, p. 8). All of this shows how much communities have adapted and changed throughout COVID.

Through this “death of the social”, economic and emotional strains on families and lack of government funding for these activities is likely to produce negative effects as national restrictions are eased. The loss of social infrastructures and relationships of support has carried a great emotional and practical cost (Bear et al., 2021, p. 37). Local third sector organisations have played a major role in keeping these communities going.

### Mental Health, Values and Ethnic Minorities

“Community groups worried about residents’ mental health developed a range of small-scale responses. Over time, these concerns have intensified and residents have looked to do more, while recognising that factors such as rising levels of unemployment and extreme mental distress are beyond the reach of communities alone to solve” (McCabe et al., 2021, p. 3). Both LSE reports above show that “mental health” has now become coding for unresolved (and still largely undefined) problems, which call for continued conversation where authorities have tired of engaging. “Our evidence suggests that there is a demand embedded the language of mental health for a more relational form of community provisioning to overcome the long-term effects of social and service disruptions during Covid-19 (Bear et al., 2021, p. 18).

The LSE Reports also show that values, ethics and expectations in many communities have already shifted. “Importantly, the ways in which people supported one another, and provided support for their communities, generated new forms of mutuality. “(M)utuality is the state of being present with another, often generated by the networked relationships in which people are embedded in their home and in their communities (Bear et al., 2021, p. 41).

All this emphasise a new reliance on voluntary sector and community groups. “Such groups were able to mobilise quickly in order to meet the needs of those in their local communities by drawing on their nuanced local knowledge and existing relationships. However, our research revealed that much of this work remains invisible to both the government and public, where recognition has been directed instead to new mutual aid groups or central government efforts” (Bear et al., 2021, p. 63).

Above all, the LSE Reports show the need for a “new localness”. There has already been “such a focus of the response to the pandemic, to enhance, build and redevelop our communities’ and places’ resilience”. This requires “new ways of organising, new methods of doing things, but also new ways of behaving. To build truly local resilient places, the voices of those in the community need to be heard from the outset. They need to be built in” (Bear et al., 2021, p. 60).

Evidence from Leicester and elsewhere shows that for different ethnic groups, given chronic Covid-19 transmission, uncertainty and divides persist. These are likely to contribute to health barriers and access to care unless they are further addressed through communications, investment in healthcare and outreach, along with concerted efforts to address the underlying disadvantages of occupation and household circumstance faced by minority groups” (SAGE Ethnicity Group, 2021, p. 21).

### Foodbanks

Meanwhile, though foodbanks have been widely encouraged and supported as community focal centres, there is some disturbing evidence beneath the surface, to which many local social enterprises and community groups might provide remedies. “(W)e have suggested that even while the “myth” of the empty cupboard and images of deserving, destitute, and hungry bodies misrecognise and misrepresents the realities of food insecurity in the UK, this iconography is both producing new forms of scarcity (discouraging people in need from seeking support and leading to the self‐rationing of food and food vouchers) …. Our own starting point here is that food insecurity can only be effectively challenged through structural change but, while fighting for these changes, difficult questions remain over how best to respond to people in crisis” (May et al., 2020, p. 219)

Nourish Scotland and the Poverty Truth Commission have amplified these findings. “(P)art of the stigma for people who need to access emergency food provision is being seen as a ‘scrounger’ or a ‘skiver’. Many people feel uncomfortable for receiving something without giving something back. Having meaningful ways to contribute – whether financially or through sharing skills or time – can make people feel a greater sense of value, self-worth and belonging. “When people are experiencing financial hardship, the focus is often placed on their problems and deficits, instead of what they have to share. Initiatives designed to recognise and value the contribution that each individual can make require that staff and volunteers have the time to get to know participants and see them as more than ‘recipients of a service’” (Nourish Scotland & Poverty Truth Commission, 2018, p. 22).

Community social enterprises already play a significant role here. “It is possible to learn from diverse models of community food provision and develop approaches to food insecurity that promote and restore dignity in every community, building a resilient community food infrastructure that works to enable good food for everybody” (Nourish Scotland & Poverty Truth Commission, 2018, p. 27). “New approaches gained momentum during the third lockdown, with community fridges, pantries, co-ops and pop-ups offering access to a wider range of fresh produce at a more local level than centralised hubs, breaking down power relations between those providing and those needing food” (McCabe et al., 2021, p. 13).

### A Funding Model

A possible appropriate future funding model derives from the Community Champions programme, which was initially promoted to encourage more vaccinations in ethnic minority and deprived communities (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 2021). Though funding advocated below seeks to support wider community intentions, its methodology is similar. Based on various indices, the Scottish Government might distribute funds to local authorities for onward access by local communities. Access to smaller local grants might be based on smaller specifics – for example, the continuation of a Kick Start post, the provision of transport in rural communities to specific locations or funding a fixed period postholder for a service with an existing demonstrable need in a specific community. These examples and others are straightforward and should not require detailed output and impact measurement, for the presentation of which, at this stage, organisations do not have sufficient capacity.

In January 2021, for Community Champions, UK Government made available £23.75mn for funding for voluntary groups, initially allocated to 60 local councils. This varied from £50,270 to Telford and Wrekin Council to £733,333 to the London Borough of Brent. Birmingham used some of its £440,000 funds to extend contracts with VCS providers and for sign language and audio materials to those with poor literacy. Two larger charities, Strengthening Faith Institutions and Near Neighbours distributed grants for local initiatives for reaching BAME and marginalised communities. These examples are provided not as specific guidance for a Scotland programme but more to indicate the level of specificity for which access to grants might be provided. As shown in examples throughout this contribution, there are community groups and social enterprises which are already providing or could provide these services, and which would thus make applications.

Details have yet to emerge of the UK Government’s proposed ‘Shared Prosperity Fund’ to replace the £780mn allocated to Scotland in European Union Structural and Investment Funds during the 2014 to 2020 Programme. Scotland received £4bn between 1975 and 2006, and £820mn under the 2007-2013 Programme. The Shared Prosperity Fund could be used to support initial allocations for a new Community Champions programme, for which there is already a precedent during the 2007-2013 EU Operational Programme, in which Priority 1 ESF and Priority 3 ERDF made specific allocations to 13 Community Planning Partnerships in local authority areas with the lowest decile SIMD data zones. A similar programme focusing on areas based on lowest decile SIMD data zones has already been suggested (Bell, 2019, p. 12). In all these there is already a recognition and acknowledgement of a significant role in delivery by social enterprises and community groups.

### Conclusion

This contribution has sought to show that “while emergency policy responses do not themselves endure, the shared memory of them does, which can have unpredictable political consequences several years later” (Davies & Gane, 2021, p. 18). Above all, there is a need to reflect on developments increasingly being reported, which through COVID show changes already taking place in local communities and the supportive role of social enterprises and community groups. With further evidence and more examples, it is hoped that Scottish Government and others could be encouraged to make available funding for their continuation.

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