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## **Re-empowering into Voice: Experiments in Organic Community Coproduction**

### **Abstract**

This article explores and extrapolates an emerging concept within community practice: namely that of *organic community coproduction*. The concept is influenced by previous uses of the term 'organic', specifically as applied by Tönnies in relation to certain types of community, and Gramsci in respect of a concept of leadership. Our development of the term has been generated within the context of reflective practitioner experience, located in a community-led action campaign Voice4Deptford, in South East London. The case study explores the interdisciplinary roots of this form of coproduction. It highlights the way that these pre-existing principles and methods have been adapted, reflected upon and improvised in the light of 30 years' grassroots engagement by Green to evolve a bespoke approach that we are proposing to call 'organic community coproduction'.

The case study outlines several original dimensions or modalities of community organic coproduction including; stepping aside; the academic as a non-expert and giving voice. It unpacks the different elements of impact and transformation, that are consequent upon organic community coproduction. These include; evidence of change; working together and community reflective time. The article concludes with a discussion of the issues involved in reframing of local power, the campaigns early successes and its continuing challenges.

### **Definitions of Coproduction**

There is a spectrum of definitions of coproduction, that mainly attempt to triangulate the relationship between the 'who', the 'what' and the 'when'. Thus

Ostrom defines coproduction as 'the process through which inputs used to provide a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not in the same organization' (1996, p.1073). Rafael Ramirez, from a more business management perspective defines it as: 'value coproduced by two or more actors, with and for each other, with and for yet other actors' (1999, p.49). However, as Bovaird (2007) reflects, the notion of partnership is now so routinised as essential for the production of public services, that most definitions are trivial and become more fixated with end products rather than being concerned with processes. Thus Joshi and Moore define coproduction as the provision of regulated public services 'through regular, long-term relationships between state agencies and organized groups of citizens, where both make substantial resource contributions' (2006, p.1).

What is missing from this definitional spectrum is a sense of a relational nexus, or non-instrumental rationale, for different social actors to come together to share experiences and knowledge. Also, largely absent from these functionalist and instrumental readings of coproduction is any notion that power is redistributed and shared in a dialectical and complex way. Most models generally propose a unidirectional flow of power, with the benefits generated by any coproduction project firmly residing in the hands of the 'regulatory' or state actors, as opposed to the 'citizen' or lay ones (Nabatchi, Mariafrancesca and Sancino, 2017, p.769). These models reinforce existing patterns of power in terms of sharing and redistributing agency and knowledge. They also undermine the very thing that is required in order for agency and knowledge to be coproduced; namely a sense of trust based on mutual accountability and transparency of both motive and method.

### **Coproduction as activist presence**

There is, of course, a counter-hegemonic tradition of theorisation on coproduction that eschews the instrumentalist and market-led approach emerging from the public management science literature, such as New Public Management (Hood, 1991). Durose et al (2015) identify seven facets of what they consider more effective and participatory community coproduction. These include the idea of *presence* and in particular a 'politics of presence', whereby 'the presence of marginalised groups means that their interests and perspectives are either physically represented or are advocated for by those they consider their peers' (p.6). *Authenticity* refers to the need to go beyond 'representation'

and glean wider community voices in decision-making and research' (p.7) *Reflexivity* highlights the importance of researchers critically reviewing the 'institutional, personal and political factors' that influence their 'design, impact and acceptability' of coproduction, whilst *beyond-text* suggests that an over-reliance on text in collaborative contexts can 'exacerbate a sense of exclusion' and that other forms of communication such as 'story-telling, performance, art, photography ... social media and blogging' should be considered (p.8). The concept of organic coproduction fits more naturally into these types of discourse. There are some ideas here that will overlap with our exposition. However, much of the tone of this literature is still descriptive and abstract, and we intend to identify more practical and measurable outcomes as a contribution to this important debate.

### **An organic approach to community coproduction**

'Do not monopolise your knowledge nor impose arrogantly your techniques, but respect and combine your skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities, taking them as full partners and co-researchers. Do not trust elitist versions of history and science which respond to dominant interests but be receptive to counter-narratives and try to recapture them. Do not depend solely on your culture to interpret facts, but recover local values, traits, beliefs, and arts for action by and with the research organisations. Do not impose your own ponderous scientific style for communicating results, but diffuse and share what you have learned together with the people, in a manner that is wholly understandable and even literary and pleasant, for science should not be necessarily a mystery nor a monopoly of experts and intellectuals' (Fals Borda in Chevalier and Buckles (1995, p.27)

The origins of this developing approach derives from three distinct yet intertwined sources. The term organic deliberately highlights elements of Ferdinand Tönnies early work; Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' with his idea of the 'organic intellectual'; and the participatory approach of the Colombian Orlando Fals-Borda. Tönnies distinguished two types of 'social organisation'; the organic community (Gemeinschaft) and the contractual or atomistic society (i.e. Gesellschaft). Tönnies' view of Gemeinschaft as Adair-Toteff explains, is rooted in ideas of 'commonality', namely a clear sense of

shared understandings about the nature of the world, and the place of the locality that is based on shared friends and possessions, and a view of who were the 'common enemies'(1995). In terms of classic sociology, urbanisation was seen as a threat to these 'organic' notions of community. For example, Wirth, in his classic text, 'Urbanism as a way of Life' (1938) suggests that in cities people have to create social links based on discovering shared 'interests' rather than rely on assumed relationships associated with 'territory'. This form of social relationship Wirth suggests, dilutes and attenuates traditional forms of belonging, and thus contributes to increasing social isolation and loneliness amongst city dwellers that continues to be felt to this day (Laing, 2016, Bellis, 2019, Green, 2019).

However, we would argue that for people living in urban communities there remains newer versions of communal life that maintain their links with Tönnies vision. For many this is a strong sense of place associated with where they live, whether it be an estate, a street, or in a high rise flat; friendship circles via 'community hubs' such as pubs, community centres, clubs, and coffee 'houses'; diverse social networks, linked, for example, to sport, leisure activities, politics, faith communities; and for many, the importance of family groupings, in their increasing new varying arrangements. 'Community hasn't died, but it has changed' (Lawrence, 2019, p.1). The persistence of these social connections and 'shared understandings' we argue, create the conditions for passion that will challenge and change together a local issue, decision or event that is impacting on people. Initiating conversations and meetings that are specific to the community, neighbourhood, locality, history and cultures that one is engaged with, is not necessarily transferrable in the same way elsewhere. It grows the 'bottom-up' and may meander as people contribute, sign-up and begin to audience the coming together of 'like-minded' members of a community. The information sharing is and should be haphazard; for example, verbally, by word of mouth, 'unexpected' posters appearing on walls, talking to people at key community interchanges, and via social media. The sharing of information, ideas, plans for action, and taking 'thinking time' (reflection) from engaging with 'real community issues' is seen as paramount to the coproduction process.

This theoretical community base is further expanded by applying the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' and his idea of the 'organic intellectual', both of which were developed in his 'Prison Notebooks', for example see (Hoare and Smith, 1971, Fiori, 1990 and Rosengarten and

Rosenthal, 2011). Hegemony reflects the idea that the ideological domination and control of a society, its intellectual force, is governed by those holding the levers of power, namely its ruling class who thus provide a hegemonic societal consensus. Their values, beliefs and ideas held sway of the rest of the population, i.e. the majority of a society (Rosengarten and Rosenthal, 2011, p.49). He argued that those without power (i.e. socialists) had to develop their own model of hegemony with a key figure in this being the intellectual. The existing 'traditional' intellectuals he defined as being, for example, clerics, administrators and academics, all functionaries whose ideas sustained the power over the state.

'...the intelligentsia who provide philosophy and ideology for the masses and who enable the ruling class to exercise their 'hegemony' by supplying the system of belief accepted by ordinary people so that they do not question the actions of their rulers' (Joll, 1977, p.90).

Unlike these 'traditional' intellectuals who perform intellectual leadership in any given society, Gramsci argued that the socialist movement had to grow its own 'organic' intellectuals. These intellectuals differ in that they are seen as more closely bound and connected to the social class to which they belong (Hoare and Smith, 1971). Applying this concept of the 'organic intellectual' to community practice moves the argument away from upward social mobility with its accompanying positions of personal power and control. Instead, it shifts the argument towards a critical focus on the wider negative social, political, environmental and economic conditions of their class that they challenge. In one of the authors' case, Green, this resonates with his East London working class cultural background.

The idea of organic community coproduction also encapsulates the work of the Colombian Orlando Fals Borda and his participatory action research approach, combining research and theory with political participation. This approach highlights the importance of; engaging with the critical voices of the community; academics and those with power 'putting aside' their knowledge and expertise; listening to, and understanding the community's needs, concerns and aspirations; and seeking out the 'voiceless', i.e. those who have been forgotten and marginalised (Fals Borda and Raham, 1991). This model, as Gutiérrez notes, clearly 'takes sides' by adopting

'a dialogical, self-reflective and participatory approach to knowledge which rejects the neat hierarchical distinction between the researcher

and researched with the explicit purpose of empowering the oppressed and helping them to overcome their oppression' (2016, p.1).

Fals Borda identifies this combination of principles as a *participatory democratic* approach compared to the more traditional representative *local democratic* approach that tends to favour and defer to elected community representatives (1979). It has strong resonances with McIntyre's typology of community engagement, which includes a collective commitment to investigate an issue or problem, and a desire to engage in self and collective reflection to gain clarity about the issue under investigation (2008, p.1). It has been a cornerstone of Greens positionality and developed in a range of community settings across the UK, Europe (e.g. Roma community in the Czech Republic) and globally (e.g. migration of indigenous tribal groups to urban areas in Borneo, and low caste Dalits in urban slums in India).

## **The Voice4Deptford campaign**

### **Background**

A conversation took place in late 2013 over a cup of tea at Pepys Community Forum (PCF), in Deptford, between Malcom Cadman, Director of PCF and a local community activist and Green, an academic community researcher-practitioner from Goldsmiths, University of London. The discussion centred on the local communities' concerns regarding proposed developments along the River Thames, Deptford waterfront, particularly the Convoys Wharf site, a brownfield site with a unique historical heritage, where only limited community consultation had previously been undertaken.

Established in Tudor times as a Royal Navy Dockyard, the site occupies most of Deptford's Thameside land. Closed in 1869 it continued in a different form as a victualing yard and Foreign Cattle Market until 1914, when taken over by the Ministry of Defence (Naval Dockyards Society, 2016; Council for British Archaeology, 2018). In the 1950s the remaining above ground parts were demolished to make way for new warehouse structures. These lay disused, until purchased by Rupert Murdoch's News International in 1980 as a storage facility for the importation of newsprint, before finally closing in the late 1990s (Transpontine, 2011). From 2000 onwards, several planning applications came forward, each led by private developers. In 2005, Cheung Kong Holdings and Hutchison Whampoa (based in Hong Kong) were selected to develop a mixed residential and commercial project of luxury apartments, according to high

density 'Dubai' style build of 3,500 flats, with 15% designated 'affordable' but no social rented provision for local people (<http://www.convoys-wharf.com/>). Following an intervention by the then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, outline planning approval was granted by the Greater London Authority in 2014 (Greater London Authority, 2014). This approval acted as a catalyst for the formation of the Convoys Wharf Community Group (later to be renamed the Voice4Deptford campaign), initiated by Cadman and Green. The aim of this group was to bring together everyone with a shared concern to ensure resident's voices were heard, this strategy was informed by Alinsky's 'neutral' community organising approach (1971) whilst also being acutely aware of its limitations, for example, its potential over-reliance on the role of 'community organisers' (Petcoff, 2017). Residents and representatives from existing Deptford campaign groups with an interest in challenging the wider regeneration of their neighbourhood, together with Cadman and Green, planned the first public meeting.

### **Growing an organic community coproduction approach**

The first public meeting was held in late summer 2014 - a noisy and at times passionate affair - with the structure of the meeting loosely underpinned by Alinsky's call for 'social action' with discussions of how communities might tackle issues themselves (1971). A reconstituted group of residents and activists, Cadman, Green, and Turner, a colleague from Goldsmiths were tasked with planning the next meeting. Subsequent meetings were well attended with views clearly expressed, with heated arguments and requests for more information on all aspects of the development. However, the new planning group faced significant challenges in taking action from these meetings, including advertising public meetings at a time and location that suited everyone. Similarly, a key organising principle for the group was agreeing that knowledge and expertise should be shared rather than remain with the academics. This idea of co-creating knowledge, which Ledwith notes (2020) promoted by Green, involved establishing mutual respect for differences and strengths, and encouraging collective responses through discussion. This produced wide ranging conversations within the group as an expression of an overall democratising rationale.

Traditional views were expressed that those with greater knowledge and expertise in organising community campaigns, research skills, and planning laws relating to housing developments should take the lead. These views gradually

became redundant, but not without people falling out with each other and then remaking friendships, as the group soon realised that no one member had the key to the truth. Everyone was learning together and had to admit it to each other.

However, sustaining the enthusiasm of the planning group in this belief that a coproduction approach was the way forward proved challenging. Attendance at later meetings was often inconsistent, leading to repetition of previous discussions to update those absent from earlier meetings. Occasionally individuals would dominate, determined to share inappropriate detail or discredit the contribution of others. With the academics in the group refusing, on principle, to take the responsibility of leading discussions, the continuity of meetings struggled, with individuals coming and going. Learning these lessons was important and led to the agreement that future meetings should generate shared agreed decisions and appropriate 'useful' actions. These lessons and actions form part of what we now present, a six-fold model of organic community coproduction.

## **Towards a methodology of organic community coproduction**

### **The act of disempowerment - stepping aside**

The authors hold a firm belief that an organic approach to coproduction should start at the community level and be based on an issue originating from that community. This gets away from the 'top down' coproduction methodology devised by those with power at the local level, for example, public sector service providers, local politicians and academics who belong to what Bussu and Galanti (2018) identify as 'bureaucracies' which often exhibit a 'lack of community engagement skill' (p.357). The project demanded for Green a personal disempowering process which was key to becoming accepted as an outsider, someone who was seen as willing to listen to residents and keep their views to themselves. Residents were wary of Goldsmiths academics, who had previously researched aspects of Deptford and not returned to disseminate their findings. Regaining and rebuilding trust was therefore essential.

### **The academic as a non-expert**

Allowing yourself to be challenged and corrected by local residents and resisting the temptation to fulfil the often expected role of the expert where "you must know everything, you're from the university" (resident's comment) is one of the

key pathways to achieving authentic collaboration. Freire's notion of 'cultural superiority' (Freire and Macedo,1995) highlighted for Green the liability of being an 'outside' a messenger of the truth, who becomes the dominant voice that undermines the traditions and voices of place-bound identities from a different social class, culture, ethnicity and gender. Authentic collaboration involved silence, listening and learning and being there, rather than telling people how it is and providing the answers as the purveyor of knowledge and expertise. In this way, the approach moves away from what Cherry and Shefner identify as the tendency for academics to direct the flow of traffic in learning, teaching and research activity, and who 'conduct research on subjects more often than collaborating with them' (2008, p.227).

### **Working with difference**

This aspect of organic community coproduction involved bringing Deptford residents together from different social classes, and faith backgrounds that included Muslim women, local Church of England vicar, City of London professionals, teachers, social care assistants, the unemployed, residents on benefits, and students. Strategies for bringing this wide range of residents together included putting up street flyers advertising the campaign's meetings; handing out campaign information leaflets at local shopping areas and engaging people in conversations; an information stall at community assembly gatherings and informing residents via social media platforms. The intention in bringing residents together was to counter the disempowering strategies and tactics often used by non-elected and unrepresentative 'community leaders' which reinforced the existing marginalisation of, for example, women from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. As Toomey reflects, the role of the facilitator aims to get everyone 'on the same page by providing spaces in which people can meet and by guiding people through brainstorming activities in which new ideas or solutions to community problems can arise' (2011, p.190)

### **Giving voice**

We argue that remaining neutral in promoting an organic community coproduction approach with communities experiencing histories of disempowerment merely upholds the status quo. As Wilson et al have argued, 'those with power decide for you unless you challenge their position' (2013, p.175). Giving people support and confidence that they have the relevant

expertise, knowledge and voice to provide alternative views requires creating relationships based on trust, acceptance and consistency. Wariness and suspicion from not only outsiders but also other local people coming forward and giving their opinions involves breaking down barriers. Creating a sense of confidence and trust that if they did voice concerns, then these issues would be both listened to and acted upon, is also a challenge. This approach supports Woodley's notion that, 'Genuine co-production can only take place when there is a realisation that it can't be imposed top-down - either explicitly or implicitly through overly stringent or prescriptive funding and procedural requirements' (2019, p.35).

### **Bearing witness**

Being prompted and encouraged to tell one's story by being around others, experiencing and learning from them so that individuals see, remember and share what's happening in the community, remains a powerful tool in the 'bottom-up' approach that lies at the heart of organic coproduction. Residents attending campaign information meetings started talking to each other despite not knowing many other people. Neighbours realised they were neighbours and stories of who they were, where they lived and what they thought about the proposed Convoys Wharf development transpired. In facilitated open discussions, initiated by Cadman, Green and Turner, they soon realised that their concerns about the proposed development were similar. Telling their own personal stories of who they were, how long they had lived in Deptford and what they wanted for Deptford people built new relationships. These meetings also created individual and group solidarity by allowing the sharing of aspirations which people had never publicly voiced before. They identified new skills in contacting other residents and shared knowledge such as the history of the Deptford community. By retelling the stories of what was happening, people were bearing witness to the possibility of their empowerment, that change was something they could make happen rather than rely on others. Crucially, it re-activated a deep awareness of what their Deptford community meant to them, an outcome that is not always featured in more traditional forms of community activism (O'Grady, 1990).

### **Consistency**

Being consistent with communities requires a commitment to stay involved with the processes of change on the part of the actor, particularly the academic outsider. Experience teaches that the researcher needs to commit themselves to a sustained effort of action over the long-term; not some 'in and out' approach once the data has been collected. This means that you will follow through with what you set out to do consistently over a period of time up until the moment the shared objectives are achieved. As such, consistency is all about your ability to be dependable, reliable and responsible for all your choices, decisions and actions. The remark from Cadman to Green that 'You're not like other academics. You talk different and listen, not tell us what to do and you keep coming back' highlighted that he was on the right track. This could be interpreted as a coproduction and praxis interchange, whereby in the Freirian tradition, a reciprocal dialogical relationship (Mayo, 1999) generated the possibility of equalising knowledge, power and intellectual superiority.

### **Evidence of change**

Having defined some key characteristics of organic community coproduction, we now seek to provide evidence of its impact. This can be both daunting and challenging. Haynes identifies impacts that emerge during an action as often not resembling those that were intended; they may not be a direct result of the coproduction activities or are an unintentional by-product (2017). One strategy used with the Voice4Deptford campaign was to ask both residents and activists to observe over a period of time what was actually happening; the pluses, the gains and the challenges. As a result of this period of community-led observation, we have identified four areas where 'things were happening', and change occurred.

### **Attending meetings**

The experience of the campaign initially confirmed an underlying phenomenon; that for a number of reasons, many residents did not wish to be included in consultative processes let alone in coproduction ventures. As Shanahan and Ward note in discussing the 'excluded' (1995, p.72), barriers to participation can include time commitments (Greene, 2005); and low income (Ravensbergen and VanderPlaat, 2010). Successfully breaking through these barriers is starting to be achieved as the following examples illustrate. It began when what Cooper and Wyatt (1997) call a 'collective alarm' was spread throughout the Deptford

community via hundreds of flyers and posters pasted up around the flats and houses, community notice boards, and other locations as opportunity arose. Engaging with residents as these activities were happening gave the organising group time and space to exchange knowledge and information regarding the proposed development and suggesting that it might be useful for them to attend. Residents talking to residents about shared concerns and interests, and why they should get involved by coming to the community meetings, instilled a sense of 'we are in this together' that seemed to work! They liked to come to the meetings if they knew their help was needed and if they could see that it was an important use of their time. Finding suitable locations and times for people to attend generated a collective sense of a joint enterprise in resourcing these meetings including the provision of a resident run crèche.

### **Alliances of Difference: Working together**

Working together is an essential element of community practice in achieving social change and justice. However, working with local community groups reinforced Bauman's uncomfortable observation that whilst the community of Deptford might be viewed from the outside as 'a warm place, a cosy and a comfortable place' (2000, p.5), it also had another side. In reality, meetings often created tensions between individuals and various community groups with their different agendas. This led to some withdrawing from the campaign on the grounds that their views and beliefs ran contrary to their commitment to the wider community. For example, one local group objected that the Voice4Deptford name failed to represent all the various Deptford community groups, including theirs. Accusations of speaking on behalf of the Deptford community without their permission were commonplace.

Publicly acknowledging the challenges posed by competing ideas, experiences and agendas was one of the key outcomes of this coproduction approach and involved supporting the experience of working together. Doing so encouraged residents to nurture individual confidence in their personal and political ability and gain some control over their lives (Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988). These 'individual participatory competences' (Kieffer, 1984) could be observed explicitly in residents' increasing self-confidence, their accumulating knowledge of the realities of working with others and the development of new skills at meetings. Despite personal animosity and local historical rivalries, an important breakthrough along these lines occurred when, some, not all, called a 'truce' by

recognising that their differences would not be beneficial to the overall community's challenge to the proposed housing development.

### **Speaking Out: Regaining Voices**

Alemanno talks of the 'plurality of voices' that drowns out democracy (2017). Crucially for this campaign however, the gaining of 'community knowledge' and people finding their voices was instrumental in challenging the local dominant narrative. This dialogue involved a two-way interactive process between activists and residents actively listening and encouraging residents to talk about their ideas, and value those of others. The process of valuing included description, clarification and explanation, and allowed residents to express how the world was perceived by them, and the experienced reality of their community (Blackburn, 2000).

Those residents who had never attended community meetings nor considered their voices and ideas important sometimes became those who initiated events. Engaging with local power holders, such as the housing developers, politicians, and local government officers reflected a successful outcome, that was expressed in taking the initiative for creating meeting agendas, opening discussions, and engaging in the 'frank exchange' of views and opinions.

### **Being together: community reflective time**

Critical reflection and community action is often portrayed as an individual process, usually only undertaken by the 'professional' looking back (Rooney, 2002; Emejulu, 2013). The collective view of the planning group, in contrast, was to aim for a more community-led discussion whereby we could revisit, dissect and learn from what the campaign had achieved to date. To that end an empty shop outside Goldsmiths was secured as a three day 'pop-up' shop to highlight the Voice4Deptford campaign. It hosted well-attended discussions and workshops, successfully attracting those already involved in the campaign, students and staff from Goldsmiths as well as 'newcomer' residents wanting to know more. A 'Voice4Deptford Wall', a visual historical collage of the history of the campaign complete with original early posters, flyers, notes from community meetings, action lists and an assorted collection of other artefacts, provided a focal discussion and reflection point. People stood around the wall in small

groups; debating, arguing and generally reflecting on the distance travelled by the campaign to date, including the numerous setbacks. These discussions provided verbal feedback, supplemented by a daily logbook provided for participants for their comments. Freire suggests that reflection without action is verbalism, encouraging a passive 'armchair revolution', whereas action without reflection is 'pure activism', that is action for action's sake (1972). Both these insights, based on the shared experiences of the campaign, were never truer. However, they also highlighted some of the real challenges with the organic community coproduction approach that the Voice4Deptford campaign experienced and is illustrated by the following two learning points.

### *Recognition*

Residents involved in the campaign, were often hindered by the negative perception of other community members. They were told that they did not represent the Deptford community, and that the 'consultation' with power holders such as local politicians, senior local authority staff and the developers was 'tokenistic' since key decisions had already been made and would therefore end in failure for the community. Similarly, there was a reluctance by these power holders to hear and respect local voices.

Many residents became highly cynical and disillusioned regarding the gains that might be made from participation in the campaign, feeling that they lacked the skills to fully participate and perhaps had little to offer. In hindsight one could see that some of the active residents and community activists became overwhelmed with their duties, suffered doubt and often felt misinterpreted as to why they are involved and what they were achieving. Some therefore left the campaign.

### *Community Time Commitment*

Pearce and Milne in their study of working class estates in Northern England highlight that,

'The amount of time and effort these residents invest in their communities is often not recognised by agencies, who sometimes even take the credit themselves for it or disregard it.' (2010, p.7)

This insight resonated with the experience with many of those who gave up their time, and still do, for the campaign on a voluntary basis. The feeling that their 'community' meant something and that it had to be activated, renewed and

protected, was clearly their driving force. However, this unpaid community activity often entailed individuals attending an evening meeting straight from their place of work or bringing young children with them to community meetings. Some had to make difficult choices between family and personal priorities and the campaign. As the campaign progressed individuals came and went, often with no hello nor goodbyes. Very rarely did the local power holders acknowledge in meetings that a certain individual resident was no longer attending meetings. This raises the serious question as to the expectations of partners in a community coproduction approach when some are employed and receive a salary, when residents and community activists usually do not!

### **Reframing local power: some early impacts**

Evidence of the effectiveness of the organic community coproduction approach lies in the ownership of the community and its power. That power becomes reframed with respect to those who are used to seeing themselves as the power brokers in the situation. Residents clearly understood the problems facing the proposed development of Convoys Wharf. They argued that they must be part of the solution and that by working together with the local agencies (power holders) they had a right to improve life in their community. Outstanding individuals, residents and community activists, such as Cadman, Davies, Briggs, Celosse, Turner (Phil), Jacca and Farah, became spokespersons, voicing the views of residents to the local agencies involved in the proposed development. This re-empowerment over the past six years witnessed their concerns, challenges and alternatives to the proposed development being taken seriously in meetings. It slowly challenged and changed the lingering view that power holders alone knew what was best for the Deptford community.

This change was evidenced when residents, for example, chaired meetings between the community, developers and politicians. The residents became co-authors of planning application challenges to the local authority and created new community platforms including initiating a BAME resident's community project of the history of slavery in Deptford.

Another example of change could be seen in the shift in previously intransigent attitudes of the developers, and their objections at community meetings on issues such as timing, location, and attendance. They were enabled to gradually see that their usual 'top down' approach to consultation was becoming unproductive. We saw evidence of this shift from informal 'off the record',

'secret' conversations and negative responses to community challenges to their planning proposals, to attempts to reach out to the community and listen. In reality embryonic changes but the journey had commenced.

## **Conclusion**

In this article the authors have discussed and reflected on the challenges facing the ongoing Voice4Deptford campaign.. They have deconstructed the different elements of a community action around housing redevelopment in a long-standing and historic locality which has succeeded in beginning to divert agency, power and knowledge away from 'experts' into the orbit of the community. We have defined these as organic approaches to community coproduction because: they are long-term; consistent; relational; consciously share power and challenge traditional expectations about it; have reflection on practice and change at their heart; and are open but not prescriptive about the different ways and levels at which transformation as social justice will occur.

This organic approach to community coproduction is profoundly shaped by a fusion of Gramscian Marxist-based principles and techniques, a re-engagement of Tönnies notion of community and a methodology rooted in the practice of Fals Borda. First, it challenges local power holder's entitlement to retain a hegemonic hold over communities by denying their voices, real participation, and decision making. Second, in the way it actively encourages and supports residents to step forward and become community 'organic intellectuals' based on who they are, their background, local knowledge and tradition, Finally, it is improvised through reflective relational practices that have at their heart an ability to admit fault and failure, and change practices through critical self-reflection and mutual accountability. To that extent organic coproduction both encapsulates but also moves beyond the attributes identified in the literature review associated with the activist presence model.

The lessons being learnt from the campaign highlights the realities of the practice of organic community coproduction, that there are risks and uncertainties attached to what has been called the 'messy, incomplete, complex and tentative' (Ackland, Crichton and Steedman, 2018, p.13). The practice of generating voices of communities when confronted by powerful external and internal forces such as developers with a global reach and local power holders is a real challenge. It is an act of mobilising embryonic social capital akin to that identified as a 'mezzo method' by Kelly and Westoby (2018, p.89) albeit in

circumstances not of our choosing. However, we argue that the embryonic organic community coproduction approach is providing a tentative model for developing a 'fluid' and 'experimental' engagement approach in urban community spaces that challenges existing power arrangements.

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