



Building a Community based Alliance: A Communities of Practice Perspective from Ireland

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Building a Community based Alliance: A Communities of Practice Perspective from Ireland

Abstract

Community organizations work on the frontline supported by local authorities, development agencies and higher education institutions. However, their actions have been curtailed by a reduction in funding over the last ten years and there is evidence of underlying structural challenges. The high levels of small community decline challenge us to develop new insights into the causes of failure and develop innovative approaches to growth. In this paper, we adopt a Communities of Practice perspective to explore the formation of a community-based alliance in Ireland. Data was collected during a series of focus groups with community stakeholders. We argue that intense collaboration that cuts across institutional domains is required. Therefore, community-based alliances should form a key part of rural (re)development by providing opportunities for knowledge sharing, peer learning and mutual support. We propose a conceptual framework which illustrates the benefits of a structured and coordinated approach.

Keywords

Community of Practice, social enterprise, networks, knowledge transfer, Ireland.

Introduction

The structural changes that impact negatively on our small communities challenge us to develop new insights and innovative approaches to sustainable growth. In addition, we as academics must work to apply our models, theories and research in ways that can support real and sustainable change and development in our communities. In the course of our normal activities we engage with community groups and stakeholders to create innovative learning tools and resources which equip leaders of community groups, public authorities and educational institutions with the knowledge and skills needed to adopt a transformative approach to community reactivation. Traditional institutional actors such as Government, support agencies, private organisations and higher education institutions (HEIs) need to rethink the way they interact with each other and also with their communities. As 2021 approaches, it

is clear that some European Union (EU) regions are further along the track towards smart, innovative, sustainable and inclusive growth. In this paper we draw on data collected in Ireland. Therefore, we acknowledge that our insights, findings and conclusions are to some extent limited to an EU context.

The ongoing Covid-19 crisis challenges all aspects of society and economy to reflect, restructure and develop in new ways in what are very different circumstances. Communities across the globe have experienced rapid change in terms of: population; the number of service providers; the range of social and cultural amenities; the development of infrastructure; and the growth in the service sector (Stephens et al., 2021). For many communities, there have been difficulties as investment in infrastructure has lagged behind changes in needs, tastes, preferences and expectations. With a cycle of under-investment, weak employment and a skills gap in relation to the labour market, especially for young people, many rural communities have been especially hard hit by the economic and social challenges. Furthermore, business closures, a decline in agriculture, the demise of public services, bank, post offices; and poor connectivity has left communities isolated and in deficit of the factors of production and key infrastructure.

For the purposes of this research we adopt a broad definition of a *community* as a group of people living in a small geographical area who have shared interests, ambitions and attachment to that area. We define an *alliance* as a: group of people who have shared interests and ambitions that facilitate collaboration in a formal, coordinated and planned manner. In this paper we adopt a Communities of Practice (CoP) perspective and advocate: engagement between groups; knowledge sharing; and collective action. It is in this context that we present the findings from a case study on a community-based alliance that incorporates a HEI. The community-based alliance profiled in this paper aims to enhance existing community-based

activity by creating a link between the key stakeholders. Specifically, we wish to illustrate the potential of a CoP inspired approach as illustrated in our emergent conceptual framework.

Community Development and Higher Education

Rural communities are in a constant state of flux and have witnessed dramatic changes in economic activity and social life. However, one aspect of rural life that remains unwavering, irrespective of decline or growth, is the contribution and impact of community activism and voluntary work. On a consistent basis, tangible and quantifiable enhancements are made to the quality of life of rural inhabitants as a result of voluntary activity carried out in rural villages, towns and peripheral areas (Farrell, 2018). In the last two decades, rural areas have witnessed unprecedented change and transformation, driven largely by technological innovation, social modernisation and processes of globalisation (Woods, 2012). Many countries globally have experienced rural economic restructuring. The means and support for dealing with such change can often be limited for rural communities, resulting in a reliance on voluntary activities and the volunteer sector (Skinner and Hanlon, 2016). Therefore, we propose that, HEIs need to engage with their communities to continue to build capacity, develop economic structures and enhance the general quality of life.

Voluntary and community organisations form part of core civil society. The analysis of voluntary and community organisations is key to understanding civil society. The origin of community development and activism is often in response to inequalities and deficiencies. Engagement by HEIs in community development is fundamentally concerned with sharing knowledge and facilitating learning and change (both on an individual and collective level). Furthermore, community engagement should be about changing people, places and amenities for the better. Community engagement by HEIs can and should take many forms including but not limited to: outreach education, volunteering, governance activities, pro bono work, consultancy and support with planning and promotion. However, external intervention and

socioeconomic change can disturb the equilibrium of communities leading to opposition and conflict. In the late 1980s, partnership became part of the EU's commitment to *rural subsidiarity*, a principle which sought to involve local communities in policy making at the level at which policy is implemented (Crawley, 2009). 'The concept of subsidiarity was also envisaged as contributing to the empowerment of local people by incorporating them more effectively in developments that impinged on their social and economic welfare' (Gilchrist 2013: 2). Locally organised collective action includes many different elements, each of which draws on different life histories, cultures and social issues. Together they can be seen as creating a strong, vibrant force within society, through which ordinary people are able to improve the quality of their lives, tackle problems and challenge unfair situations.

The effects of the economic crisis 2008-2012) are still evident in communities across the globe. The various restrictions imposed by governments in response to the Covid-19 pandemic have created a new set of challenges. Small towns and villages have been severely impacted by: cuts in public services, the stark closure of businesses and high levels of unemployment contribute to the hollowing out of community life. Smith (2012: 57) explains that 'socio-economic decline in rural areas is a pervasive and debilitating phenomenon in terms of regional development, particularly when former models of economic growth which once stimulated business generation and regeneration can no longer be counted on to do so'. Indeed, Franco and Tracey (2019) propose that although the value of community capacity building is widely accepted within scholarly literature, there is a need to increase knowledge regarding specific priority areas which can be effective pathways towards sustainable development. Once the participatory process is established, the benefits of community-based development include increased efficiency and cost effectiveness. Crickley and Mc Ardle (2009) propose that community engagement is about a journey from the real towards the ideal. The journey involves collective action based on social and economic needs. Services provided in the

community do not automatically have collective outcomes for all. However, it should always be undertaken as the result of collective decisions and have collective outcomes for the whole community. Daly (2008: 160) explains that the ‘professionalisation of voluntary and community organizations has highlighted tensions between the role of partnerships in cultivating leadership, on the one hand, and fostering citizen participation in civil society, on the other’. There is an underlying tension between community activism, volunteering and the need for voluntary and community organisations to employ individuals in a professional capacity and/or engage consultants. In most countries, regions and local municipalities have a development or regeneration strategy that aims to ensure community investment, with a commitment to spatial equality. While many plans have a collaborative framework, in recent years, the scope of these plans has been limited by budgetary constraints and systemic problems with infrastructure.

Due to the paradigm shift of higher education towards knowledge transfer, innovation, and commercialisation HEIS are increasingly expected to deliver tangible outcomes (Stephens, 2013; Klofsten, 2018; Yi and Uyarra, 2018). Such a shift has changed the nature and scope of academic activity within HEIs and public research organizations. HEIs are generating significant value across multiple dimensions financial, social, cultural and environmental (Mets *et al.*, 2017). As both economic and social entities HEIs play a vital role in anchoring investment and generating economic activity, jobs and contributing to the growing success of our region. Guerrero and Urbano (2014) explain that given the complexity of university functions, previous studies have evidenced the economic impact of university teaching, research, or entrepreneurial activities by adopting different theoretical approaches and methodologies. However, this traditional approach has limitations and does not capture the complexity and dynamic characteristics of the outcomes of higher education and the transformation of these outcomes into economic and social impacts. HEIs may have different

objectives and strategies relating to community engagement and development. For example, HEIs vary substantially, in terms of scale, scope, and areas of specialisation. HEIs with strong, ‘world class science, medical and engineering, as well as computer science faculties, may be able to generate different types of change and engage in different interventions than HEIs which focus on arts and social sciences’ (Wright *et al.*, 2017: 912). We believe that HEIs can make transformative changes through community engagement linked to regeneration by creating, developing and monitoring a community-based alliance. HEIs have a key role to play in improving the knowledge, skills, confidence and connections within their communities. HEIs can intervene in specific areas such as community leadership, cross-sector collaboration, social enterprise, innovative investment approaches, cultural heritage, impact evaluation and much more. It is hoped that this research will act as a stimulus to a strategic debate about the development of communities and the creation of community-based alliances.

A Communities of Practice Perspective

For decades, academics have studied CoPs, their various forms, structures, developments, effects, and factors that influence them. Roberts (2006) reports that since being identified as a mechanism through which knowledge is held, transferred and created CoP has become increasingly influential within management literature and practice. Indeed, Amin and Roberts (2008) explain that the language of CoPs can be used to explain learning and knowledge generation across a variety of work, organisational, and spatial settings. Lave and Wenger (1991: 98) argue that a Community of Practice, which they define as: ‘a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping Communities of Practice’ is an intrinsic condition of the existence of knowledge. Furthermore, Wenger (1998: 7) presents a simplified definition of a CoP as: ‘*a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly*’.

Three components are required for a group to be characterised as a CoP:

1. There needs to be a domain. A CoP has an identity defined by a shared interest. It is not just a network of people but membership implies a commitment to engagement and action.
2. There needs to be a *community*. Members must interact and engage in shared activities and there must be sufficient trust to facilitate the sharing of information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other (not necessarily on a daily basis).
3. There needs to be a *practice*. A CoP involves people who have a shared portfolio of stories, tactics, tools, experiences, problem solving skills etc.

Interactions need to be developed over time and perhaps in a structured manner with a designated coordinator (we would advocate a role for academics and HEIs). CoPs develop their practice through a variety of methods, including: problem solving, requests for information, seeking the experiences of others, reusing assets, coordination and synergy, discussing developments, visiting other members, mapping knowledge and identifying gaps (Brown and Duguid, 2002; Wenger et al., 2014; Pyrko et al., 2017; Hadjimichael and Tsoukas, 2019). For Labe and Wenger (1991) a primary focus is learning by *social participation*. That is, continuously create their shared identity through engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities. Contu (2013) explains that CoP uses shared repertoires, language and artefacts in a process of increasing mutual engagement where learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice and involves the construction of identity through changing forms of participation in CoPs.

The motivation to become a more central participant in a Community of Practice can provide a powerful incentive for learning. Authors including (Brown and Duguid, 2001; and Swan *et al.*, 2002) link CoPs positively to learning, knowledge flow and in some cases innovation.

Indeed, Pykro *et al.*, (2019) explain that CoPs can be understood as groups of people who regularly learn together and from each other, because they care about the same real-life problems. As a CoP is voluntary, what makes them successful over time is their ability to generate enough interest, relevance, value added and tangible outcomes to attract and engage members. Although many factors, such as management support or an urgent problem, can inspire a community, nothing can substitute for this sense of alliance, shared stories and shared purpose. Indeed, any community of practice ‘produces abstractions, tools, symbols, stories, terms, and concepts that reify something of that practice in a congealed form’ (Wenger, 1998: 59).

Methodology

In this research, a case study methodology was used to explore the understanding, practice, motivations, behaviours and attitudes in relation to community development. In line with McAdam *et al.*, (2019), Wenger’s (1998) CoP framework was utilised to advance a process-based understanding of how individuals involved in the formation of a regional alliance of community-based organisations collectively learn by exploring three dimensions of a CoP that enable community members to develop. The research project involved the creation of a collaborative, community-based body, called an *Alliance* which brought together twelve community activists. We as academics represented our HEI and played a pivotal role in the design and implementation of a structure approach to the formation of a community-based alliance. The members were chosen to create a balance of public, private and non-profit organizations. All the participants were based in Ireland. The range of groups included:

- A county-wide youth agency who provide generic youth services as well as skills, training and development opportunities.
- A social enterprise management board.
- A community organisation with a dedicated community centre.
- A community managed tourist destination.

- A unique organisation dedicated to developing their town as a whole through supporting and encouraging local groups to be active.
- Staff of the sole third level education provider in the region.

Participants in our alliance were asked to share knowledge and identify best practice support structures and training objectives. In order to create a coherent and structured approach to enhancing our understanding of the potential of community-based alliance, the data collection was undertaken in three stages with a focus group approach to data collection in each stage. In advance of the focus groups, the study engaged with each of the participants individually. We did this to explain to them that the overall aim was to create an alliance. Although the participants all knew of each other in advance of this project they had not formed a formal grouping and their interactions were ad-hoc. The participants were open to the idea of our role in coordinating the formation of the alliance.

Following a review of the CoP literature (including Swan *et al.*, 2002; Smith 2012; Wenger *et al.*, 2014; and Pyrko *et al.*, 2017), a decision was taken to explore in the first focus group community development using four themes: 1) key issues in the communities; 2) formation of the community group; 3) group operations; and 4) key lessons. During the second focus group we worked to refine the issues and choose to focus on the key challenges that the members had overcome; and the biggest challenges for the future. The focus groups helped to explore the communities: characteristics, and activities/services; history/evolution; performance; and enablers and disablers facilitating development. In the third focus group the study reviewed the emergent framework for the formation of a community-based alliance. In the context of community development, qualitative data on soft outcomes can be used to measure and demonstrate success in a number of ways, such as: highlighting progress at an individual level; showing stakeholders what progress is being made; and assessing support for innovation practices. Consideration of soft outcomes provides a truer, more rounded picture of successes. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and superfluous material removed such as

digressions and repetitions to assist the analysis. Narrative structuring (Kvale, 2006) was used to create a coherent story of the experts' experience(s) of using advertisements to improve road safety. The findings are presented in the next section; this is followed by a discussion of our emergent conceptual framework: *Stages in the Formation of a Community Alliance*. Finally, we present our best practice recommendations and conclusions.

Findings

In the first of the focus groups we worked with the participants to explore their experiences of community development. These shared stories and experiences were an important part of the formation of the alliance (CoP). It is crucial to establish a common purpose (trust) from the outset. Initially, we asked the participants to identify the original motivations for forming their organisation, working group and/or community group.

INSERT Figure 1 Reasons for group formation

The original rationale for formation was usually linked to a large-scale project that aimed to address a key community need. With many of the community groups continuing to operate after the initial project. Subsequent development was linked to a continuation of funding and the need to “maintain” the original project (often a physical building/amenity).

In the second part of the focus group we worked to identify the key issues that the groups encounter. These stories helped to foster a shared experience and facilitated the sharing of tacit knowledge.

INSERT Figure 2 Key Issues in the communities

Surprisingly, the traditional issue of funding was not the major concern. A variety of issues were highlighted by the focus group. The groups have significant challenges with the recruitment of staff and volunteers. Many cited apathy among their community as a barrier to

progress. Additional issues occur in relation to dealing with government agencies and the significant increase in regulation and compliance requirements.

In the third part of the focus group we worked to identify key operational challenges. These stories helped to: further shape a shared experience; facilitate the sharing of additional tacit knowledge; and the establish the necessary level of trust and respect among the group.

INSERT Figure 3 Key operational challenges

Significantly, the key challenge for all the participants was the renewal of their communities and the reenergising of their community group. This shared experience (stories) was a crucial first step in the formation of the alliance. The participants felt constrained by an inability to recruit new members, which both hindered progress but also caused significant challenges in relation to strategic and operational planning.

In the fourth part of the focus group we worked to identify key lessons. The consensus that emerged in this part allowed us to identify key actions that were common among the alliance.

INSERT Figure 4 Key lessons

Moving forward the groups felt that much could be learnt from their experiences to-date. It was at this stage that the participants started to see merit in collective action. The overarching issue is renewal and how best to achieve a connection between the experience of existing members and that of those who are needed to bring the groups forward. A second theme was the need to “stand-up” to funders and regulators to improve the experience of all groups and to ensure sustainability and effectiveness in the future.

In the second focus group we explored the key challenges that the members had to overcome; and the key challenges for the future. The second focus groups helped us to explore: the possibility of alliance formation; to identify a tentative framework; and best practice principles. The findings from focus group two are presented as a series of quotes which help capture the

reality of life for our community-based groups. The quotes are categorised using the following headings: 1) fatigue and apathy; staffing; governance and compliance; government agencies and funding bodies; engaging communities; strategic planning; and sustainability.

The first quote captures the challenge of maintaining an operational board and of sustaining meaningful engagement from existing board members. The result is that one person is in charge of almost everything:

“I have one meeting a month and it’s...my quorum, if I can get a quorum, we’re happy. And they’re happy. But, with a lack of passion and a lack of...well, they have the lack of drive and they’re very, probably very lucky too from a point of view that they have me as their manager. And I’m not saying, trying to say...I’m making all the noise that they would have had to make on previous occasions. (R3: Fatigue and Apathy)

The second quote highlights the challenge of engaging younger members to help revitalise what are often ageing board memberships. Recruitment during the initial formation of a new group appears to be much more straight forward than ongoing recruitment.

“A lot of people in our area, the younger people are either away or they’re busy with their raring children, and they’ve just finished college, or whatever, so they’re working flat to the mat to pay a mortgage, and one thing to another; so it’s, in my community centre, it’s the sixty-five-plus is the bulk of our people that’s willing to be available to do things ... our committee’s that busy that it’s now getting to the stage that they’re...the same committee’s there for the last ten, fifteen years and they’re spent and tired.” (R3: Fatigue and Apathy)

The third quote raises one of number of concerns with the design of support programs. In this instance a job placement initiative which has limited ability to make a positive impact.

“So, we have to go and find our own funding but, I mean, until recently I was the only person employed. One of those people is going to be fifty...or sixty in September, so she’s being lifted out of it because, apparently, if she’s there when she’s sixty she has to be there...they have to...they keep her to retirement. So, that lifts my admin support. (R4: Staffing)

The fourth quote relates to skill shortages which impact many sectors but particularly rural areas which experienced significant *brain drain* between 2009-2015.

“The other thing that we would struggle with as well is in terms of staffing, you know, and finding key people for roles. That’s a challenge, I suppose, in rural Ireland as well.” (R2: Staffing)

The fifth quote captures the workload implications (burden) of increases in regulation and compliance which disproportionately impact smaller organisations or those with a predominantly voluntary structure.

“Well, I’ve been with the group for twenty years ... all of this compliance verification role has grown. I can’t even explain how much it has grown... And each funder has all of their different funding requirements. They don’t care what you have to do for the other funders; they just care about, you know, whatever strategy they’re aligned to and whatever your compliant.” (R1: Governance)

The sixth quote resonates with much of the media coverage of the insurance “scandal” in Ireland with threatens to undermine the provision of social amenities and community infrastructure.

“But insurance is the big problem for most of rural Ireland. Like, if you want to do walks, if you want to do anything, anything that’s outside the remit of your building; and even within your building, insurance is the killer.” (R3: Governance)

The seventh quote highlights the frustrations experienced by many of our participants when they try to *comply* with the programme and/or funding requirements. With many now willing to (re)focus elsewhere rather than be constrained by the promise of support.

“...it takes a bit of bravery to walk away from situations that aren’t working for you as an organisation. So, certainly, that’s been learning that we had. We are now in that space where we have had projects and the funders were bringing us in different directions that we felt weren’t in keeping with the ethos of the organisation and we let that project go. I don’t think I ever thought we’d be in that position, but we are now. Because we’re good at what we do and I think it is confidence as well, to say we have a skillset in these particular areas and we’re good at this.” (R1: Agencies)

Furthermore, quote eight indicates that groups are now willing to stand-up and work with funders to improve the design and appropriateness of support and funding schemes.

“I think our group would need to be braver. And, the problem that we’re in at the moment is that we listen to government officials ... it’s vitally important that we say no, that’s not what I want... I think that was the main problem: not listening to government officials that probably mean well but it has to be right for your area. It has to be right for you.” (R3 Agencies)

Quote nine and ten capture the evolution of community engagement and the demands and expectations of community members.

“I feel like we were, kind of, taken advantage of really because the community was coming forward and that we should’ve asked for more instead of saying ‘Yes, we can do everything. We can be all things’, now they have me doing everything.” (R4: Engaging Communities)

“So, over the, over the course of the last eight years, as I say, we looked for feedback all the time from families and then we just built on that. So, we have regenerated five empty buildings in Carndonagh.” (R2)

Quote 11 and 12 highlight the challenge of recruitment at a board level with the challenge for many groups being how to add real value by sourcing key people while also maintain minimum numbers and overall capacity.

“We would be quite strategic with our board. We would look for people who would have an expertise in a particular area. So, over the years we might have had a solicitor volunteering or a bank manager. We don’t have any of those at the minute. We want people that are good. People that, um, held fast, I suppose, during recession.” (R1: Capacity)

“...there’s a serious lack of people. And, maybe you’re better with somebody with a bit of passion for what the purpose of the job is rather than somebody who was an architect, or, who doesn’t want to draw anything or a solicitor who doesn’t want to know.” (R3: Capacity)

Quote 13 and 14 refer to the need to match the desire for ambitious growth and development with the realities of capacity often within volunteer structure.

“We are just coming to the end of a three-year strategic plan so we’re very organised now and we’ve had our key performance indicators – getting very business-like. We’ve found that over the years we’ve had to get quite business-like... ultimately, funders what to know outcomes, the language of outcomes is a big thing... we would have a three-year strategic plan and we would have an annual plan then.” (R1: Strategy)

“The biggest learning for us is around recognising your own capacity. Because the worst thing for an organisation would be reputation and, so, from a funders point of view, when you say you’re going to deliver something, if they trust you to give you the money, you have to deliver it as you said you would.” (R1: Strategy)

The final two quotes bring us full circle and back to the issue of funding which although not flagged as a key issue at the start of the focus groups was identified as the key concern from a sustainability perspective.

“Sustainability’s always an issue. To see where the money’s coming from and to make sure you can get the money that you need to run your service. And, God forbid, expand! So, not just to keep what you have but to do new things because needs are emerging all

the time. Needs are emerging in communities, so you need to be able to maybe tweak the service that you provide or to get additional monies.” (R1: Sustainability)

“I want to see our bank account in black, which will allow us then to drive on with other local and projects. I also...that way then we’ll al-...our committee then will be able to get more involved and, hopefully, bigger picture.” (R3: Sustainability)

The key findings from the focus group, that informed the design of our conceptual framework are:

- 1) fatigue and apathy set in over time. Experience although vital can lead to inertia. There is an inability to reenergise the community groups through ongoing recruitment.
- 2) that although the range and value of funding opportunities has increased this is placing significant pressure on communities to have formal structures in place and a systematic approach to management reporting and governance.

In the third, and final focus group we began by presenting our emergent framework. We worked with the group to identify refinements and to develop an associated set of best practice principles. The overall consensus from the participants was that coming together as a CoP offered the prospect of sharing experiences, leading to collective action that would make a valuable difference to the sustainability of the respective communities. The conceptual framework is presented in figure 5.

INSERT Figure 5: Stages in the Formation of a Community Alliance

Figure 5 captures our proposed six stage process for developing a community-based alliance. The framework reflects a CoP perspective. The key characteristics of our framework map to those of a CoP as outlined by Roberts (2006, p. 625). For an alliance to form there must first be the establishment of a common purpose which in turn creates the required level of trust to sustained mutual relationships and establish agreed descriptions of who belongs to the alliance. Next is a series of storytelling exercises i.e. workshops, network events, focus groups. The first set of stories will likely only involve explicit information about origins, historical events,

current structure and profile etc. This stage allows a shared discourse to emerge reflecting a certain perspective on the world. The second set of stories allow the sharing of tacit knowledge, a stage at which the value of alliance membership starts to increase exponentially. Members will now know what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to the CoP. What follows is a pattern of how shared activities develops over time and interactions within the alliance start to focus on mutual definitions, actions, tools, artefacts and jargon. At this stage some form of collective practice will be agreed and the alliance will start to work effectively on shared projects, developing a clear identity and profile across their communities. The long-term success of the alliance will be reflected in the final step when the alliance has a history of shared experiences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The post-recession economic climate has presented community organisations, development agencies and local authorities with a radically changed working environment combining rising demand for social service provision with the reoccurring needs for infrastructure and amenities. The difficulties some organizations face in meeting the requirements of accountability means that their capacity for innovation is significantly reduced. Although formal and informal voluntary activity pervades, many communities are suffering from inertia and apathy from within their communities. This creates significant challenges for sustainability and renewal. Our example illustrates the benefits of a structured and coordinated approach that brings together members of community groups. Are initial findings indicate that a structure approach to the sharing of experiences can support the conditions for collective action and the formation of a CoP. Our research indicates that our community leaders will not benefit from generic training. They already have significant experience and so training must cover gaps in their knowledge, but also build on their existing skills and allow for greater personalization of learning according to their strengths. Therefore, we must work to instil a wider vision,

leadership and an entrepreneurial mindset in our community leaders so that they have the motivation to overcome perceive failure and skills to address community regeneration. For this reason, community-based alliances should form a key part of our strategy. Alliances developed using CoP framework will facilitate knowledge sharing; peer learning; and mutual support. Communities can make transformative changes in community regeneration by improving their knowledge, skills, confidence and connections. We believe this best achieved community representatives and leaders adopting a CoP perspective and forming alliances between leaders and community activists. It is important to note that for engagement to work, all parties must be transparent about the terms of engagement and each community needs to have realistic expectation about what can be achieved through participation (Ilott and Norris, 2015). As with all research there are limitations to this study. Indeed, the CoP approach is not without its criticisms (Roberts, 2002; and Mutch, 2003). We intend to conduct further research in different settings with a specific focus on developing international case studies. This will aid our testing and refinement of the framework.

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Figure 1 Reasons for group formation

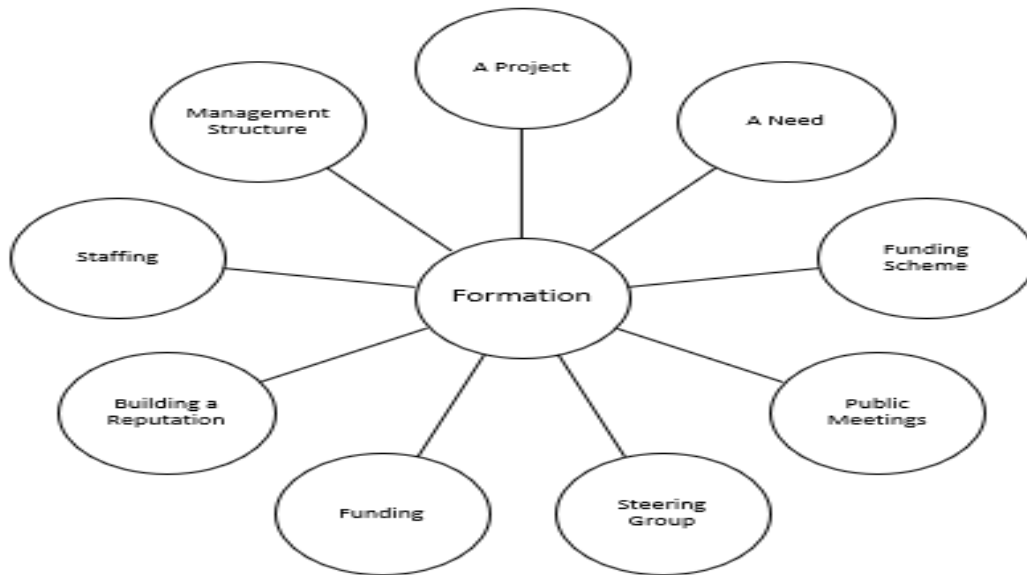


Figure 2 Key Issues in the communities

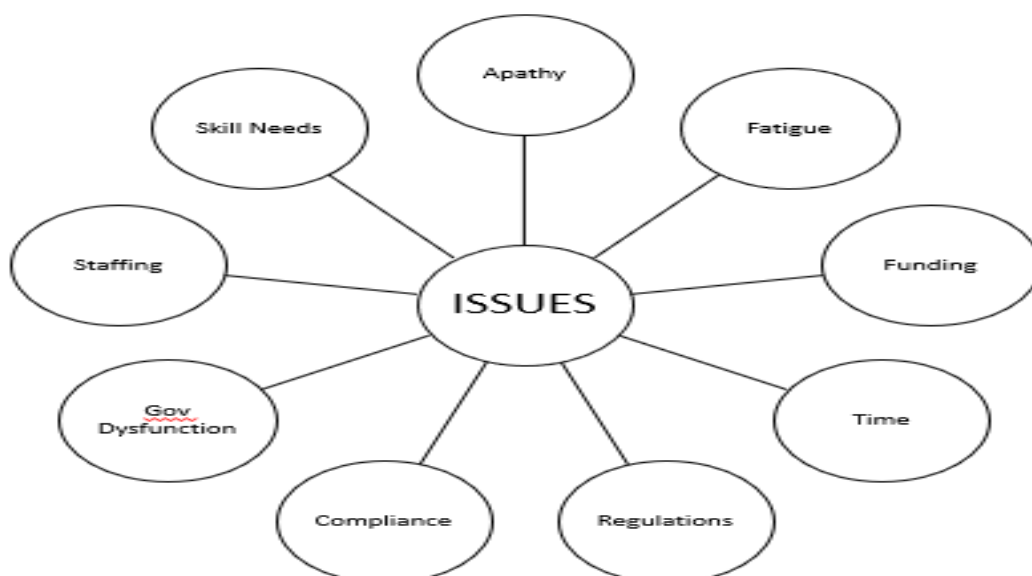


Figure 3 Key operational challenges



Figure 4 Key lessons



Figure 5 Stages in the Formation of a Community Alliance

