Growing and sustaining self help

Taking the Big Society from words to action

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CDF would like to thank the five self-help groups we have worked with; Chrysalis, Friends of Landsdown Community Garden, Phoenix Community Housing Co-operative, Roma Support Group, and TBN Credit Union. The groups' insightful contributions have been invaluable, and we are immensely grateful for the view of self help that they afforded us.

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Executive summary

This report is about the practice of self help: a community's collective attempt to tackle the issues it cares about. The report highlights the potential for self help, given the current socio-economic challenges, and suggests ways in which the government and other agencies can grow and sustain self-help activity. It draws on a wide range of literature and CDF's work with five self-help groups, who have acted on issues of financial exclusion, domestic violence, derelict land and empty houses, and welfare support for minority groups. Our research has been discussed and refined in light of discussions with government officials, partners and stakeholders.

In the current climate, self help is more relevant than ever. The poor state of public finances in the UK is leading to public spending cuts which 'will reduce the quantity or quality of public services available'.[1] In addition to the economic context, the coalition government is shaping a new policy direction: to build a Big Society, in which 'people come together to improve their communities and help one another' (HM Government, 2010). The government's ambitions converge with other related agendas around localism and redefining the role of the state. The result is a clear focus on community action that provides social value and complements or fills gaps in public services.

In this context, there is a significant opportunity to grow and sustain self-help activity. In the course of our research, we have seen how self-help groups support public service, but the value they create goes beyond this. While self help can address intractable social, economic and environmental issues, it also has the potential to empower citizens, build trust and resilience and give communities a sense of influence over local issues.

Self help as a concept has a long history. It was originally put forward by Samuel Smiles (1859) to encourage greater self-reliance and individual responsibility. Since then, self help has come to mean a more collective enterprise where a community of people help each other to address problems they face in their daily lives. An elusive concept, current thinkers disagree about how autonomous a group must be from the state and external bodies, to be classed as 'doing' self help. Based on our literature review, we identified three key types of activity that demarcate self-help groups:

- activity that adds to, and complements, the work of public services in addressing a social, economic or environmental issue
- activity that is decided upon, organised and actioned free from state control and organisation
- activity that is not purely about advocacy, but is about action.

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[1] See http://www.publicfinance.co.uk/features/2010/07/the-axeman-cometh/

Following CDF's primary research with five self-help groups, we have refined this reading of self help. Self-help groups develop practices based on lived experience, which often challenge the practices and inadequacies of existing services; they are driven by the needs of a community; they are dependent on committed individuals, whose energy is largely responsible for sustaining the work; involvement in self help is a form of participation in both democratic processes and civil society.

Our literature review revealed strong and cogent arguments for the state's role in supporting self help. It has become clear that we grow and sustain self help 'by offering stable, long term, targeted financial and technical support' (Berner, 2005). CDF's primary research with the five self-help groups has supported this conclusion.

The culmination of this research is the development of three solutions to the three key challenges facing self help.

1. **Self-help Intermediaries to bridge public services and self-help groups**.

   Self-help groups often push for a change that is based on their lived experience of a problem. This is frequently at odds with the analysis and actions of those delivering the related public service, who have a different relationship to the problem. This can put professionals and self-help groups in opposition. The result is that groups fail to get the support and resources they need, and the state fails to harness groups' energy and experience – to the detriment of services and service users.

   There is a crucial role to play in bridging the divide between public bodies and self-help groups. Using our knowledge of key community development practices, and related learning from other intermediary roles, we make a case for Self-help Intermediaries. This role entails three functions: identifying valuable self-help groups and practices; mediating between the state and self-help groups; assessing the support and resource needs of self-help groups. We present two approaches to developing these roles; re-orienting existing state-based community workers, or developing a national pool of such intermediaries. CDF is currently developing proposals to test these approaches in local settings. We will explore the most effective place to base intermediaries, the different capacities of the role, and which of the two models has the most potential.

2. **Public Service Plus to meet the shortfall in technical expertise**.

   A lack of technical expertise, at key points, stunts the development of self-help groups. Our self-help groups tackled numerous technical issues in addressing local problems. Technical requirements included expertise in soil chemistry, building regulations, legal issues and developing fair contracts. Whilst some groups found the expertise they needed (sometimes at considerable cost), others did not and this hindered their development.

Many of these skills reside in local public bodies. In a bold proposal, we point to an existing commitment to 'transform the civil service into the civic service' (Conservatives, 2010), and suggest this could be extended to all public sector workers. Under a scheme we have called Public Service Plus, we suggest enabling public servants to volunteer their specific expertise with groups. Crucially, this requires systems for matching specialist public servants with the groups and tackling issues of professional liability and incentivisation. We present these key considerations for Public Service Plus, and outline proposals to test two systems for matching specialist public servants and groups: the first is a brokerage model; the second a more direct system for linking public servants with self-help groups.

3. **Community organisers to match funding with support**.

Self-help groups need a diverse mix of support, resources and funding. Whilst some of the self-help groups in our research cited a lack of funding, others suffered more obviously from the absence of certain physical assets (such as empty properties for refurbishment) or a shortage of advice and support. The challenge is to find sophisticated ways of blending support and funding for such groups.

As the government designs grant programmes, such as Community First, we should attempt to develop systems for connecting funding to support. In this report, we outline how community organisers could play a key role in the areas receiving Community First funding, enabling them to bring in support for groups to complement the funding they receive.

In the conclusion, we reflect on the role played by self-help groups in tackling intractable social, economic and environmental issues, often succeeding where the state has failed. We conclude that there are limitations to what self help can achieve, or how far it can be directed. We have found self help to be variable, resistant to professionalisation, dependent on people's energy, which can be unpredictable, and that it often operates in niche areas.

This makes self help difficult to control. Rather than seeking to control it, however, central government and local public bodies must create the conditions for it to grow, and where it does, they should support and resource it. Seize this opportunity and government can harness the power and potential of self help to meet the converging ambitions of localism and the Big Society.

We close the report with an offer to the reader. If you or your organisation is interested in working with us on any of the proposals presented here we would like to hear from you.

Contact us at selfhelp@cdf.org.uk

Introduction

Writing in 1902, Peter Kropotkin stated that 'sociability is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle'. As sociable beings this applies to us all; when we are under threat, or those close to us are under threat, we tend to collectivise. The dire state of our public finances, coupled with a shrinking capacity to provide key public services (Crawford, R. and Tetlow, G., 2010), means that many in our society will face grave challenges and threats in coming years. In this context, we will increasingly have to rely on our collective resources to tackle the gaps left by a shrinking state.

Yet in the depths of this pessimism we have cause for optimism. As we will demonstrate in this report, when communities collectivise and 'help themselves' it can have a remarkably empowering affect on them. Helping those who are facing similar difficulties to you, or taking action to improve your local neighbourhood imbues people with a sense that they can influence local issues and take responsibility. Such activity is also important to our economy. The time we spend helping the people we care about, or being active in our community, constitutes more than 40 percent of the productive work we do as a nation (Cahn, 2002). It has real economic value, yet standard measures of the economy (such as Gross Domestic Product) fail to take it into account. Just as important, self-help groups can tackle intractable social, economic and environmental issues, with a radicalism and effectiveness way beyond that of the state. 'Living' a problem means that self-help groups are often best placed to solve it.

It is perhaps then a positive thing that the government is talking the language of self help:

> 'We will...make it easier for people to come together to improve their communities and help one another'.

> HM Government, 2010

Anticipating this policy context, CDF has spent a year researching the concept and practice of self help. Our work was sparked by a forecast for community development we conducted in 2009 (Archer, 2009b), where we predicted the importance of self help, and how it would become a focus for community development in the coming years. Indeed, the link between community development and self help is a strong one; CDF's survey of community development workers in 2004 (Glen et al, 2004) showed that 69 per cent of workers facilitated or supported self-help groups. The community development field's longstanding expertise in developing and working with self-help groups, has strongly informed our research.

In 2009, CDF published a baseline paper exploring community self help (Archer, 2009a). Following this, we conducted primary research with five self-help groups and

held two discussion groups with government officials and partners/stakeholders. These discussion groups, which we reference throughout, have helped us refine our thinking.

The aim of this report is to highlight how government and other agencies can support self help, whilst also presenting the practical realities of self-help groups. We suggest solutions to the key challenges in growing and sustaining self help, drawing on learning from a wide range of UK and international literature, as well as our experience in the community development field, and our work with the five self-help groups and the feedback from the discussion groups.

The report begins by outlining the policy context for self help. This is followed by a short discussion of the concept of self help and descriptions of each of the five self-help projects we studied. We then go on to present some of the key challenges to self help and identify opportunities to overcome them.

The policy and community context

As we write, a great many policy makers and thinkers are scratching their heads at the prospect of turning the 'Big Society' from an initial catchphrase into a coherent *and useful* concept. *The coalition: our programme for government* (HM Government, 2010) outlines with gusto the aspirations for the Big Society. The idea of people 'coming together' to make their lives better sits alongside a stated desire to hand power and responsibility from the state to communities. The concept of the Big Society represents as a convergence of ideas about, on the one hand, community action, and on the other, a smaller state with fewer resources.

As the Decentralisation and Localism Bill takes shape, [2] we can see how ideas about a smaller, more localised state are supporting the push for more community action. Key elements of the bill include rights for community groups to run services, to own land in the form of land trusts, and to have greater financial autonomy. Such 'localism' measures are designed to encourage communities to take action and show how government is prioritising a certain type of voluntary activity; that which 'improves communities' or creates social value. In this context, self help looks ever more relevant. As we detail in the next section, a defining feature of self-help activity is that it entails direct action to address a real issue affecting a community. Hence, the convergence of localism and the Big Society has created a real opportunity to grow and sustain self help.

We are, however, some way off realising the Big Society. Currently, only 29 percent of people feel they can influence decisions that affect their local area (CLG, 2009). Clearly, people do not feel that the capacity to make decisions and take action is in their hands. Yet we do know that when people are involved in community groups their sense of influence over local decisions improves. When asked, 65 percent of community group members funded under the Grassroots Grants programme felt they could influence local decisions (Curtis et al., forthcoming 2010). If involvement in community groups generally increases feelings of influence, perhaps involvement in self help will have an even greater impact?

There is at least a strong platform on which to build self help. Civil society in the UK is relatively well developed: 70 percent of adults volunteer in some form (CLG, 2008), the number of general charities has been increasing and civil society owns £210 billion in assets (NCVO, 2009). Part of the plan for the Big Society is to build on this civil

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[2] See http://www.number10.gov.uk/queens-speech/2010/05/queens-speech-decentralisation-and-localism-bill-50673

society. The government has committed to supporting 'co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises'. Other proposals for building the Big Society include 'making regular community involvement a key element of civil service staff appraisals' and a commitment to train 5,000 community organisers (Conservatives, 2010). We also anticipate grassroots funding programmes will be made available to support community groups, in the form of a neighbourhood grants programme (HM Government, 2010).

On a cautionary note, the process of turning a group of people with an idea into a coordinated group that can actually run a school, take over a service or create something entirely new is complex. As our discussion groups revealed, one of the big challenges facing the Big Society is how to 'nudge' people into action. It is of vital importance that we understand how self help evolves, but also why latent energy and demand for control is blocked or untapped.

The concept of self help

CDF's work on self help over the past year has shown how difficult it is to apply a fixed definition to the concept. It was acknowledged in our discussion groups with government officials, partners and stakeholders that it can be difficult to distinguish between self-help groups and a range of other community and voluntary groups. In CDF's baseline paper, *Help from within* (Archer, 2009a), we explored the diverse range of definitions of self help. We will not repeat these here, but offer a basic outline of the defining features of self help. As our work has developed, we have refined how we conceive of self help, but a concrete definition remains elusive.

Radically different ideas have underpinned self help from the time it was first introduced through to how it is used today. When the original concept was articulated by Samuel Smiles in 1859, he based his ideas on self-reliance and individual responsibility. However, modern interpretations define self help in terms of collective responsibility and mutual aid. Today, the concept's central theme is that more can be achieved by the collective effort of a group than by the members working in isolation. This is a long way from the original idea of not being a burden on those around us. As a group, the members understand the help they need better than anyone else and they learn how to obtain and deliver this help through collective action.

However, beyond this consensus there is disagreement about how reliant a group must be on its own labours, and its direct decision-making power. For some commentators, engagement in decision making is enough to constitute community self help (Richardson, 2008). For others, self-help groups are those that make decisions directly without reliance on any third party, using their own 'labour, skills and knowledge' (Burns and Taylor, 1998).

CDF's research has revealed that self-help groups often focus on addressing a specific set of problems that they feel acutely. The very act of addressing the problem gives them a sense of empowerment and responsibility. As a volunteer in one of our case studies noted:

> *'It's been life changing. And it's more than just bricks and mortar, it's about giving something back. You have a level of ownership, it's a guilt you have, I get twitchy after a couple of months if I haven't done something. It's the way I am and I think lots of people are like this.'*

> Phoenix volunteer

To understand the unique contribution of self help, we need to define what it's essential characteristics. In *Help from within*, CDF offered an approximate definition of self-help activity, and this helped us identify the self-help groups we researched. In

addition to the three key types of activity undertaken by self-help groups identified in *Help from within*,[3] by the end of the research process, we concluded that self help often has the following features:

- its practices and methods are based on lived experience and often challenge the practices and inadequacies of existing public and private services
- it is driven by a community's need and often by the energies of a committed individual
- it is a form of participation in both democratic processes and civil society.

While the pursuit of an adequate definition necessarily focuses attention on the common aspects of self help across the many styles of work and settings, it is also right to acknowledge its diversity. This point came out strongly in our discussion groups. Self help evolves in a vastly complicated context, but it is also often local in nature and the local context will inevitably shape the form and function of the groups.

Different political persuasions have adopted varying definitions of self help and the role conceived for it. Ultra-conservative positions support self help on the premise that it is 'letting the poor look after themselves'. Ultra-liberal positions support self help on the premise that 'the poor can do anything if you set them free'. Both definitions of self help entail the state stepping back, but self help does not mean zero input from the state, and in this sense it is not a cost-neutral solution to social problems. As Berner (2005) states, we must:

> '… encourage initiatives not by walking away but by offering stable, long term, targeted financial and technical support'

These ideas have been central to developing our notion of self help and the role of the state in supporting it.

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[3] Activity that adds to, and complements, the work of public services; activity that is decided upon, organised and actioned free of state control and organisation; activity that is not purely about advocacy but is about action (Archer, 2009, p. 6)

The case studies

To understand the practical realities of 'doing' self help, CDF studied five self-help groups, covering a broad range of services and styles of intervention. These groups were selected from a number of suggestions made to us by partner organisations,[4] on the basis that they undertook activity that adds to, and complements, the work of public services in addressing a social, economic or environmental issue; activity that is decided upon, organised and actioned free from state control and organisation; activity that is not purely about advocacy, but is about action. The case studies are spread across England, with two in London and the remaining three in Liverpool, Manchester and Middlesbrough.

In their own words, **Chrysalis** was founded in response to the 'lack of service provision for victims/survivors of domestic violence' in Liverpool. Chrysalis aims to help women to break free of abusive relationships and provide programmes and ongoing support to enable change. Run by volunteers and students on placement, in recent times Chrysalis' core client base has developed due to improving relationships with the city's Social Services Department that refers mostly young women with children. The women are encouraged to work with Chrysalis and attend a structured programme, which helps them to identify the character of their relationships and – often for the first time in public – to consider the damage and risks for them and their children. Chrysalis receives up to seven referrals from the Social Services Department each day.

Phoenix Community Housing Co-operative (henceforth Phoenix) was established in London's east end in 1980 to provide short-life accommodation for single people on low incomes. In its Sumner House project, which was the focus of our research, Phoenix has renovated four flats owned by a local housing association at a cost of £6,000 each. The housing association was quoted £30,000 for the same work to each property. Training volunteers to refit the properties, Phoenix has not only introduced new affordable housing but has also helped volunteers learn new skills for employment.

The **Roma Support Group** (RSG) was established and is led by Roma people. Since its humble beginning working from private kitchens in east London, RSG now works with 850 Roma families. It offers advice on a wide range of welfare concerns, education support for Roma children and social inclusion events to promote understanding of Roma culture. The need for the project came to light when a young boy grabbed the founder's hand and led her to a group of Roma women queuing for help outside the local Polish centre. The idea evolved through discussion with a group

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[4] The suggestions were kindly made to us by Community Links, Groundwork, Self-help-housing.org, and CDF's Grassroots Grants team.

of Roma men and the founder, and it was agreed to set up a dedicated place where Roma could go for support and advice. Twelve years on, the project has its own premises, core staff, a host of volunteers and a positive reputation in the field.

The **TBN Credit Union** (TBN) was established following an announcement in a community meeting, which asked if anyone was interested in starting a credit union. A group of local residents came together to find out what it was and one year later TBN was formed. In May 2010, it celebrated its 20th anniversary and 1,000th member. TBN flourishes in an area of Middlesbrough where there are no local banking facilities. It is run entirely by volunteers who run weekly collection points at local schools and other community venues. It provides banking facilities, savings clubs and advice on financial management for local residents and school students. TBN is supported by Community Ventures Limited (a charity comprising numerous local social enterprises), which employs a credit union development worker for the city.

Friends of Landsdown Community Garden is a Manchester-based group that formed when local residents tried to find a way of transforming a piece of waste ground and adjacent alleyway behind their terrace of houses. They found a number of organisations keen to develop a community garden project and with access to small pots of funding. Arcon Housing Association, who owned the land, was keen to see it put to better use. Manchester City Council's alley gating programme was engaged as it complemented the project. Groundwork then threw their experience of working on environmental community projects into the mix. The three organisations came together and supported the residents to form a group, and take responsibility for maintaining the land. The group received an £8,000 ward-based grant, and a £10,000 grant from Arcon to undertake the work.

Addressing the challenges facing self help

Working with the five self-help groups/organisations has revealed a number of crucial challenges that have, or could have, stunted their progress and growth. In the section that follows we outline key challenges to self help, and present solutions to address them.

1. Self-help Intermediaries to bridge public services and self-help groups

Challenge

Self-help groups often directly question the way public services are delivered. Public service professionals can see this as a critique of their practices and can be defensive. Self-help groups can get frustrated facing resistance during long periods of advocating practices they feel are most effective. They commonly push for a change that has support in their communities and is rooted in lived experience. Therefore, the challenge is to foster closer working relationships between self-help groups and public service professionals, and to harmonise their different experiences, if we want self-help groups to complement and fill the gaps in shrinking public services.

Evidence

Self help often originates because local people have a way of understanding problems that is distinct from that of the state. Self-help organisations tend to evolve as a necessary response to the failure or absence of service provision. It could be as simple as not living close to a bank, which could result in self help in the form of a credit union.

> *'Say you've got £5 and you want to save it. Going to the bank will cost £1.40 each way on the bus, so you'd have £2.20 left, no bank will take it.'*
>
> TBN Co-ordinator

Despite clear evidence that our self-help groups were delivering tangible benefits for their communities, they were often marginalised or not supported by public service providers.

> *'I was invited to the domestic violence "Zero Tolerance" campaign launch in the town hall. I'd spoken to many of them on the phone over the years and so they said, "are you the woman with the daughter who's being beaten up?"... I asked them, if you can't help a girl who's being beaten right this minute, right now, what can you do? What does zero tolerance mean?'*
>
> Founder of Chrysalis

Chrysalis' history is a useful example to explore. Despite good intentions in both policy and practice, few of the agencies, legal or welfare, felt able to do anything to help the founder's daughter when she was faced with domestic violence. Chrysalis developed as a response to the gap in provision for those experiencing domestic violence, specifically with regard to personal support. Experience from Chrysalis suggests that women who are experiencing domestic abuse need two things: support from the criminal justice system and the practical and emotional support to get out of the violent relationship. Chrysalis crucially provides the latter, and this supports the view that the existing public services and Chrysalis are two halves of the same whole.

Initially the relationship between Chrysalis and local public bodies was oppositional. This has since improved and Chrysalis now takes an increasing number of referrals from the local Social Services Department. But there is more to be done. The small amount of funding Chrysalis receives is to deliver programmes, but this does not cover the broader work that Chrysalis undertakes or pay any salaries.

There are clear advantages for professionals to working closely with those who are more embedded in a problem. Public bodies can be worlds apart from the lived experience of the communities they serve. Many interviewees echoed the sentiments of the founder of Chrysalis when she spoke of professionals 'just not getting it'. Professionals do not inhabit the same spaces, either physically or emotionally, as those involved in self help, and evidence suggests real advantages in trying to merge these two perspectives. The different spaces that different actors inhabit, mean that each 'see' the problem and its solution in different ways. Good management or policymaking may require coolheadedness, but to solve the right problem appropriately, professionals also need to understand the lived experience of those seeking help. The emotion and urgency of those closest to the problem is not necessarily a sign of amateurism, anymore than detachment is a guarantee of professionalism.

Phoenix is a good example of what can be achieved when self-help groups and public service providers unite. By working together, Phoenix and a local housing association have developed a mutually beneficial way of restoring void properties. This increases the affordable housing supply at minimal cost and mitigates the neighbourhood problems associated with void properties. Their combined effectiveness is grounded not only in a shared agenda, but also in a convergence of their perspectives and experience. When convergence does not take place and perspectives stand in conflict, self help can easily be stunted. In such cases, we fail to maximise the benefits accrued from self-help activity.

Opportunity

As public service cuts hit, local public bodies must find ways to support and mobilise self help to address local problems – without it those problems could remain unaddressed and the growth of the Big Society would be stunted. In this sense then, it is in the interest of the state that views and experiences are shared.

So how do we achieve this? How do we work through tensions between self-help groups and the state, build relationships and develop a more harmonious approach? Firstly, we must find a way to bridge the distinct stand points of public bodies and self-help groups. This means bridging lived and professional experience and a power differential that means self-help groups have often had little impact on the state. Such a bridge must also ensure self-help groups understand the role of local public bodies in taking a strategic view of local issues, and that take account of local priorities.

In the course of our research, we have seen how intermediaries have played, or could have played, this key bridging role. We are not alone in this finding. Other thinkers have also noted the importance of developing such intermediary roles and have described them as Local Innovation Brokers (Young Foundation, 2010a), Community Enablers (Community Matters, 2010), or Generalist Intermediaries and Facilitators (School for Social Entrepreneurs, 2009). While conceived differently, these roles carry a consistent set of ideas: to connect the state and community groups, harnessing the energy of the community and mediating between agendas.

Figure 1: Role of Self-help Intermediaries

We agree with much of this thinking and believe there is much to learn from community development workers here, who are required to understand the needs of both community and state and connect the two.[5] Using this expertise as a basis, and our learning from the case study groups, we see a role for a Self-help Intermediary. The intermediaries would undertake three key functions as outlined in figure 2 on page 17.

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[5] See Key Area Four in National Occupations Standards for Community Development.
http://www.fcdl.org.uk/NOS_Consultation/Documents/NOS_CD_Eng_v2finalartworkedversion.pdf

Figure 2: Three key functions of Self-help Intermediaries

Identifying valuable self-help groups and practices	Mediating between state and groups	Assessing support and resource needs of groups
• The Self-help Intermediary provides help to local public service providers to identify self-help groups that are providing important benefits, looking at how they complement public services and their distinctive practices. This means having a good relationship with public service providers, to ensure valuable self-help groups/practices are harnessed and supported. The Young Foundation Social Entrepreneur in Residence (SEiR) is performing a similar function in Birmingham's North and East PCT, identifying ideas and ventures from the community to improve health services and address high costs (Young Foundation, 2010b). This scouting, backed with the ability to provide resources and support is key.	• The role must focus on mediating between the state and the group, trying to secure to argue the case for their resource needs and practices. This could mean securing fair leasing / funding / resourcing arrangements for groups, or ensuring that such settlements do not come with heavy prescriptions in terms of practices/methods. It also means ensuring groups are fully aware of the pressures and priorities of the state, and strategic priorities for their area or community.	• Such a role should also encompass the identification of support and resource needs of a group, and develop a case for the social return on any investment in support or resources. This means looking at what groups need to establish or grow, and what social value this will create.

We use the term 'Self-help Intermediary' to point to certain roles and tasks undertaken, rather than a set job description. Indeed, there are many questions to answer such as, where these intermediaries would be best based, within the community or within the state? Our view is that in order to perform the functions outlined above, the role must first carry influence with public service providers, while having proximity to self-help groups. Secondly, the role must be carried out by someone who understands the realm of both community and public bodies

Given these two considerations, we suggest that there are two models to explore. The first is to re-orientate state-based community workers already stationed in a specific locality, giving them increased resources (and influence) to perform the key functions we have outlined. The second is to develop a national pool of intermediaries that could be brought into a locality as and when needed.

In our discussion group with senior government officials and partners/stakeholders, it was noted that a variety of individuals undertake some of the functions highlighted above. We saw this in a number of our case studies. In the Friends of Landsdown Community Garden project, an elected member and ward co-ordinator undertook key intermediary functions. Our discussion groups also pointed to the proposed community organisers as fulfilling this intermediary role. We think they could, if they are capable of undertaking the three intermediary functions we have outlined. However, if they are to use oppositional and campaign-based methods, then mediating between the state and groups may be difficult.

In the discussion groups that we facilitated, there was consensus that intermediary roles must be flexible, dependent on different contexts and localities. Intermediaries must be able to focus down on the crucial local issues (for both groups and local public bodies), and hence the role is likely to be orientated differently in each context.

Seizing the opportunity

Significant learning has been developed about certain elements of the intermediary role e.g. identifying valuable self-help groups and practice. However insufficient attention has been given to the crucial job of mediating to ensure a fair settlement and convergence of views. Learning how this is best done will be CDF's focus.

Hence, CDF is developing proposals to work with intermediaries in a local area, backed by local public agencies, to see how intermediation takes place and whether it can shift relationships between groups and the state. Working with a variety of intermediaries, from different sectors and with different remits, we hope to learn some key lessons about effective intermediation to grow self help. Such research should help us answer questions about who is best placed to intermediate, what practices work in bridging with the state, and the extent to which such roles are context dependent.

2.   Skills matching to meet the shortfall in technical expertise

Challenge

Our case studies have shown that often a lack of technical expertise at crucial points can inhibit self-help groups' progress in developing solutions to persistent social, economic and environmental problems. The challenge is how to fill the gaps in expertise in the context of limited resources, and the role that the state can play in doing so.

Evidence

The evolution of Friends of Landsdown Community Garden is a successful story of state support for a self-help group. Key staff from three city agencies collaborated with a motivated group of residents over three years to turn a piece of waste ground into a community garden. The land was identified as a crime and fly-tipping 'hotspot', and due to its proximity to both a local park and residents' homes, it was targeted to be put back into productive use. Agencies shared the costs of creating the garden and the group's sense of ownership motivates them to maintain the land.

Like the evolution of the other groups however, progress was not smooth, and technical issues arose in their development and preparation of the land. In the preparatory stage, the soil was inspected by Groundwork and found to carry low levels of contamination. The top soil required expert removal and replacement and the group is being encouraged to acquire public liability insurance to protect themselves from future claims. What first appeared to be a simple idea turned into a complex venture, and it appears the support of Groundwork and other parties has been crucial to helping take this forward. Our research has suggested self help regularly hits complex issues that go beyond the average citizen's knowledge and skill set.

Phoenix Community Housing Co-operative hit technical issues in its Sumner House Project. Due to the high costs of repairs, void properties are often empty for an indefinite period, earn no rental income and often incur additional expenditure through being squatted or vandalised. Phoenix's renovations created savings for the public purse. But the process required a high degree of technical expertise in the negotiation of contracts, planning and building regulation requirements, and in the management of the renovation work. A lot of this expertise had to be brought in at a significant cost, which had to be met by Phoenix, making the project harder to balance financially.

> *'We had a project manager able to sign things off and legally run a building site…We had an idea of what needed to be done but we needed a professional… a project worker able to oversee the project and bring expertise, linking us to other projects, suppliers and advice on the legal aspects'*
>
> Phoenix Volunteer

We know that certain voluntary/infrastructure organisations are able to provide technical support. For example, RSG received 18 hours of consultancy support from London Voluntary Services Council to develop a constitution and form a group. The group was then supported by Community Links. TBN receive ongoing support from the local Credit Union Development and Support Officer. However such support, while valuable, is not always systematically provided nor is it available in all areas. This is in part because it is often dependent on the strength and existence of local voluntary organisations. In addition, support often focuses on building the capacity of groups rather than the short term provision of specialist skills.

Opportunity

It is evident that most of the technical skills and expertise that self-help groups need already exist among public sector staff. The examples above demonstrate a need for detailed knowledge of construction, soil chemistry, planning and contract law, group constitution and accessing funding, most of which reside in the skill sets of public sector workers.

So if many of these skills are within the state, how do we get these out and into self-help groups? One response would be to create a raft of new support jobs, such as Community Project Soil Chemists or Community Planning and Building Regulations Advisers. This would be both complex and expensive, and would find little traction in the current climate of public sector cuts.

However, if we connect our thinking with the government's aspiration to transform the 'civil service into a civic service' (Conservatives, 2010), new possibilities open up. While this policy is seemingly geared towards encouraging central government staff to volunteer, it could be extended to all public service staff. Being freed up even for a few days per a year, officers from local authorities, for example, could provide vital advice and support to self-help groups. Rather than simply encourage more volunteering broadly, there is an opportunity to connect such officers to self-help groups that are in need of their specific skills. This approach, which we are calling **Public Service Plus**, represents a financially viable way of addressing the shortfall of expertise in self-help groups.

Figure 3: Public Service Plus
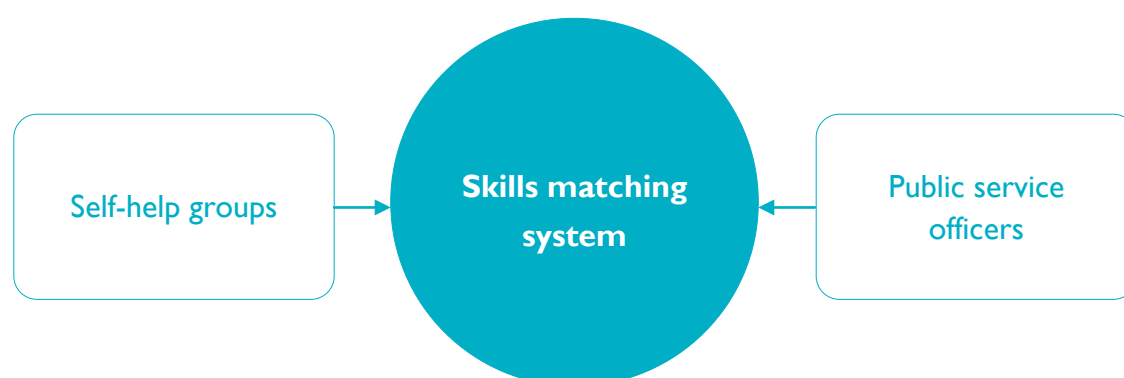
In our discussion groups with government officials and partners/stakeholders, questions arose as to the systems required for matching groups to those public servants with specialist skills (see figure 3 on page 20). It was also suggested that Public Service Plus could be piloted in the public sector where the commitment has already been made, and then opened up to the private sector. Our discussion groups also raised the possibility for media and new technologies to play a role in encouraging people to volunteer. Public Service Plus is an area where this thinking can be applied, and the development of the Your Square Mile web platform is an exciting opportunity to explore. [6]

Figure 4: Two systems for matching self-help groups to civil servants

Brokerage	Virtual connections
• HR departments act as brokers between self-help groups and professionals in local public services.	• Direct relationship between self-help groups and professionals in local public services via the web.
• Broker takes requests from groups and identifies appropriate experts across local public services.	• Website where groups can advertise their needs and negotiate time and commitment from public servants.
• Brokers have their own network to better share resources across agencies, or are linked to the local strategic partnership.	• Could serve as a function of websites like Your Square Mile.

Implementing Public Service Plus would come with challenges and questions to answer:

- How do you avoid conflicts of interest, for officers, and difficulties in terms of professional liability?
- What would be the systems for matching groups and staff, and ensuring groups get the exact expertise they need?
- How could this operate across a variety of public sector agencies?
- How would you reward/incentivise the participation of officers?
- Should such volunteering be in the form of paid leave?

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[6] See http://www.thebigsociety.co.uk/square-mile.html

If we get the answers to these questions right, then Public Service Plus could ensure that groups get the key expertise they need to grow and sustain their activities. But Public Service Plus could also deliver a number of subsidiary benefits beyond that of securing the expertise for groups. It could also form part of addressing the difference between lived and professional experience as discussed above. Public Service Plus could provide the initial framework through which to enable officers to better understand community level action, and for groups to better appreciate the reality of officers and the operation of the public sector. Public Service Plus has the potential to make the Big Society a practical reality for thousands of public and possibly private sector employees.

Seizing the opportunity

Our proposal is to test the two potential matching systems summarised in figure 2 in two local areas with various local public sector agencies. We will also explore the different capacities in which such specialists would give their time as a pure volunteer, as a paid worker, or as part of paid conditional leave. We are currently looking at the implications of each for employees and employers.

The proposal brings with it a number of technical challenges, as well as issues for employees and employers. We will seek to partner with organisations that have the specialist knowledge to help us work through these dimensions.

3. Match funding with support

Challenge

Of the self-help groups we researched, all were in some way dependent on resources, like any other organisation tackling complex social needs. The idea that self-help groups simply grow and sustain themselves without external resources is misplaced. Yet, self-help groups may be hard to identify and target in terms of simple funding strategies. In addition, we know that funding alone won't be enough. In previous sections we have seen how unproductive relationships with the state and a lack of technical expertise stunt self help. So the challenge is to work out the specific funding requirements of groups and how this can be complemented with other support and resources.

Evidence

It should be reassuring that self-help groups rarely mirror the way public services departmentalise issues. For example, RSG is not simply concerned with welfare advice for Roma, but also promotes a sense of identity and belonging. Each self-help group, and the approach its takes, is complex and requires different types of resources.

In the founder of RSG's words, a key part of the evolution of the organisation was to 'get out of the kitchen', and operate in a shared and accessible space, rather than being based in one person's house. This was an important part of the growth of the organisation to enable a sense of common ownership and shared responsibility for the project. For Chrysalis, the award of a small grant helped secure some essential IT equipment and office space. In our interviews with Chrysalis, they recounted their first grant, remembering it as a moment of recognition after years of being the 'outsiders'. The grant represented more than the money. It provided the opportunity to have a space of their own, which was vital to avoid attacks from violent partners on the founder or her home. Hence funding is not only of practical value to the groups, but serves as recognition of their contributions to the community.

Across our case studies we saw different dependencies on funding. For those capable of raising income, issues other than funding seemed pressing. While funding would help Phoenix, it requires empty properties on long leases, at a price sufficiently low to make renovation and re-let viable. In TBN's case, they cannot apply for funding from most charitable Trusts and foundations because they do not have charitable status. While grant aid would help, the model sustains itself on members paying into the credit union and on the energy and the dedication of volunteers. What TBN has found invaluable is low-cost office space, and specialist advice and support.

But we do know that grant funding is key to some organisations. In our discussion group with partners/stakeholders it was affirmed how small grants to small organisations are pivotal. Some of our case study groups were not income generating, and hence required financial support to deliver their much-needed services. For example, RSG does not generate income (because of the nature of its services and its

client group) and therefore requires sufficient grant funding to rent premises, employ staff and cover running costs. The group needs to employ qualified advisors in order to comply with liability insurance requirements, which is often a prerequisite for accessing funding. We have seen how organisations such as RSG need more than just a small one-off grant. As with public services, self-help groups need to build the trust of beneficiaries and this requires long-term, sustained work. Larger, longer-term 'delivery' grants would enable RSG to better plan and deliver its services, and continue building the trust of beneficiaries.

The diversity of models or forms of self help leads to different funding requirements. But as we have seen in previous sections of this report, growing self help will also require specific mediatory support and technical expertise. Evidence from our case studies suggests therefore that we need to develop a sophisticated way of delivering both funding and support, in a variety of proportions depending on the needs of self-help groups.

Opportunity

It would be misleading to conclude that funding would solve all the problems self-help groups face. In the previous section we emphasised that we cannot neglect groups' requirements for technical expertise and mediation with the state. However, funding is an issue for many groups and it is often the case that certain features, such as non-charitable status or self help's challenge to orthodoxies, can restrict the flow of resources to self-help groups.

But if we value self-help groups, and agree that they play an important role in filling gaps in state provision, then finding ways to fund those that need it is a priority. Our discussion group with partners/stakeholders highlighted the potential of social impact bonds and the Big Society Bank to deliver funding, but our focus has been on the government's commitment to a neighbourhood grants programme. Currently called Community First, this programme will no doubt provide welcome funding for grassroots self-help activity. While this programme will not focus solely on self help, it could be designed in a way that allows us to track the impact of funding on self-help groups.

The ambition of government is to link Community First with the commitment to train 5,000 community organisers to work within local communities. This presents a unique opportunity to match funding with support. To maximise this investment, the role of the community organiser should be designed to adopt the three Self-help Intermediary functions as detailed in figure 2 (page 17). At a minimum, a niche group of organisers based in the Community First areas should adopt the Self-help Intermediary roles in order to identify and support self help, and mediate between the public sector and self-help groups.

In sum, grant programmes must take into account the diverse requirements of groups in terms of both funding and support. A large grassroots funding programme alone will not inspire the growth of *all* self-help models. We know that some groups face more significant barriers than a lack of capital. Hence grant programmes should develop ways to connect with parallel support programmes, or set up systems that provide this support. Programmes that ensure recipients also get technical support and intermediation are more likely to have an impact.

Seizing the opportunity

The Community First programme is a unique opportunity to look at the mix of support and funding that self-help groups require, and to connect funded groups to this support. There are strong reasons to link this grant programme with community organisers, as the latter can be used to help secure this mix of funding and support for self help.

We propose working with community organisers, in a small number of areas, to see firstly if they can play the role of identifying groups' support needs and matching this with support from local providers. Community organisers would need to be adequately resourced in order to secure the requisite support that groups need. If viable, we will also test the community organisers ability to undertake additional intermediary functions. We will draw on our learning regarding intermediaries (see page 14), to establish how such community organisers can effectively play this role.

However, if community organisers adopt more campaign-based and oppositional approaches, their ability to take on the intermediary role we have outlined would be compromised. In this case, we propose working with public bodies in areas receiving Community First funding, to develop Self-help Intermediary functions as detailed in our above recommendations. As suggested, this may entail re-orientating existing frontline roles such as community workers to fulfil the Self-help Intermediary function. This would be at no additional cost yet would provide a great opportunity to leverage the Community First investment and grow self help.

Conclusions: Our focus

Self-help groups have the potential to play a crucial role in addressing the big challenges we face as a society post-recession. Some of the best and most creative solutions to local issues come from those that *live* those issues; from welfare support to housing/land dereliction, from financial exclusion to domestic violence. Self help is an expression of participation in our democracy, a route to empowerment, and also a deliverer of social outcomes.

Yet lived experience often butts up against the professional view, and 'living' an issue does not necessarily mean you have all the technical expertise and resources you need to address that issue. In this sense, self help is limited by our ability to support it. But it is also limited because it is fuelled by human responses such as 'compassion, conscience and guilt', which cannot be systematised. [7] It is variable and often experimental. Self help tends to be small scale, capable of important outcomes in niche areas, growing organically from the unseen and unpredictable energies of individuals. Harnessing this will entail the state being more responsive and willing to hand over power and control. The convergence of ideas around localism, decentralisation and a Big Society creates a window of opportunity to do this.

If this really is the time to support self help, to grow and sustain it, then we must address three practical key challenges:

- bridging the gap between such groups and the state
- securing the right technical expertise
- delivering the right kind of funding and support

We can start the process of tackling these challenges by acting on the recommendations we have outlined in this report:

1.   practice, test and learn from effective **intermediation**

2.   test our **Public Service Plus** model as a way of securing technical expertise for groups

3.   explore the role of community organisers in **matching funding with support**.

Growing and sustaining self help will require radical and substantive changes to how state and civil society interact. Central government must ensure that resources and support reach self-help groups, and that local public bodies are improving their relationships with such groups. Such local state apparatus must be responsive to self-help groups, adopt an invest-to-save mentality, and respect the alternative practices of

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[7] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COn7Fc5ZurQ

group. Self-help groups must appreciate the role and function of the local public bodies, including their strategic view of local needs/priorities, and be willing to accept some of the compromises that will come with greater resources and responsibility.

Organisations such as CDF must practically support these efforts, learning what works and what doesn't by getting close to local practice. We would be interested to hear from you or your organisation if you share our aspirations, or wish to work with us on any of the proposals presented here.

Contact us at selfhelp@cdf.org.uk

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