

# Democracy in a Pandemic: Participation in Response to Crisis

Edited by  
Graham Smith and Tim Hughes,  
with Lizzie Adams and Charlotte Obijiaku

CENTRE FOR THE  
STUDY OF  
DEMOCRACY

UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTMINSTER 

involve



# Democracy in a Pandemic: Participation in Response to Crisis

Edited by  
Graham Smith and Tim Hughes,  
with Lizzie Adams and Charlotte Obijiaku



University of Westminster Press  
[www.uwestminsterpress.co.uk](http://www.uwestminsterpress.co.uk)

Published by  
University of Westminster Press  
115 Cavendish Street  
London W1W 6UW  
[www.uwestminsterpress.co.uk](http://www.uwestminsterpress.co.uk)

‘Voices from the Pandemic’ section, Introduction and  
Editorial Arrangement © Involve and Graham Smith  
‘Lessons for Democracy’ section © The several contributors

First published 2021

Cover design by Diana Jarvis

Print and digital versions typeset by Siliconchips Services Ltd.

ISBN (Paperback): 978-1-914386-17-6

ISBN (PDF): 978-1-914386-18-3

ISBN (EPUB): 978-1-914386-19-0

ISBN (Kindle): 978-1-914386-20-6

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book57>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA. This license allows for copying and distributing the work, providing author attribution is clearly stated, that you are not using the material for commercial purposes, and that modified versions are not distributed.

The full text of this book has been peer-reviewed to ensure high academic standards. For full review policies, see: <http://www.uwestminsterpress.co.uk/site/publish>

Suggested citation:

Smith, G., Hughes, T. with Adams, L. and Obijiaku, C. (eds.) 2021.

*Democracy in a Pandemic: Participation in Response to Crisis.*

London: University of Westminster Press.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book57>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

To read the free, open access version of this book online, visit <https://doi.org/10.16997/book57> or scan this QR code with your mobile device:



# Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction <i>Graham Smith, Tim Hughes, Lizzie Adams and Charlotte Obijiaku</i>	1
<b>Part One: Voices From the Pandemic</b>	<b>9</b>
Some Things Are So Urgent That We Can't Afford to Do Them Quickly <i>Martin Johnstone</i>	11
The Perfect Storm? Emerging From the Crisis Stronger, Through Sharing What We Have <i>Jez Hall</i>	17
Building More Vibrant and Inclusive Democracies: How to Meet the Challenges of Covid-19 <i>Sanjay Pradhan</i>	25
Does Democracy Need a Time Rebellion? <i>Roman Krznaric</i>	31
Building Back Inclusively <i>Dayo Eseonu</i>	37
Ordinary and Extraordinary Stories: Including People with Learning Disabilities in Policy Development and Research <i>Rhiann McLean and Angela Henderson</i>	43
Organising to Humanise the Gig Economy <i>Alex Marshall</i>	51
Let's Talk About Covid-19 Ethics <i>Dave Archard</i>	57
Democracy – A Dish Well Done <i>Frances Foley</i>	63
Learning How to Listen in a Pandemic <i>Laura Seebohm</i>	69
No Justice Without Us: Respecting Lived Experience of the Criminal Justice System <i>Paula Harriott</i>	75

Participation on Whose Terms? <i>Javier Sanchez-Roig</i>	79
The Queer House Party: Solidarity and LGBTQI+ Community-Making in Pandemic Times <i>Francesca Romana Ammaturo and Olimpia Burchiellaro</i>	83
Student Democracy in the Face of Covid-19 <i>Isobel Walter</i>	91
Experts by Experience: Enabling the Voice of Survivors to Transform the Response to Domestic Abuse in the UK <i>Martha Tomlinson</i>	97
The Best Time to Start Involving the Public in Covid Decision-Making Was a Year Ago. The Next Best Time is Now <i>Jon Alexander</i>	101
<b>Part Two: Lessons for Democracy</b>	107
Hearing Diverse Voices in a Pandemic: Towards Authentic Inclusion <i>Ruth Ibegbuna</i>	109
Mutual Aid and Self-Organisation: What We Can Learn from the Rise of DIY Responses to the Pandemic <i>Matt Leach</i>	123
How the Pandemic Has Accelerated the Shift Towards Participatory Public Authorities <i>Donna Hall, Simon Kaye and Charlotte Morgan</i>	139
Citizen Voice in the Pandemic Response: Democratic Innovations From Around the World <i>Antonin Lacelle-Webster, Julien Landry and Ann Marie D. Smith</i>	155
Is Democracy Too Much Trouble in a Pandemic? <i>Archon Fung</i>	169
Conclusion: A Manifesto for Democracy in a Crisis <i>Tim Hughes and Graham Smith</i>	183

# Acknowledgements

We wish to thank our colleagues Lizzie Adams and Charlotte Obijiaku for their collaboration in the development of the ‘A Democratic Response to Covid-19’ blog series and to Joe Mitchell who helped us out in the early stages of the project. Without their work, this book would not exist. We also extend our thanks to Oliver Escobar, Clodagh Harris, Kelly McBride and Rebekah McCabe for acting as a highly responsive and insightful advisory group on the book project and to Martin King for sorting out the referencing. We are appreciative of the funding received from the University of Westminster Diversity and Inclusion Research Community that enabled us to publish this book as an open access volume and Andrew Lockett at the University of Westminster Press for expertly guiding this project on a ridiculously tight timetable. Finally, and most importantly, we thank the contributors to the volume and to the larger blog series for their insights and commitment to the cause of participation and deliberation.

—*Tim Hughes and Graham Smith, May 2021*





# Introduction

Graham Smith, Tim Hughes, Lizzie Adams  
and Charlotte Obijiaku

As we write this introduction, the UK is slowly emerging from its third lockdown since March 2020. This has been an extraordinary time politically, with democracies restricting the movements and actions of their populations to an extent that would previously have been unimaginable.

In the face of an emergency, the working assumption has too often been that the centralisation and concentration of political power and curtailment of democratic rights is justified and effective. More participatory and deliberative approaches to democratic politics are luxuries that can be abandoned.

However, the weakness of this assumption has been exposed by the widespread failures of centralised forms of governance in protecting populations since the pandemic broke. By the emergence of mutual aid and self-help groups to realise unmet needs. And by successful initiatives led by some public bodies and charities

that have focused on listening to and working with the public, in particular vulnerable social groups.

The argument of this book is that in the face of an emergency, centralising attitudes and policy that overly concentrate power are misguided. Participation and deliberation are not just possible. They are valuable, perhaps even indispensable. By participation, we mean direct involvement of people in the decisions and activities that affect their lives. By deliberation, we mean opportunities for people to share and test ideas through inclusive and respectful conversations. Another democratic world can be realised in the face of a crisis. And its contours can be discerned from multiple practices over the last year.

Much of the rhetoric around the pandemic has been that ‘we are all in this together’ and that Covid-19 is the ‘great leveller’. True, no one can fully protect themselves from the virus. But such rhetoric papers over the reality that this health crisis – and the economic and social crisis that is following in its wake – is experienced in very different ways by different communities and social groups.

Particular groups in society are more vulnerable to the virus. Most of the deaths and hospitalisations have been amongst those who are old and with underlying conditions, such as diabetes. Black, Asian and other minority ethnic communities are especially vulnerable.

Particular groups in society have had to continue to go out to work during the crisis, often putting their lives at direct risk. This includes doctors, nurses, community health, care home workers and others running essential services, and those in the gig economy who cannot afford not to work. Many are amongst the lowest paid.

Particular groups in society have been hit hardest by loss of income during the pandemic. This tends to be those who were

already the most economically vulnerable. The rise in demand on food banks and local mutual aid groups is testament.

Particular groups in society have found it harder than others to live through the lockdown. While some of us may have enjoyed a slowing down of the pace of life, others have been faced with looking after young children in cramped accommodation, with no access to green spaces; suffering with mental health conditions and not being able to access support; being vulnerable to domestic violence; having extensive caring responsibilities. The list goes on.

Particular groups in society are hesitant about accepting vaccinations. This often reflects long standing distrust in public authorities that have failed to protect their interests well before the pandemic hit.

Our point is that Covid-19 has brought with it different experiences for different parts of the population. The crisis exposes the structural inequalities that permeate our society. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and created new ones. We need to be attentive to the way that inequalities intersect, making certain social groups particularly vulnerable to the variety of impacts of the pandemic.

Our concern is that government policy and decision-making by other institutions in the face of this unprecedented emergency has too often not reflected the diversity of lived reality, frequently making the situation worse for many social groups.

Participation in the decisions that affect our lives is a democratic right. Even in 'normal' times (whatever that means), it is a right that is rarely respected fully. During the pandemic, public authorities have too easily put it to one side in the name of emergency action. Not only is this morally unacceptable, it is also a causal factor in poor decision-making.

Participation and deliberation can lead to better decisions by public and private institutions, reflecting the knowledge, lived experience, hopes and concerns, and interests of different communities. Too often decisions are made by relatively closed groups (whether politicians, civil servants, scientific experts) who do not understand the lives of many of those who will be affected by their decisions. The pandemic reinforced this practice. This is not to discount the necessity of scientific knowledge or of the need for rapid decision-making. Expertise has been essential in understanding, tracking and responding to the virus. Rather, it is a concern for how scientific knowledge is integrated into political decision-making in a way that is responsive to different social needs and interests.

Our understanding and imaginations are limited by our own social experiences – politicians, civil servants, scientific experts are no different. Participants in key decision-making bodies do not reflect the diversity of our societies and as such the decisions they have made have not adequately responded to the diversity of needs. Hearing the voices of those who are rarely listened to can radically change accepted opinions about what needs to be done. Diversity results in better decision-making.

Participation and deliberation can lead to more trustworthy decisions that people are willing to accept. While political leaders received a bounce in opinion polls at certain points during the pandemic, they are not held in high regard. Survey data tell us that most people think that politicians make decisions in their own interests, in the interests of their party, or in the interests of those with wealth and influence. Policy outcomes suggest this is a reasonable supposition. Trust is particularly valuable when we face a crisis. Responding to Covid-19 in a way that gives meaning

to the idea that ‘we are all in this together’ entails bringing the ‘we’ into decision-making. Where decisions need to be made quickly, under crisis conditions, confidence and faith in the intentions of institutions is critical. When people can see that decisions reflect their lived experience and interests, trust and acceptance follow.

Participation and deliberation can enable people to develop their own solutions collectively – or to co-produce outcomes with public authorities. Participation and deliberation is not just about the decision-making processes of public and private organisations, but communities and social groups taking control of their own lives. The rapid emergence of mutual aid and self-organisation is indicative of the broader potential for community action. The different capacities of communities to respond to the pandemic is an indication of the pervasiveness of structural inequalities.

We say participation and deliberation ‘can’ have these positive effects because much depends on how it is organised and the response of those with political and economic power. We can create effective forms of participation and deliberation – the civic infrastructure that enables meaningful engagement. The question is whether public authorities and others with political and economic power are willing to change the ways they work; to embrace participation and deliberation as a central tenet of democratic society.

Our aim in this book is to take stock of the lessons we can learn from the Covid-19 pandemic for participation and deliberation. This is critical for two reasons. First, as we come out of the pandemic, we are faced with a range of difficult economic, social and environmental decisions that have profound distributive and political consequences. This includes the shape of any economic stimuli, support for a buckling health service and holding

decision-makers to account for their actions during the pandemic. Second, this emergency is not a one-off. We are likely to face future emergency situations, whether this is the emergence of vaccine resistant variants of Covid-19, a different health pandemic, the climate crisis, or some other source of social turmoil. The pandemic has exposed limitations in the inclusiveness of democratic governance, but also lessons about how governance structures and practices could be improved.

This is a time to learn lessons about how participatory and deliberative democracy can be embedded more effectively within our democratic culture and practices.

### **The structure of this book**

Early in the pandemic, the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster and the participation charity Involve launched a blog series – A democratic response to Covid-19.<sup>1</sup> Our aim was to provide a platform for different voices to make visible the role played by participation and deliberation during the pandemic and to accentuate the case for enhanced engagement during and beyond emergency contexts. The series started slowly, but quickly gained momentum and popularity with over 30 diverse contributions from a variety of civil society activists, charities, policy-makers, writers and others. The series expanded our imagination of what participation and deliberation could mean both during and after the pandemic.

We realised that the diverse contributions were a valuable and unusual asset for those of us who believe that participation and deliberation is critical to a thriving democracy. So, we decided

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.involve.org.uk/our-work/our-projects/guidance/what-role-should-public-play-covid-19-recovery>

to combine a selection of these articles with specially commissioned short essays as an intervention into current thinking about how to build our way collectively out of the pandemic. The pandemic can tell us many things. But for us – and the contributors to this volume – it tells us that participation and deliberation are vital ingredients of a thriving democratic society.

The book is in two main parts. The first – ‘Voices from the Pandemic’ – consists of 16 of the original articles chosen to represent diverse perspectives and experiences on participation and deliberation in a time of emergency. Emergent themes are the need to recognise and challenge pervasive inequalities, support forms of self-organisation and group solidarities, and develop meaningful modes of participation and deliberation in the decisions that affect our lives. The articles are published in the order that they were written, with only minor updates. The second – ‘Lessons for Democracy’ – brings together five specially commissioned essays reflecting on hearing diverse voices, mutual aid, participatory public authorities, democratic innovation around the world, and the future for democracy. The book primarily draws from UK experience, but includes reflections from further afield. We fully expect that the insights will travel. Details of all authors are found at the end of their contributions.

We end the book with a short ‘manifesto for democracy in a crisis’ to guide our way out of this pandemic. The manifesto builds on the insights from the articles and essays, making the case that deepening democracy is critical to our collective capacity to adapt in the face of future crises. It is vital that we learn lessons from this pandemic and in doing so hear and act on the diverse experience and knowledge of communities and social groups that have suffered most at the hands of Covid-19 and are too often politically marginalised.

**Graham Smith** is Professor of Politics and Director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster and Chair of the Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development. He is the author of *Can Democracy Safeguard the Future?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

**Tim Hughes** is the outgoing Director of Involve. He is a leading specialist in the field of participatory and deliberative democracy, having overseen and led over 50 projects to involve people in national and local decision-making. He is the editor of *Building Back With: A Handbook for Involving Communities in the Covid-19 Response and Recovery* (London: Involve, 2020).

**Lizzie Adams** is Project and Governance Lead at Involve. Outside of her work at Involve, Lizzie is Chair of trustees for a small charity called *RefugeeYouth*.

**Charlotte Obijiaku** is a Project Administrator at Involve and a member of the 2020/21 *Charityworks* graduate scheme.



# PART ONE

## **Voices From the Pandemic**



# Some Things Are So Urgent That We Can't Afford to Do Them Quickly

Martin Johnstone

27 August 2020

There is an inherent contradiction in the title of this essay, but also a deep truth.

At times quick decisions need to be made and procrastinating costs lives. Other times our immediate, short term responses – natural though they may be – do not serve us well in the longer term. We will doubtless have experienced both during the Covid-19 pandemic and we are likely to see both again in our attempts to recover from it.

Over recent months it has been encouraging how much consensus there has been, at least in terms of rhetoric, about the need to Build Back Better. There is a broad recognition that the trajectory we were on was failing too many, driving inequality and destroying the planet.

One of the challenges which those enabling and leading the build back better movement face is the requirement to both

respond quickly and to take time and to act deliberatively. There is no doubt that an ‘Overton’ policy window has opened to make the case for radical economic and social change – e.g. building a green economy, creating universally accessible and affordable superfast broadband, recalibrating social care – but also that it could close rapidly. There is also a perceived need to act now before more damage is done. However, there is also a risk that by moving too quickly many of those whose interests were not represented (or even acknowledged) previously will continue to be overlooked.

This is one of the perennial problems of policy development, implementation and evaluation. Put simply, those whose lives have been most harshly impacted by policy and practice remain largely excluded from the development of the very policy and practice supposedly designed to tackle current injustices. There is, therefore, a need not just to build back better but, to build back WITH.

Over the last few years, a growing number of Poverty Truth Commissions<sup>1</sup> have emerged in different parts of the UK. The commissions bring people with direct, lived experience of poverty together with civic and business leaders in a shared task to address the symptoms and causes of poverty. The commissions always begin with those who experience poverty – they meet as a group for several months before others are invited to join them. It is their struggle that substantially sets the agenda. This is slow work. It is about building understanding and relationships – empathy across and between different spaces – before a commission is capable to move on to developing solutions. One of the people who has helped to develop the Poverty Truth Network says

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://povertytruthnetwork.org/commissions/commission-locations>

it often feels more like cooking a Sunday roast than a microwave dinner.<sup>2</sup> You can't rush it.

Recently a small group that has been involved in different Poverty Truth Commissions came together to discuss how to build back with. One person pointed out that it has taken coronavirus for many of us to realise what had been obvious to her and others for many years: things were not working the way they should for people like her and for millions of others. We spoke of digital inequality; poor mental health; isolation for some and overcrowding for others; escalating levels of food insecurity; the struggle to look after our kids. We recognised that for those able to work from home during the pandemic, fewer opportunities to spend money may well mean that savings have increased in recent months, whereas for others increased household costs have thrown people even further into debt.

Unless people who bear the scars of failed policy and practice are there when decisions about the future are being considered, there is the overwhelming likelihood that past mistakes will be repeated.

We do not underestimate how challenging this way of working is. But it seems to us inconceivable that it is possible to create a just asylum system without the involvement of asylum seekers and people who are fearful of losing their jobs to them. We won't successfully create a society where young people can flourish if they are excluded from the design of that society. We won't develop a sustainable benefits system without the insights of people who require its support.

These things are obvious but, in our experience, it is astonishing how often they are overlooked or paid lip service to. We have lost

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.povertytruthnetwork.org>

count of the number of times that we have heard it said: 'It would have been good to involve more people with lived experience but there simply wasn't the time.' However, if we are honest, we need to recognise that for too many of us who hold positions of power, there was not the time because we did not believe that the insights of others were as worthwhile as our own.

Time clearly matters. For some, now is the time to really listen rather than jumping to inadequate and incomplete solutions. This is about slowly, and with others, growing in confidence, finding our voice, and sharing our expertise. One of us spoke about how, through the course of the pandemic, he had played a regular part in advising the local authority on how homeless people could be more effectively supported, knowing the issues from the inside. This was only possible because, as part of a Poverty Truth Commission, he had begun to recognise his own worth.

These stories are not unique. The Poverty Truth Network is one of a range of groups that nurture such wisdom and help it to inform policy and practice. But such groups are still a minority, even amongst progressive organisations who are often understandably impatient for change.

The model for establishing a Poverty Truth Commission is about designing a system, not just a one-off policy programme. Systems thinking is deliberately slow and iterative, enabling friendships, insights, policy and practice to grow sustainably over time. We recognise that this way of working is also joyful, and that joy is an essential element in what will be the long, ongoing journey towards a sustainable and better future. The arc of history may well bend towards justice, but it is a long arc.

Some things are so urgent that we cannot afford to do them quickly.

***Martin Johnstone** has been part of the Poverty Truth story from the very start, helping to establish the first Poverty Truth Commission in Scotland in 2009. The piece arose out of a conversation between Alex Campbell, Hugh Douglas, Andrew Grinnell, Lee Hemsworth, Martin Johnstone, Shirley Rigby and Imogen Tyler. They are all involved in the work of the Poverty Truth Network.*





# The Perfect Storm? Emerging From the Crisis Stronger, Through Sharing What We Have

Jez Hall

25 September 2020

Individually, and collectively, many tragedies and crises have been faced since the pandemic struck this country.

Most of us yearn for a new beginning. Others fear the storm has not passed. Maybe we're just in the eye of the hurricane? A moment of false calm, awaiting the next onslaught. It's not just Covid-19. Issues around racism and inequality continue to be more prevalent than ever. The looming threat of climate heating remains. The uncertainties of Brexit lie just round the corner. The calm after the storm sounds like a pipe dream.

How do men act on a sinking ship? Do they hold each other? Do they pass around the whisky? Do they cry?

—*The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men  
Against the Sea*, Sebastian Junger

More hopefully, in the early days of the lockdown we saw a massive up-swelling of mutual aid groups.<sup>1</sup> Kindness, neighbourliness and community action raised our spirits and brought some relief to the fearful and the vulnerable. Covid-19 also taught us problems once thought insurmountable could be quickly achieved. For just one example: gathering in the homeless and providing them a temporary shelter from the storm.

I've been thinking about the international lessons of rebuilding following a crisis, such as after Storm Matthew struck Haiti in 2016.<sup>2</sup> These show us that local people usually have a very good idea of what they need and given the right tools and some resources can get on with the job.

Our own collective journey towards recovery has begun. But we are beginning to appreciate just how far the gap has widened amongst those that live, learn and work in this country. Whether in terms of jobs, housing or education, in our mental health or young people's life chances, inequality is forcing all of us to re-evaluate what matters in life. Citizens' acceptance of unfairness has reached its limit, forcing our leaders into taking wasteful U-turns, as the exam results fiasco has shown.<sup>3</sup>

Covid-19 has brought endless questions. Why was 'business as normal' insufficient to prepare us for the pandemic? What might guide us traversing the uncertainties of the next weeks, months and years? Can we adjust to our 'new normal'? Have we the resources and the trust to act 'in community' with others? Or most worryingly ... might we learn that there is no such thing as

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://covidmutualaid.org>

<sup>2</sup> ENN. 2017. Evaluation of the response to Hurricane Matthew, Haiti. ENN Online, July. <https://www.ennonline.net/fex/55/evaluationhurricane-mathaiti>

<sup>3</sup> BBC. 2020. As it happened: U-turn after UK exam results chaos. BBC News, 17 August. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/world-53802215>

society, and it really is every person for themselves! I don't think so, and I'm not alone.<sup>4</sup>

All governments are deceitful – they're deceitful because it's easier than being honest. Most of the time, it's no more sinister than that.

—*A Death in Belmont*, Sebastian Junger

When a crisis strikes there is a reason to be decisive and interventionist. Early on even the harshest opponents may offer support for a time.<sup>5</sup> As the immediate threat subsides, difficult questions start to be asked and without good answers the risk is that this democratic consensus fractures. When stepping up and working together once seemed a sensible approach, our new reality becomes ever more complex. The well known process of 'forming, storming, norming and performing' moves into its second phase. Recrimination, anger and distrust can develop, causing progress to slow. But, if the democratic culture is set aright, and leaders are able to shift from command-led towards listening and responsiveness, I think we can rebuild faster.

As a long-time advocate for participatory democracy, I believe we need more local responses. Centralisation becomes a blockage. That is the learning from many years of building back better.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Haldane, A. 2020. Responding to Covid-19: Social capital and the social sector in the 21st century. Pro Bono Economics, 26 May. <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/News/responding-to-covid-19-social-capital-and-the-social-sector-in-the-21st-century>

<sup>5</sup> Savage, M. McKie, R. and Helm, T. 2020. Starmer: Labour will work with PM to fight Covid-19 in national interest. *The Observer*, 4 April. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/apr/04/new-labour-leader-keir-starmer-pledges-to-work-with-boris-johnson-on-covid-19>

<sup>6</sup> Fernandez, G. and Ahmed, I. 2019. 'Build back better' approach to disaster recovery: Research trends since 2006. *Progress in Disaster Science*, 1 May. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590061719300031>

Given that, what are the new democratic norms that might help us take us beyond forming and storming?

I've been part of conversations about how participatory budgeting (PB), a form of collective, direct decision-making, can play its part in Covid-19 recovery.<sup>7</sup> For those new to participatory budgeting, the principle is simple. Gather together some financial resources. Hold collective conversations in communities on how to use that money. Then, working together as citizens, vote on how our taxes are shared out.<sup>8</sup> Not voting for representatives to decide for us. Voting directly where the money goes. Sounds a bit utopian maybe, but across the world, in many different forms, participatory budgeting has been working successfully to improve how government operates and as crucially, how government is perceived.<sup>9</sup>

The truth about a city's aspirations isn't found in its vision. It's found in its budget.

—*Brent Toderian*

Done well, participatory budgets are a positive example of high performing, responsive and open government.<sup>10</sup> A mechanism for

---

<sup>7</sup> Participatory Budgeting Works. 2020. PB's role in post Covid-19 recovery and renewal? Participatory Budgeting Works. <http://www.participatorybudgetingworks.org/news/view/26/pbs-role-in-post-covid-19-recovery-and-renewal>

<sup>8</sup> PB Network. 2019. Participatory governance and tax compliance: Two new World Bank studies. PB Network, 5 July. <https://pbnetwork.org.uk/participatory-governance-tax-compliance-two-new-world-bank-studies>

<sup>9</sup> PB Network. 2019. PB World Atlas list over 11,000 participatory budgeting experiences. PB Network, 3 December. <https://pbnetwork.org.uk/pb-world-atlas-list-over-11000-participatory-budgeting-experiences>

<sup>10</sup> Wampler, B. McNulty, S. and Touchton, M. 2017. Participatory budgeting: Spreading across the globe. Open Government Partnership, 13 October. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/stories/participatory-budgeting-spreading-across-the-globe>

distributing some of our collective wealth in fresh, citizen-led and innovative ways. It sounds easy, but there are always inevitable complexities. There always will be when thinking about devolving power and money. Without getting into all of those now, here are some ideas about how participatory budgeting might contribute towards building back better.

**At neighbourhood level:** A mechanism to support and solidify mutual aid. When the demands upon the state increase, it's really helpful to enable people to look after themselves. Participatory budgeting could be a way to connect up mutual aid groups, to share ideas and to work together. If you want to know more about how this happens, read my blog post on tackling social isolation through PB.<sup>11</sup>

**At local authority level:** A way to build consensus on how to invest limited public money. As rebuilding continues, councils are re-planning their capital and revenue investments. I believe what is known as mainstream PB<sup>12</sup> – where citizens directly shape public services – could have an important role in maintaining trust and fostering engagement through ensuring investments respond to the needs of local communities.

**Embrace civic tech:** A Covid-secure way to have sensible and informed public debate. Nationally there has been concern that the pandemic has led to less scrutiny over public spending and

---

<sup>11</sup> Hall, J. 2018. 'Our voice is being heard at last' ... building social inclusion through Participatory Budgeting. Shared Future, 13 October. <https://sharedfuturecic.org.uk/our-voice-is-being-heard-at-last-building-social-inclusion-through-participatory-budgeting>

<sup>12</sup> Budge, A. and Hall, J. 2016. Mainstreaming Participatory Budgeting: Ideas for delivering Participatory Budgeting at scale. PB Network, October. <https://pbnetwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/PB-Mainstreaming.pdf>

this risks further eroding public trust in government.<sup>13</sup> But there are many ‘off the shelf’ online PB platforms that could be used to engage people in budget decisions, and lots of research on how to do it.<sup>14</sup> At least locally, the upcoming spring 2021 local government budget consultations offer a window for councils to ask citizens how they would direct spending on initiatives to build back better, as called for by Fiona Garven of the Scottish Community Development Centre.<sup>15</sup> By using civic tech effectively, this could happen even without holding face to face meetings.

**Nationally:** For sparking a democratic culture that supports local resilience. Few national governments use participatory budgeting on their own budget. Portugal is one notable exception.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless national government can play an important enabling role, providing encouragement and capacity building, or by offering guidance. It’s worth looking at how Scotland has a national programme for participatory budgeting, which has the support of all its local authorities.<sup>17</sup> Scotland offers us a model that I think could be grown across the UK.

What is most exciting of all is how flexible a deliberative and participatory democracy can be. We have already seen initiatives

---

<sup>13</sup> Phillips, D. 2020. Up to £10 billion of the Chancellor’s ‘Plan for Jobs’ will be funded by underspends on previously planned projects. Institute for Fiscal Studies, 16 July. <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14938>

<sup>14</sup> Parra, C. Rohaut, C. Maeckelbergh, M. Issarny, V. and Holston, J. 2017. Expanding the design space of ICT for Participatory Budgeting. *Communities and Technologies*. <https://hal.inria.fr/hal-01519127/document>

<sup>15</sup> Garven, F. 2020. Opinion: PB can give citizens a stake in the Covid-19 recovery. PB Scotland, 17 June. <https://pbsecotland.scot/blog/2020/6/17/opinion-pb-can-give-citizens-a-stake-in-the-covid-19-recovery>

<sup>16</sup> Marques, M. L. M. 2017. Participatory democracy: Portugal’s new frontier. OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/governance/participatory-democracy-portugal-new-frontier.htm>

<sup>17</sup> <https://pbscotland.scot>

for public deliberation on building back better.<sup>18</sup> Might we take it one step further? Add a mechanism for turning citizen-led recommendations into large scale resource allocation?<sup>19</sup> Our leaders need to embrace change now. Need to let go a bit. Help us perform better, locally, to become more empowered, less dependent and better prepared citizens. Let's remain confident we can meet our democratic challenges.

I started this essay with a rather bleak quote. I'll end with a more upbeat one:

Never be afraid to fall apart because it is an opportunity to rebuild yourself the way you wish you had been all along.

—*Rae Smith*

*Jez Hall is a Founding Director of the social enterprise Shared Future CIC. He has worked in diverse communities for over 25 years, facilitating deliberative and participatory democracy processes and delivering research and policy work.*

---

<sup>18</sup> West Midlands Combined Authority. 2020. Citizens' Panel to help guide Covid-19 recovery. West Midlands Combined Authority, 4 June. <https://www.wmca.org.uk/news/citizens-panel-to-help-guide-covid-19-recovery>

<sup>19</sup> Hall, J. 2017. Participatory Budgeting: It doesn't have to become a bun fight. Institute of Welsh Affairs, 19 September. <https://www.iwa.wales/agenda/2017/09/participatory-budgeting-doesnt-become-bun-fight>





# Building More Vibrant and Inclusive Democracies: How to Meet the Challenges of Covid-19

Sanjay Pradhan

14 October 2020

We're at a critical moment in history, amidst a confluence of five profound crises.

First, a catastrophic health crisis unleashed by the most devastating pandemic in a hundred years. Second, a global economic crisis, now the worst recession since World War II, leaving millions unemployed and vulnerable around the world. Third, a climate crisis ravaging communities. Fourth, a crisis of inequality, including systemic racism igniting global protests. And fifth, a crisis of democracy, reflecting citizens' eroding trust in their governments as well as the unfettered rise of authoritarian leaders attacking democratic institutions and civil liberties, spreading disinformation.

And yet, at this same moment in history, the open government movement has a unique opportunity to help tackle these crises. Courageous reformers and activists – in Open Government

Partnership (OGP) countries and beyond – are implementing innovative reforms that showcase an alternative: a more hopeful vision that empowers all citizens to shape and oversee their government. A vision of a more open Covid-19 recovery that saves millions of lives and livelihoods.

But to achieve this vision, we must act on three pressing priorities:

Our first priority is to ensure transparency and public oversight over the staggering \$20 trillion being invested globally in Covid-19 stimulus and safety nets.<sup>1</sup> When so much money moves so fast, there is a high risk of corruption, capture and waste, as we are seeing in Covid-19 corruption scandals in Brazil, Kenya, the Philippines, the United States and beyond.

We need open contracts, open budgets, open aid, allowing citizens to follow the money. Globally, governments spend a massive \$13 trillion on public contracts but only 3% are published openly. When Ukraine disclosed all contracts as open data and empowered citizens to report violations, the government saved \$1 billion in two years, 82% of entrepreneurs reported reduced corruption, and there was a 50% increase in new businesses bidding for contracts.<sup>2</sup> We must work together to make open contracts the global norm to fight entrenched corruption.

Our second priority is to rectify societal inequities laid bare by the pandemic. We in the open government community

---

<sup>1</sup> Pradhan, S. 2020. Making trillion dollar stimulus and safety nets work for all: The essential steps we can take now. Open Government Partnership, 24 July. <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/stories/making-trillion-dollar-stimulus-and-safety-nets-work-for-all-the-essential-steps-we-can-take-now>

<sup>2</sup> Vasyl Zadvornyy, P. 2020. How open contracting approaches help Ukraine to tackle COVID-19. Open Contracting Partnership, 16 April. <https://www.open-contracting.org/2020/04/16/how-open-contracting-approaches-help-ukraine-to-tackle-covid-19>

must fight this through our core values of inclusion, justice and human rights.

Inclusion is vital in the Covid-19 response to ensure that resources reach the most needy, not the most powerful. We need openness in decision-making and oversight over implementation to empower all voices, especially those of the most vulnerable. In the Philippines, the government allocated \$4 billion for Covid-19 safety nets, but to now ensure that these actually reach 18 million vulnerable households, civil society has called for transparency of who is eligible, a citizens' grievance redressal mechanism, and oversight by citizen groups and audit institutions.<sup>3</sup>

We also need to ensure that Covid-19 bailouts are not captured by the politically connected. We call on stakeholders to advance transparency and oversight in lobbying – as in Chile<sup>4</sup> and Ireland<sup>5</sup> – and in company ownership – as in the UK<sup>6</sup> and Slovakia.<sup>7</sup>

And as we recover from the pandemic, we must build more inclusive democracies by systematically including women and historically marginalised groups, such as Afghanistan using OGP

---

<sup>3</sup> Pradhan, S. 2020. Making trillion dollar stimulus and safety nets work for all: The essential steps we can take now. Open Government Partnership, 24 July. <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/stories/making-trillion-dollar-stimulus-and-safety-nets-work-for-all-the-essential-steps-we-can-take-now>

<sup>4</sup> Open Government Partnership. 2015. Chile Plan de Acción 2014–2016. Open Government Partnership, 23 October. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/chile/commitments/CL0030>

<sup>5</sup> Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. 2014. Open Government Partnership Ireland National Action Plan. Open Government Partnership, July. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/ireland/commitments/IE0014>

<sup>6</sup> Open Government Partnership. 2018. United Kingdom: Unmasking shadow companies. Open Government Partnership, 9 July. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/stories/unmasking-shadow-companies>

<sup>7</sup> Open Government Partnership. 2019. Finding the real beneficiary. Open Government Partnership, 27 May. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/stories/finding-the-real-beneficiary>

to advance a national women's empowerment plan<sup>8</sup> or North Macedonia improving access to justice for its minority Roma community.<sup>9</sup> We also need transparency and accountability of law enforcement to root out biases in the justice sector that disproportionately impact minorities and the poor.

Our third priority is to protect citizens' basic ability to freely speak, associate and assemble. Many governments have used the pandemic to expand state surveillance and arbitrarily restrict civic freedoms that were already under attack in more than 100 countries. We call on governments to roll back these measures and instead enhance civic space, such as Mexico committing to democratic regulation and supervision of the state's digital surveillance.<sup>10</sup>

With open civic space, we can foster robust civic engagement to reinvigorate democracy. Participatory budgeting in Madrid, Paris and Uruguay has empowered citizens to fund projects that respond to their needs.<sup>11</sup> We call on all national and local

---

<sup>8</sup> Open Government Partnership – Afghanistan. 2020. Afghanistan Action Plan 2019–2021. Open Government Partnership, 10 January. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/afghanistan/commitments/AF0030>

<sup>9</sup> Open Government Partnership Macedonia, Republic of Macedonia Ministry of Information Society and Administration. 2018. Open Government Partnership National Action Plan 2018–2020. Open Government Partnership, July. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/north-macedonia/commitments/MK0137>

<sup>10</sup> Open Government Partnership. 2020. Featured commitment: Technology rights and privacy – what's in the 2019 action plans. Open Government Partnership, 18 September. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/stories/featured-commitment-technology-rights-and-privacy>

<sup>11</sup> Open Government Partnership. 2020. A guide to open government and the coronavirus: Fiscal openness. Open Government Partnership, 30 April. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/a-guide-to-open-government-and-the-coronavirus-fiscal-openness>

governments to scale up reforms like Italy's OpenCoescione<sup>12</sup> and Kaduna, Nigeria's Citizen Eyes and Ears<sup>13</sup> that empower citizens to shape and oversee their government on an ongoing basis, reinvigorating democracy between and beyond elections.

If we can join forces across government, civil society, business and accountability institutions, we can together write a positive chapter of an open Covid-19 recovery that saves millions of lives and livelihoods. We can together put citizens at the heart of governance and amplify the voices of the marginalised to build a more just society.

With 78 member countries and thousands of civil society organisations, OGP has the platform, the partnerships and the opportunity to forge a countervailing force against the rise of authoritarianism, and a positive global force to build vibrant and inclusive democracies.

***Sanjay Pradhan** is Chief Executive at the Open Government Partnership. He leads OGP's policy dialogue with Heads of States, senior ministers and civil society organisations across the partnership, and serves as OGP's global spokesperson.*

---

<sup>12</sup> Citizen Engage. 2018. Italy: A new platform for participation. Citizen Engage, Open Government Partnership, 11 July. [https://www.ogpstories.org/impact\\_story/italy-a-new-platform-for-participation](https://www.ogpstories.org/impact_story/italy-a-new-platform-for-participation)

<sup>13</sup> Citizen Engage. 2018. Kaduna, Nigeria: All eyes on government. Citizen Engage, Open Government Partnership, 11 July. [https://www.ogpstories.org/impact\\_story/kaduna-nigeria-all-eyes-on-government](https://www.ogpstories.org/impact_story/kaduna-nigeria-all-eyes-on-government)



# Does Democracy Need a Time Rebellion?

Roman Krznaric

21 October 2020

Democracy has always had a problem with time.

No matter how it is organised – with different electoral systems or varying power splits between the executive, legislature and judiciary – it suffers from a fundamental temporal design flaw: the interests of future generations are typically ignored. The citizens of tomorrow are granted no rights or representation. There are rarely any public institutions explicitly designed to protect and promote their interests. They are excluded from the demos.

This matters because never before in human history have our choices in the present had such potentially negative consequences for future people. The turning point may have been the first nuclear test on 16 July 1945 – the moment when humanity became capable of destroying its own future. But since then we have upped the stakes by creating a global ecological crisis that will have impacts for decades and even centuries to come, while

multiple technological risks now lie just over the horizon, from nanotechnology to AI-controlled lethal autonomous weapons. At the same time, racial injustice and inequality get passed on from generation to generation, embedded in public institutions and cultural life.

None of this should come as a surprise. We all know that our politicians can barely see beyond the next election, or even the latest opinion poll or tweet. There are few political rewards for taking the interests of future citizens into account, especially when they are not here to vote.

Covid-19 has, somewhat paradoxically, made this myopia all the more visible. On the one hand the pandemic has understandably focused the minds of governments, businesses, communities and families on dealing with the immediate threat of the crisis. But it is equally clear that those countries that had long-term pandemic plans in place (such as Taiwan) have dealt with the virus far more effectively than those that didn't have such foresight (like the USA). There is a growing recognition that long-term thinking and planning are essential for effective public policy.

So we need to step back and consider how it might be possible to extend the time horizons of democratic government. Is it really possible to give future generations a voice?

The good news is that there is a growing global political movement of people committed to intergenerational justice and injecting long-term thinking into the DNA of democratic decision-making. I think of these pioneers as Time Rebels.<sup>1</sup> Well-known examples include the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, whose work has inspired a Wellbeing of Future

---

<sup>1</sup> Krznaric, R. 2020. How to be a good ancestor. TED, October. [https://www.ted.com/talks/roman\\_krznaric\\_how\\_to\\_be\\_a\\_good\\_ancestor](https://www.ted.com/talks/roman_krznaric_how_to_be_a_good_ancestor)



Generations Bill that would establish a Future Generations Commissioner for the whole UK.<sup>2</sup> In the USA, the public interest law firm Our Children's Trust<sup>3</sup> has filed a series of landmark cases at the federal and state levels to secure the legal right to a healthy atmosphere and stable climate for both current and future generations. Such cases, fought on behalf of tomorrow's citizens, mark a turning point in the long struggle for democratic rights.

Amongst the leading time rebels is Japan's Future Design movement, which is directly inspired by the principle of seventh-generation decision-making practised in many Native American communities. This offers a unique and powerful model for revitalising democracy as we emerge from the Covid-19 crisis.

So how does it work? Local residents are invited to public meetings to discuss and draw up plans for the towns and cities where they live. They begin by discussing issues from the perspective of a current resident. They are then given ceremonial yellow robes to wear and told to imagine themselves as residents from 2060.

This imaginative step of picturing themselves living – at their current age – several decades into the future, has an extraordinary effect. Multiple studies have revealed that they systematically favour much more transformative plans, whether discussing issues such as healthcare, the future impacts of AI or ecological threats.<sup>4</sup> In effect, they begin imagining how their decisions today will impact on the lives of future generations – especially their children or grandchildren – and this shifts their priorities

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://todayfortomorrow.org.uk>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org>

<sup>4</sup> Saijo, T. 2020. Future Design: Bequeathing sustainable natural environments and sustainable societies to future generations *Sustainability* 12, 16: 6467. <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/16/6467/htm>

and choices. In technical terms, their ‘discount rate’ diminishes:<sup>5</sup> they start putting more weight on the welfare of future citizens, whose interests would normally have relatively little impact on their decision-making calculus.

Future Design was founded by the Japanese economist Tatsuyoshi Saijo, director of the Research Institute for Future Design at Kochi University of Technology.<sup>6</sup> It has been highly successful since its first experiments in the small town of Yahaba, which began in 2015. In 2019, Yahaba’s mayor opened a Future Strategy Office, which coordinates the use of Future Design across multiple areas of local decision-making. It has been used, for instance, to discuss long-term investment in the town’s decaying water infrastructure and resulted in an agreement to raise water tax rates by 6%.

Future Design has now spread to major cities such as Kyoto and Suita, and is being used in policy planning by the Japanese Ministry of Finance. In the city of Uji, local citizens have formed their own Future Design group and held online sessions with city officials to discuss the impacts of Covid-19.<sup>7</sup>

Part of the appeal of Future Design is that it is a grass-roots participatory form of decision-making that taps into the emerging

---

<sup>5</sup> Nishimura, N. Inoue, N. Masuhara, H. and Tadahiko, M. 2020. Impact of future design on workshop participants’ time preferences *Sustainability* 12, 18: 7796. <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/18/7796/htm>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.souken.kochi-tech.ac.jp/seido>

<sup>7</sup> In its original incarnation, Future Design participants were split into two groups: one group from the present and the other representing 2060. While this approach yielded positive results in terms of encouraging long-term vision, it generated a certain degree of tension in debates between the two sides. So more recently Future Design has been based on a model where everyone imagines themselves both in the present and then subsequently in the future (and sometimes also in the past). Still, the results are similar: a marked tendency to extend time horizons beyond present-day concerns.

citizens' assembly movement, which has become a prominent part of the democratic landscape in Ireland, Belgium and other countries. In Britain, for instance, the approach was used for Climate Assembly UK<sup>8</sup> and has been adopted for Scotland's Climate Assembly,<sup>9</sup> which is due to report to the Scottish Parliament in 2021. A more radical vision is at the heart of a new Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill.<sup>10</sup>

There is a growing body of research<sup>11</sup> demonstrating that such deliberative citizen-based bodies have a greater capacity to take the long view than traditional politicians who are typically caught in short-term cycles and attitudes.<sup>12</sup> They simultaneously serve to restore public faith in democratic processes at a time when the rise of far-right populism threatens democratic rights worldwide.

The Covid-19 crisis may offer an unprecedented opportunity to mainstream citizens' assemblies. As the economist Milton Friedman pointed out, 'Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change.' Just as pioneering long-term institutions emerged from the crisis of World War II, like the World Health Organisation, the European Union and the National Health Service, so too could such institutions emerge from the pandemic crisis. The citizens' assembly model is one of the greatest hopes for enabling democracy to survive and thrive into the long term. And if participants are also given ceremonial robes to wear that help them

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.climateassembly.uk>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.climateassembly.scot>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ceebill.uk>

<sup>11</sup> Smith, G. 2021. *Can Democracy Safeguard the Future?* Cambridge: Polity. <https://politybooks.com/bookdetail/?isbn=9781509539246>

<sup>12</sup> Caney, S. 2019. Democratic reform, intergenerational justice and the challenges of the long-term. Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, July. <https://www.cusp.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/11-Simon-Caney-online.pdf>

time travel into the future, then we will truly know that a democratic time rebellion is under way.

*Roman Krznaric is a public philosopher and former political scientist. This article is based on his new book, The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World (W. H. Allen: London, 2021).*

# Building Back Inclusively

Dayo Eseonu

12 November 2020

‘COVID-19 brings with it different experiences for different parts of the population. It is exacerbating existing inequalities and creating new ones.’<sup>1</sup> This is certainly true for ethnically diverse communities across the UK.

Data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies,<sup>2</sup> Public Health England<sup>3</sup> and the Office for National Statistics<sup>4</sup> shows that these

---

<sup>1</sup> Smith, G. and Hughes, T. 2020. Why participation and deliberation are vital to the Covid-19 response. *Involve*, 23 May. <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/why-participation-and-deliberation-are-vital-covid-19-response>

<sup>2</sup> Platt, L. and Warwick, R. 2020. Are some ethnic groups more vulnerable to COVID-19 than others. *IFS*, 1 May. <https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/chapter/are-some-ethnic-groups-more-vulnerable-to-covid-19-than-others>

<sup>3</sup> Public Health England. 2020. Beyond the data: Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on BAME groups. *Public Health England*, June. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/892376/COVID\\_stakeholder\\_engagement\\_synthesis\\_beyond\\_the\\_data.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/892376/COVID_stakeholder_engagement_synthesis_beyond_the_data.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> White, C. and Nafilyan, V. 2020. Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by ethnic group, England and Wales: 2 March 2020 to 10 April 2020. *Office*

communities have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. They are more at risk of catching and dying from the virus for reasons including pre-existing health conditions, living conditions and occupations. Organisations which would have stepped in to support these communities are also experiencing difficulties as a result of the pandemic. Research carried out by the Ubele Initiative found that Covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on organisations led by ethnically diverse individuals which deliver services to ethnically diverse communities.<sup>5</sup>

We know that Covid-19 will increase racial inequalities and have a knock-on negative effect on the ability of ethnically diverse communities to recover from the pandemic. Whilst these communities were increasingly being invited to contribute to decision-making either as individuals or organisations before Covid-19, their views rarely influenced the outcomes of decision-making processes. During this pandemic and post-Covid-19, decision-makers need to commit to pursuing equity as part of their short, medium and long-term responses. Although an explicit commitment to equity is the first step, active strategies need to be in place to hear from ethnically diverse communities either as individuals representing a certain social perspective or as organisations representing communities they serve. The most transformative outcomes for ethnically diverse communities will result from

---

for National Statistics, 7 May. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/coronavirusrelateddeathsbyethnicgroupenglandandwales/2march2020to10april2020>

<sup>5</sup> Murray, K. 2020. Impact of COVID-19 on the BAME community and voluntary sector: Final report of the research conducting between 19 March and 4 April 2020. Ubele, April. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58f9e592440243412051314a/t/5eaab6e972a49d5a320cf3af/1588246258540/REPORT+Impact+of+COVID-19+on+the+BAME+Community+and+voluntary+sector%2C+30+April+2020.pdf>

decision-makers incorporating the inputs received from these communities. That is, decision-makers who are responsive in understanding and addressing the socio-economic causes of inequalities exacerbated by Covid-19.

As the pandemic unfolded and continues to unfold, general resources and support have been made available to individuals and organisations. Participation and deliberation with the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (B.A.M.E.) Voluntary, Community, Social Enterprise and Faith (VCSEF) sector before the launch of programmes would have been beneficial as some of the support that has been made available by government and funding bodies has been exclusionary. For example, the majority of the members of the Greater Manchester B.A.M.E. Social Enterprise Network<sup>6</sup> hosted by GMCVO (Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation) are micro-businesses. Eligibility criteria such as minimum annual income or payment of business rates renders them ineligible for support. These issues are not peculiar to ethnically diverse communities but they bear these exclusions more deeply. This is due to the years of underfunding, especially during austerity, that has hampered the sector's ability to successfully apply for funds and adapt business/delivery models quickly.

Research carried out by GMCVO<sup>7</sup> and the Black South West Network<sup>8</sup> details some of the barriers and issues experienced by the B.A.M.E. VCSEF sector. These reports offer recommendations

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://gmsen.net/connect-bame>

<sup>7</sup> Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation. 2019. Connecting BME entrepreneurs to social investment briefing. GMCVO Social Enterprise, May. [https://gmsen.net/sites/default/files/briefing\\_paper.pdf](https://gmsen.net/sites/default/files/briefing_paper.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Lodi, C. 2020. Impact of COVID-19 on BAME led businesses, organisations and communities. Black South West Network. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/594948a7414fb5804d2b4395/t/5ec3ee32a5b5c27385219625/1589898876817/Covid19\\_Report\\_v2\\_compressed.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/594948a7414fb5804d2b4395/t/5ec3ee32a5b5c27385219625/1589898876817/Covid19_Report_v2_compressed.pdf)

on what could be done differently: for example, early involvement in design of support earmarked for the sector to make process improvements to the application process. Where funding bodies that support the VCSEF sector have encouraged participation of, and deliberation with, organisations led by ethnically diverse people, we have seen an increase in more appropriate and targeted support for the very organisations which are supporting ethnically diverse communities through the crisis.

The ‘Build Back Better’ slogan is gaining traction across the UK but what does build back better mean for B.A.M.E. communities and how can decision-makers tap into their knowledge and experience of Covid-19? For me, ‘Build Back Better’ is about working with and strengthening ethnically diverse individuals and organisations they lead to bring about racial equality for ethnically diverse communities. Plenty of evidence exists that the relationship between organisations led by ethnically diverse people in the VCSEF sector and decision-makers is not always positive.<sup>9</sup> Now is the time for decision-makers to actively seek out and cultivate more equal partnerships – one in which power is distributed – with organisations led by ethnically diverse people who can serve as conduits to the knowledge, experience and perspectives required to build back more inclusively.

Based on my personal and professional experience (as a researcher working with ethnically diverse young people and supporting ethnically diverse social entrepreneurs), I offer some thoughts for decision-makers who wish to build back better in a way that is inclusive of ethnically diverse communities:

---

<sup>9</sup> Ware, P. 2013. ‘Very small, very quiet, a whisper ...’ – Black and minority ethnic groups: Voice and influence. Third Sector Research Centre, October. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/tsrc/working-papers/working-paper-103.pdf>



- Care should be taken because B.A.M.E. as an umbrella term hides the experiences of specific communities (such as Black African, Bangladeshi, Pakistani etc.) under this label. Even within these groups, there will not be homogenous experiences. Therefore, it is important to know the particular population(s) you wish to work with and to go to the spaces they inhabit to encourage participation of the diversity of experiences amongst particular populations.
- Frame participation and deliberation opportunities and how you want ethnically diverse communities to get involved in a way that matters to the population you wish to work with.
- Ethnically diverse communities are more trusting of people who look like them. Consequently, organisations led by ethnically diverse people are in a much better position to facilitate non-exploitative participation of individuals and organisations in a culturally sensitive manner.
- Participatory and deliberative spaces should create an inclusive environment for a deep-dive into issues and offering up of solutions. These spaces can be online (during the pandemic) or face-to-face in community hubs, post-Covid.
- To enable deliberative processes, employ highly skilled facilitators with deep knowledge and understanding of structural issues and barriers that ethnically diverse communities face as well as the ability to draw out the unique perspectives of individuals and organisations.

Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement have shone a spotlight on racial inequalities this year. I am hopeful that we can pause, take stock and do things differently in the pursuit of racial equality. Going forward, doing things differently will entail more participation and deliberation as part of the decision-makers' toolkit. If undertaken inclusively, it will ensure building back better supports ethnically diverse communities in a sustained and sustainable manner.

*Dayo Eseonu works at the University of Manchester and recently completed her doctoral research with ethnically diverse young people. She coordinated the launch of GMCVO's 'Connecting BAME Social Entrepreneurs' project which seeks to connect ethnically diverse social entrepreneurs to opportunities for the development and growth of their enterprises.*

# Ordinary and Extraordinary Stories: Including People with Learning Disabilities in Policy Development and Research

Rhiann McLean and Angela Henderson

26 November 2020

Pre-existing social and health inequalities mean people with learning disabilities are more likely to be impacted by Covid-19 whilst facing more barriers than ever to inclusion in policy development and research.<sup>1</sup>

The Research Voices project,<sup>2</sup> funded by the Wellcome Trust in 2018 as a joint project between The Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory and Talking Mats,<sup>3</sup> is one example of how people with learning disabilities can be engaged more effectively. The project established a citizens' jury of people with learning

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sldo.ac.uk/our-research/life-expectancy-and-mortality>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sldo.ac.uk/inclusive-research/research-voices-project>

<sup>3</sup> Talking Mats is a social enterprise dedicated to supporting people who experience communications barriers.

disabilities to debate and deliberate on how to make health research more inclusive and, in the process, challenge structural and attitudinal barriers to involvement of people with learning disabilities in research. The recommendations from this citizens' jury are now available.<sup>4</sup>

The Research Voices project is first and foremost about providing a forum for people with learning disabilities to engage in issues that affect them directly, as citizens. So, in preparing this essay we thought it vital to ask the group members to share their perspectives on a democratic response to Covid-19. Their responses are woven into this piece and reflect some of the real-life challenges of collaboration during a pandemic.

### **Why should we be including people with learning disabilities in our Covid-19 response?**

We'd like to think that we have moved beyond convincing people that it's necessary for people with learning disabilities to be partners in research and policy that directly affects their lives. But, with decision-making processes moving quickly and an increasing demand for digital literacy, people with learning disabilities are at more risk than ever of being excluded from local and national Covid-19 responses.

---

<sup>4</sup> Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory, Talking Mats, Wellcome Trust. 2020. Research Voices Citizens' Jury recommendations on involving people with learning disabilities in health research. Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory. <https://www.sldo.ac.uk/inclusive-research/research-voices-project/reports-and-resources>; Scottish Learning Disabilities. 2020. Research Voices Citizens' Jury: Our recommendations involving people with learning disabilities. YouTube, 11 June. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srcqiB0zuKE&list=UUpvHqUW0-t2FlQX3BwjQoFQ&index=2&t=6s>

Is this because we don't imagine people with learning disabilities in our representations of 'the ordinary citizen'? People with learning disabilities are, of course, ordinary. Most of the feedback I received for this essay from the group was about their worries as parents, their fears for employment or the saga of a broken fridge. Ordinary challenges that we can all relate to. But our group also touched on issues that were compounded by experience of learning disability, including:

- Not being able to access their supported employment opportunities;
- Feeling confused about guidance on Covid-19 (Easy-read and video information is often only available online and days after initial announcements); and,
- Accessibility and dependability of complex health and care support during the pandemic.

Susan reminds us that people with learning disabilities aren't a single, homogenous group. And people with profound and multiple learning disabilities and their families face even more barriers to inclusion, but still have a valuable contribution to make:<sup>5</sup>

I think for [people] who have a much higher level of learning disabilities there should be a fully trained person to help explain it to them [in] a way for them to understand so that they too are able to be part of making decisions about Covid-19 because they might have a unique answer about it that other people haven't even thought about, because they can quite often see it from another angle, a different way of coming up with answers and questions to do with Covid-19.

– *Susan on Facebook Messenger*

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://pamis.org.uk>

Susan is right.

People with learning disabilities face multiple barriers to inclusion in public deliberation, and are unlikely to be routinely recruited into citizens' juries, panels or advisory boards unless purposively included. We are unlikely to hear their stories in passive consultation through online surveys or polling. Instead, we need to reach out and meet people where they are at. The rise of self-advocacy movements, representative networks and national involvement groups across the UK offers a useful starting point. In our work, we made the decision to connect locally with smaller organisations and to include people who might not have had the opportunity to participate in representative organisations.

In our experience of adapting deliberative democracy to be more inclusive, the following considerations are critical ...

### Resource

A Covid-19 response means allocating resources to dedicated facilitators, equipment, investment in accessible communication and time. Time is perhaps the most challenging resource of all.

We were definitely struck by the paradoxical truth in the essay by the Poverty Truth Network that 'some things are so urgent that we can't afford to do them quickly'. We were lucky to be able to dedicate 6 months at the start of our project to building strong foundations for our work with group members.

Time has inherent value in fostering trust and relationships. We can't expect people to share their stories with us without that foundation.

Covid-19 restrictions mean many organisations are now having to plan their engagement remotely for people they haven't had the opportunity to meet in person. Concessions

will need to be made, but they should never be at the expense of accessibility.

## Adaptations

Inclusive deliberative democracy requires reimagining engagement practices.

We need to think differently and disrupt how we normally ‘do things’. It’s not as simple as ‘translating’ reading materials into easy-read. It’s about giving people time to reflect, process and recall information, thinking about communication first, and creating environments where people are given explicit opportunities to share their views in a safe space.

We need to revisit expectations, not with the aim of expecting less but the opposite; to allow ourselves to be led in new directions and trust that people who have been marginalised and silenced will often have the most to say.

The best starting point is asking people with learning disabilities and their supporters what they need to participate.

## Digital literacy

Some of my friends don’t have FaceTime on their phone and I haven’t spoken to them since March. Some people don’t have phones.

*– David speaking to his supporter Laura,  
who emails us his ideas*

David touches on something important: the lack of access isn’t just about being digitally excluded from opportunities to contribute to Covid-19 decision-making, it’s about being cut-off from your peers. The strength of our citizens’ jury was peer support

and friendship, which is harder than ever to foster right now. Investing in digital inclusion does more than just diversifying engagement, it offers the opportunity for community connection.

### **What's in it for us?**

What motivates professionals and people with learning disabilities to work together? More simply put, what do we owe each other?

For most of our members, relationships motivate them to participate. People with learning disabilities are more likely to feel lonely and socially isolated,<sup>6</sup> even more so during Covid-19. Part of what we can offer is the chance to connect and make a meaningful contribution. That has been the most significant shift in our project since going online – we focus on brokering relationships and offering support.

### **Acknowledging different expertise**

John comes back to us and says he thinks partnership should be at the centre of the Covid-19 response, and that experts shouldn't have to walk alone when making decisions.

But put a disability person with him or her and then not only will that person prosper but give you the world in information that would justify and help the parliament make the best [choices].

*– John using Google Drive for the first time*

---

<sup>6</sup> Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities. 2020. Relationships matter: Exploring people's experience of relationships, social isolation and loneliness. SCLD, October. <https://www.sclد.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SCLD-Relationships-Report-Final.pdf>



We can't stop thinking about 'the world in information,' which is exactly what deliberative democracy can offer us. We like the idea that an aim of any work is that everyone involved should prosper. But for now, we'd settle for people with learning disabilities having their voice heard.

*Rhiann McLean is a Public Engagement Lead at the Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory.*

*Angela Henderson is the Deputy Director of the Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory.*

*This piece is written with contributions from the Research Voices Group.*



# Organising to Humanise the Gig Economy

Alex Marshall

15 December 2020

Many industries have suffocated under the grasp of the Covid-19 pandemic. Others, like the delivery sector of the gig economy, have boomed.

The CEO of Deliveroo, Will Shu, proudly declared that this ‘extraordinary and crazy period’ had accelerated the adoption of online food delivery by ‘two or three years’, hastening the timeline for Deliveroo’s impending listing on the stock market.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the couriers who are fundamental to this upsurge have seen pay and conditions go from bad to worse.

Food delivery couriers already worked under incredibly precarious conditions before the pandemic struck. The employment

---

<sup>1</sup> Williams-Grut, O. 2020. Covid helps Deliveroo turn a profit as orders and customers surge. Yahoo! Sport, 3 December. <https://uk.sports.yahoo.com/news/deliveroo-web-summit-williams-shu-covid-19-coronavirus-online-delivery-152053944.html>

model of courier companies strips their workforce of employment rights under the bogus guise of self-employment. Workers are over-recruited against an unknown customer demand. The result is now a common sight: workers standing around on the street, unpaid for hours while they desperately watch their phones hoping for the ping of a job. Fees have plummeted as couriers are forced to accept any job they are sent. Under the constant threat of unfounded automated dismissals with no chance to appeal,<sup>2</sup> the companies they work for do almost nothing to protect workers' health and safety – not least the genuine risk to life every time they hit the road for a day's work.

The courier industry is notoriously fragmented and the existence of a courier is nomadic, with little time spent with others as they work incredibly hard for unethically low pay. With no defined workplace, workers have been hard to organise to challenge the falling cost of labour.

Back in 2015, couriers working for the more traditional package delivery companies (before the rapid rise of app-based companies) decided they could no longer tolerate the continual depletion of pay and conditions. Sixty couriers from various companies came together and put forward a set of demands centred around improved pay and conditions. We then voted to form the Couriers and Logistics Branch of the IWGB (Independent Workers Union of Great Britain).<sup>3</sup> A long overdue collective voice was formed demanding drastic reform.

Almost overnight isolation was replaced with networking and campaigning to push back. WhatsApp groups became the virtual

---

<sup>2</sup> Andersson, J. 2020. Sacked Deliveroo driver says company termination policy 'doesn't leave room' to challenge customer complaints, 24 November. <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk/deliveroo-driver-sacked-24-hours-notice-company-policy-challenge-complaints-appeal-uber-766927>

<sup>3</sup> <https://iwgb.org.uk/page/clb>

workplaces in which couriers organised and recruited. Those who had been sold the bogus claims of flexibility and freedom are now becoming staunch advocates of direct action and strategic litigation. We have seen strikes of Deliveroo riders in Sheffield<sup>4</sup> and targeted restaurant boycotts in York,<sup>5</sup> Nottingham and Wolverhampton. IWGB has recently forced the government through judicial review to extend health and safety protections to the gig economy and frontline workers. Just Eats' announcement that it will introduce hourly pay, pension contributions, holiday pay, sick pay and maternity or paternity pay is another example of how the tide is turning.<sup>6</sup>

But the arrival of the pandemic exacerbated the perilous existence of the food delivery courier. The deadly virus was a new addition to the list of hazards they already locked horns with on a daily basis. Couriers did not have the option of furlough pay and many will come out the other side of the pandemic financially worse off.

At the beginning of March, while I was still chair of the Courier and Logistics Branch, I met with couriers as the impact of the pandemic was becoming clear. We decided on a set of demands to guarantee the physical and financial safety of couriers, including: full pay for self-isolation, regular testing, income protection, provision of PPE and other safety measures. The letters I sent to all

---

<sup>4</sup> Lezard, T. 2020. IWGB Members in Sheffield strike at Deliveroo, Uber and Stuart. Union News, 26 November. <https://www.union-news.co.uk/iwgb-members-in-sheffield-strike-at-deliveroo-uber-and-stuart>

<sup>5</sup> Dunning, D. 2020. Video: Deliveroo riders' protest in York City centre set to end – but the dispute is not over. York Mix, 11 October. <https://yorkmix.com/video-deliveroo-riders-protest-in-york-city-centre-set-to-end-but-the-dispute-is-not-over>

<sup>6</sup> Armitage, J. 2020. Just Eat boosts terms for courier in game-changing move for gig economy work. *Evening Standard*, 9 December. <https://www.standard.co.uk/business/just-eat-couriers-deliveroo-uber-ubereats-b230434.html>

the companies for whom our members worked were published on social media to increase the pressure on the various companies.

While the amount was insufficient, a few companies offered workers some income support when they were forced to self-isolate. But many big companies did the bare minimum to guarantee the safety of their workers – both physically and financially. Too many couriers are still waiting for PPE that they applied for in March. Many who purchased PPE themselves have not been fully recompensed or have been refused reimbursements. The IWGB made public which companies were failing. As this gained traction online, slowly we have seen companies do more to protect their workforces.

Some companies offered pay for couriers who had to self-isolate, but this was little more than statutory sick pay (only £95.85 per week) and many workers did not qualify. This left many couriers in a situation where they had to choose to continue working through potential early symptoms or face financial destitution by taking the responsible decision to isolate. Self-isolation became a privilege reserved for those who could afford it.

One positive to come from the pandemic is the rebranding of couriers as ‘key workers’. Too often stigmatised as low skilled, overnight they were transformed from disposable to essential. Another positive has been the acceleration of membership of the Couriers and Logistics Branch of the IWGB.

The IWGB is capitalising on this new-found status of ‘key workers’ to provide a spotlight on the experience of couriers. The branch launched the ‘Clapped and Scrapped’ campaign at the beginning of November to focus on the lack of process around terminations.<sup>7</sup> We are demanding a process that would give

---

<sup>7</sup> Andersson, J. 2020. Sacked Deliveroo driver says company termination policy ‘doesn’t leave room’ to challenge customer complaints, 24 November.

workers the right to appeal and the right to trade union representation at a hearing. An Early Day Motion laid down by Ian Byrne MP launched the campaign<sup>8</sup> and a virtual rally<sup>9</sup> will take place on the 16 December at which terminated couriers will speak alongside MPs about the life-changing ramifications of these unjust decisions.<sup>10</sup> This is the latest development in the collective struggle to improve conditions and win all the rights couriers are being denied.

One lasting lesson of the pandemic is that workers need more say over their work conditions. If food delivery work is now essential, then why are couriers still denied employment rights? If the model they choose is one that profits from the exploitation of a workforce they deny they even employ, then there is something deeply wrong with the model. Workers are finding their voice in an industry where they have little or no say over how their work is organised. Now is the time to humanise the gig economy!

*Alex Marshall is the recently elected president of the IWGB. Before being elected he was a courier for 8 years and the chair of the Courier and Logistics Branch of the IWGB for 2.5 years. In that time, he was involved in recruiting and organising hundreds of couriers, led multiple campaigns and helped the IWGB to become the first union to be recognised in the gig economy at his previous company.*

---

<https://inews.co.uk/news/uk/deliveroo-driver-sacked-24-hours-notice-company-policy-challenge-complaints-appeal-uber-766927>

<sup>8</sup> <https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/57687>

<sup>9</sup> <https://fb.me/e/1nRfFaA5p>

<sup>10</sup> York Mix. 2020. York cycle courier set to lose his job – for shaving off his beard. York Mix, 20 November. <https://www.yorkmix.com/york-cycle-courier-set-to-lose-his-job-for-shaving-off-his-beard>





# Let's Talk About Covid-19 Ethics

Dave Archard

17 December 2020

2020 ends with the first people in the United Kingdom being given the vaccine that might – just – if rolled out across the whole population, spell the beginning of the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is good to be able to hope for such a prospect after an unbelievably difficult and painful year.

It seems churlish then to ask questions about the vaccine but we must do so and seek answers. Some of these questions concern the safety and efficacy of the vaccine. Answering them is important if people are to feel confident about taking the vaccine. We know already that there is a significant degree of 'vaccine hesitancy', not as widespread as in the United States where nearly half of the population have indicated they will not be vaccinated, but nevertheless worrying in its extent and possible growth. Some of this is of course supported by absurd anti-vaxxer conspiracy theories. But some of it rests on reasonable fears about possible side effects; and some of it may be supported by understandable

moral objections to the ways in which the vaccine may have been developed and produced. These worries need to be addressed and done so in a way that ensures the Government can be trusted in the claims it makes for the vaccine alongside other measures to combat the pandemic. That, given the last nine months of policy-making, is no mean feat.

Yet that is only half the story. For, although the Government has repeatedly insisted that in everything it does it is led by the science, we know that there are also major ethical questions to be answered. We know, for instance, that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted on BAME communities,<sup>1</sup> even if it is not entirely clear why this is so; we are now also being told that the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing social inequalities;<sup>2</sup> we know that policies of isolation and social distancing have adversely affected the old, single people and children.

These considerations broach issues of fairness and of equality of treatment which we cannot ignore. In respect of the vaccine roll-out and the question of who gets vaccinated first, the Government has chosen to follow the advice of its Joint Vaccination and Inoculation Committee. But this advice is barely morally justified and seems to rest on a very simple principle of prioritising those most in need. Yet do we vaccinate front-line workers only because we think of them as at risk and want them healthy to treat patients? Or do we think that they deserve to be vaccinated early because

---

<sup>1</sup> Public Health England. 2020. Covid-19: Understanding the impact on BAME communities. Public Health England, 16 June. <http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-understanding-the-impact-on-bame-communities>

<sup>2</sup> Marmot, M. 2020. Covid exposed massive inequality. Britain cannot return to 'normal'. *The Guardian*, 15 December. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/dec/15/health-inequalities-covid-ucl-government-policy-making>

of what they have done, their sacrifices and work being above and beyond the call of duty, all in the name of the rest of society? Why do we now give priority to the old when back in March and April, when it was a question of deciding who got access to life-saving ventilators, many ethical guidance documents advised that the young should be given precedence over the aged and frail?

These are ethical questions, and they merit informed, considered and fully justified answers. Now of course, the public – and our Government – could simply rely on advice from a high-level ethics committee. Indeed, it did commission guidance from a Moral and Ethical Advisory Group (MEAG)<sup>3</sup> set up towards the end of last year and I chair the Nuffield Council on Bioethics<sup>4</sup> that has for 30 years produced independent reports on those social and ethical issues that have arisen from new developments in medical and biological research.

Yet what we also need is a space within which there can be popular deliberation on pressing ethical matters. And we need the means to ensure that the public can discuss and debate these matters in an intelligent, informed and interested way. Here the United Kingdom compares unfavourably with other European countries, such as most notably France and Germany.

In preparation for the revision of the national bioethics legislation, the French Comité Consultatif National d'Éthique in 2018 organised a massive nation-wide public engagement and consultation exercise that resulted in its report, and recommendations, to the Government. Its title is wonderfully ambitious: 'what world

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gov.uk/government/groups/moral-and-ethical-advisory-group>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nuffieldbioethics.org>

do we want for tomorrow?’ Its sub-titular banner: ‘Participate! Get Informed!’<sup>5</sup>

The German ethics committee, Deutscher Ethikrat, alongside Germany’s standing committee on vaccination and academy of sciences, produced last month a wonderfully clear and authoritative set of recommendations on the ethical framework for prioritising access to the vaccine.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, the legal duties of the Ethikrat extend beyond providing advice to the Government to ‘informing the public and encouraging discussion in society’ which it does through regular open and online meetings.

Other examples are easy to find and I will only mention the Irish Citizens Assembly<sup>7</sup> set up in 2016 to address constitutional issues, and which famously broke years of political deadlock by making recommendations on the legalisation of abortion that were eventually approved in a referendum and adopted as law.

Ensuring that there is proper, full and transparent public discussion of these ethical issues is not an academic luxury. It is essential if any democracy is to discharge its duty of ensuring that its laws and policies are understood, supported and trusted in by the public. This is all the more vital in an emergency public health crisis. Let’s start talking about Covid ethics!

*Dave Archard is a Professor of Philosophy who has taught at the Universities of Ulster, St Andrews, Lancaster and Queen’s Belfast,*

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.etatsgenerauxdelabioethique.fr>

<sup>6</sup> Stiko, Gec and Leopoldina. 2020. Recommendations for fair and regulated access to a Covid-19 vaccine. Deutscher Ethikrat, 9 November. <http://www.ethikrat.org/en/press-releases/2020/recommendations-for-fair-and-regulated-access-to-a-covid-19-vaccine>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.citizensassembly.ie/en>

*and has written extensively on issues in applied ethics, political philosophy and philosophy of law. He is Honorary Vice-President of the Society of Applied Philosophy and the current Chair of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.*



# Democracy – A Dish Well Done

Frances Foley

5 January 2021

When the Covid-19 crisis hit, Pembroke House,<sup>1</sup> the settlement house where I live, was as unprepared as everyone else.

Staff and volunteers had been making plans for the next phase of our community cafe, drawing up a schedule for our reading, gardening and music groups and applying to run our annual summer street party. Instead, we found ourselves rapidly shifting gear, figuring out how we could put the assets we have at the disposal of the neighbourhood. Like most people, our instinct was to throw what we had into the communal pot.

Back in 1885, when a group of progressive university graduates founded a settlement house, settlements were relatively unknown – as they still are. The idea of a residence founded to draw in and help the neighbourhood seemed to many utopian, even naïve. But these social reformers were fired up by a conviction that levels

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pembrokehouse.org.uk>

of poverty were inexcusable. There were soon hundreds of settlements all over the country and across North America.

These were people – like Clement Attlee – with a strong desire to help the poor, but aware that they were relatively ignorant of poverty. Past models of charity had preserved strict (often physical) distance between benefactor and beneficiary, but settlement workers sought proximity and intimacy. They were neighbours, not philanthropists. Despite class and cultural tensions the settlement workers stayed put and put down roots. Their belief was that everyone had ‘time and talents’ – the name of a settlement in Bermondsey that still exists. Everyone had as much to gain as to give. A pioneer of settlements, Nobel peace prize winner Jane Addams saw the mission as one to ‘socialise democracy’.

This philosophy is echoed in the idea of ‘mutual aid’ – it suggests reciprocity, solidarity, neighbourliness, community. And benefits can be more than a bag of groceries: a sense of purpose and connection, the invitation to be part of something bigger. In months marked by isolation and demobilisation, this has been particularly welcome.

Like our Pembroke predecessors during the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak and the 1940s bombing raids, we could offer our buildings. Overnight, the team transformed our hall into a food hub with hundreds of delivery riders operating two shifts a day taking food where it was needed most. We were inundated by offers of help, people drawn by a direct and practical task, connection to neighbours, a chance to feel useful. In a pandemic, direct participation has power.

Since March, over 350 volunteers have delivered over 140 tonnes of food, cycling over 60,000km to reach around 1,350 people a week. But it wasn't long before the ethical, political



and social questions around the food crisis came into focus. Covid-19 has exposed and exacerbated rather than caused many of this country's social and political crises.

Before the crisis, we knew that 25% of children in Walworth lived in poverty and 20% of families regularly missed meals. That raised the question that many food banks face – in the long term, how do we make ourselves obsolete? A food distribution hub, necessary in extraordinary times, is scandalous in ordinary times.

We began by getting the neighbourhood round the (virtual) table.<sup>2</sup> We knew that the next bit – the tricky part – would require dialogue and deliberation. The event, called 'We Need To Talk', had three stages: a public forum to identify the causes of food insecurity;<sup>3</sup> a 'daisy-chain' stage – a series of 1-to-1 conversations linking up the neighbourhood; and a number of action groups. Sessions followed good deliberative practice: highly facilitated, time-bound, small groups wherever possible, with a clear purpose and, through much practice with Zoom, a sense of conviviality.

People were quick to make the links – between time and availability of food; between isolation and poor diet; between mental and physical health.<sup>4</sup> We talked through costs, risks and hitches to every solution. We accepted that this was multi-layered, as much about feelings as logistics. From community gardeners to business owners, council workers, food recipients, neighbours, volunteers and staff – all demonstrated high levels of imagination and practicality. The best ideas were, as ever, a combination of the two.

---

<sup>2</sup> Pembroke House. 2020. Walworth starts a new kind of conversation. Pembroke House, 4 September. <https://www.pembrokehouse.org.uk/walworth-starts-a-new-kind-of-conversation>

<sup>3</sup> <https://actionnetwork.org/forms/we-need-to-talk>

<sup>4</sup> For a visualisation of the process and the ideas it generated, see <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UYgSc10KUrivNL595NxlB062NdLulDfo/view>

What conclusions about democracy have we drawn? The recognition that the democratic ethos demands equality of contribution – citizens with as much to give as to gain. Mutual aid must live up to its name and move beyond one-way charity, as the early settlement workers knew.

Democracy's demands cannot be fulfilled as easily by everyone. Despite our best efforts, many in our neighbourhood who should have been round the table, weren't. Democracy – especially the deliberative kind – takes time, energy, commitment, capacity and confidence. These assets aren't evenly distributed in our society, as millions juggle jobs, precarious finances and caring responsibilities. There is food insecurity but also time poverty. Participation cannot just be the privilege of those who can afford to show up.

Secondly, we know that democracy demands and delivers a heightened sense of the power of the collective. In order to grow this power, we invited tales of 'life in lockdown' – what people had been doing, learning and sharing in the most difficult of circumstances. But different levels of confidence don't just disappear inside the hallowed space of deliberation. They are chipped away through deliberation itself.

Thirdly, the question of credentials – 'what do I know?', 'why am I qualified to participate in this?' One of the benefits of neighbourhood democracy is the clear answer: because you're an expert in your own neighbourhood. You know the local park, the pool and the play area; and now you're addressing local food insecurity. Democracy begins at home – and is better in the specific than the abstract.

Finally, the question of investment. Our deliberative project is slow and sometimes tedious. Unlike the food hub, it wasn't set up overnight nor does it have the energy of an emergency. But

neither will it be taken down next week. Dozens have now had a dose of deliberative democracy and they cannot walk away from one another – they're neighbours.

This year especially, citizens have seen themselves – and been seen by politicians – as organised, creative, persistent and generous, an important boost to our collective sense of self. It takes time, but unlike the fast-food sugar-hit politics of elections, deliberation is slow-cooked democracy. Ingredients are planted, cultivated and gathered, the dish is cooked with care and thought, and the final offering is savoured among friends.

*Frances Foley is a residential volunteer at Pembroke House and Deputy Director of Compass.*



# Learning How to Listen in a Pandemic

Laura Seebohm

26 January 2021

So much has been written about the pandemic, most of which seems to focus on the plight of the working professional classes. When attention is given to those who face multiple disadvantages in our society, the analysis is too often based on unfounded assumptions.

Our teams at Changing Lives<sup>1</sup> have never stopped providing outreach, helping people come in from the streets whether rough sleeping or selling sex, working with people in prison and supporting those in active addiction. The impact of lockdown has not always been what we expected. Early on some people thrived without having to ‘jump through hoops’ imposed by services; some felt they were no longer the ‘outcasts’ as we were ‘all in it together’; some said it was the first time they were asked how they were and whether they needed a food parcel – a fundamental shift in dynamics of relationships with professionals.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.changing-lives.org.uk>

But experiences of the pandemic are not static and over the months we have seen a 67% increase in people we support harming themselves intentionally; we have seen a 179% increase in women we support reporting experiences of sexual violence – I could carry on.

What has remained the case throughout is that it is those people and organisations most embedded in communities and contributing to people's wellbeing who are relevant. Everyone else was – for a time at least – pretty superfluous to requirement; delegated like me to commentating about how we might 'build back better' from afar.

The experience of Covid-19 has made the executive team at Changing Lives realise we need to work differently. It has taken a pandemic for us to recognise that we have to change how we do things. We need to listen better and make sense, learn and adapt to what we hear.

### Learning to listen again

In partnership with the Centre for Public Impact<sup>2</sup> we have embarked on a mission of discovery. We realised we needed to throw aside all assumptions about how to listen and engage with people in this very different context, and experiment with a 'bottom-up' approach that would itself adapt to the needs and preferences of people we wanted to hear from; those whose voices are seldom heard.

Members of our teams spoke to 90 people we already support and engage with across Northern England – people subject to multiple disadvantages, including homelessness, domestic abuse,

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org>

addiction, sexual exploitation or involvement in the criminal justice system and those with insecure asylum status.

The process has been iterative. There is no agenda. Even asking directly about the pandemic felt too prescriptive. We wanted to know whether people already experiencing untold hardships actually want to be listened to. If so, how in these radically different circumstances? Who do they want to do the listening? Are they keen to be involved in a sense-making process to help us learn about what is heard? And what do they want to happen next? Too often the methods we typically use to obtain and impart information can be experienced as impersonal, dehumanising and clinical, and fail to engage people or reassure them that they will have any impact.

### **What have we learned so far?**

What we have learned already is that trust and connection are important.<sup>3</sup> People want to be listened to but only by those with whom they already have a relationship. Trust in authorities was rapidly lost during lockdown and people have found messaging confusing and contradictory. This has exacerbated feelings of isolation and emotional distress. The ‘circle of trust’ people rely on is small and hyper-local: Changing Lives workers, friends, family or people from their own community. These people are the vital connectors.

We have gained some sense of the social and technological barriers. No single form of communication could be accessed by

---

<sup>3</sup> Changing Lives. 2020. New report shows the so-called ‘hardest to reach’ may hold a key to pandemic recovery, but are not being listened to. Changing Lives, 13 October. <https://www.changing-lives.org.uk/news-stories/learning-to-listen-again>

more than two-thirds of people. One-to-one face-to-face communication is clearly most popular; digital platforms facilitated engagement for some but were barriers to others. How we listen needs to be bespoke.

The type of conversations and the spaces to have them in are not dictated, nor do the professionals dominate the sense-making sessions. It has become evident that people want their voices to be heard and they want to have some influence on what happens next. Many were most motivated to engage in conversations that would help improve things not just for themselves but for others. Such altruistic qualities are not those often attributed to the people we work with at Changing Lives.

Our next iteration will be to explore whether this methodology can become integrated into ‘how we do things’ at Changing Lives. For years we have grappled with how to genuinely involve people with lived experience in our decision-making processes and service design (often grandly described as ‘co-production’ or ‘co-design’).

- Can we test more agile ways of listening and sense making to create the conditions for it to happen all the time throughout every level of the organisation?
- What are the cultural and behavioural shifts to do this and what change might be required in how we support people going through challenging times?

It may have taken a pandemic to move us in the right direction.

Our work is also making us question whether this kind of listening and sense making has the potential to change power dynamics and public services more broadly. To build collaborative spaces for learning across the silos of public services.



To enable those seldom heard to be involved in democratic processes and decision-making. Even to connect to a radical devolution agenda that challenges dislocation and divisions, building community and social cohesion.

These aspirations might sound grandiose, but perhaps through this work we can begin to contribute to closing the democratic deficit that exists when we don't believe all voices have equal value. It is the moral duty of all in public service to elevate the voices of everyone. But we don't need to speak for people. They do this very well themselves.

***Laura Seebohm** is Executive Director at national charity Changing Lives. Changing Lives is a nationwide charity helping people facing challenging times to make positive change for good.*



# No Justice Without Us: Respecting Lived Experience of the Criminal Justice System

Paula Harriott

2 February 2021

The evidence that Covid-19 disproportionately affects certain communities and those long identified as suffering health inequalities comes as no surprise.

At the same time, the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 have forced deep personal and organisational reflections. These injustices compel an acknowledgement of our deep-seated prejudices and the reasons why we ignore the causes of such thinking and our apathy in responding.

The Black Lives Matter movement has illuminated a striking fact that for some is hard to accept: until a movement of those with lived experience organises, protests, advocates and snatches off the metaphorical blindfolds we choose to wear, we carry on either unaffected or lacking sufficient drive, insight and

conviction to truly change. The blindfolds of power and privilege act to protect so many of us from witnessing the reality of the economic, political and social systems which do not embed inclusivity but rather perpetuate separation and difference.

Leadership from those with lived experience is capable of creating movements for change, creating space to self-educate and educate others, to organise, to develop narratives that not only challenge and disrupt, but act as a guide to the future. Lived experience leaders can be visionary changemakers. It was after all, women who challenged patriarchy and set out a programme of women's rights, people of colour who won civil rights, and LGBTQ+ activists who won rights for their communities. Direct lived experience creates passion and dedication to persist in an endeavour that is unrivalled, for in such work the personal is political and no longer abstract.

It is direct lived experience of the criminal justice system that propelled me into the work I do in prisoner engagement, prisoner involvement and prisoner leadership. That lived experience has taught me about power and privilege and what it feels like to be banished, to be publicly shamed and to have your rights as a citizen revoked without compassion. Power to command a naked strip search is power manifested. It taught me about the senselessness of painful retribution as a mechanism for healing and restoration. I witnessed the full impact of judgement, the full force of the requirement to accept total individual culpability without reference to mitigation nor an acknowledgement of even a hint of societal responsibility. I saw and directly experienced the public invisibility of prisoners; merely used cynically as political footballs in the game of harsher sentencing often trumpeted by every major political party.

The public's lack of questioning of the age-old outdated notion of prison as punishment, means that there has been no outcry that since March 2020 most prisoners have spent around 23 hours a day locked in a cell with no visits from family and children, no work, no education, no rehabilitation interventions and limited access to healthcare. Long-term solitary confinement of such duration has direct impact on mental well-being and is likened to torture. Covid-19 is making even more visible the implications of the way that society thinks – or fails to think – about criminal justice.

We seek to reduce crime in this country through ever increasing sentencing that fails to affect the causes of crime. Now, more than ever, is the time for those with lived experience – without the metaphorical blindfolds – who see clearly where solutions lie, to speak out and to be heard, and to be supported to lead the work to reframe notions of justice in our post-Covid world.

This is why the Prison Reform Trust set up its free to join Prisoner Policy Network<sup>1</sup> (PPN) of serving prisoners, former prisoners, family members and supporting organisations in 2019. This network creates a framework for prisoners to have a say in both the work of the PRT, guiding its advocacy work, but also more widely in the sector. The network identifies and seeks to support prisoner leaders, equipping them to take their rightful place in the sector and in civil society. The lived experience and leadership of current and former prisoners is critical both in participation in the day-to-day running of prisons as much as in the broader criminal justice movement.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Projectsresearch/Prisonerpolicynetwork>

The PPN has published a series of reports reflecting prisoner experience and prisoner views on policy and service design.<sup>2</sup> Recently it supported the design and delivery of the first ever leadership programme for people with lived experience of the criminal justice system supported by the Centre for Knowledge Equity<sup>3</sup> and the Clore Social Fellowship.<sup>4</sup> With support from the Convict Criminology Movement, network members are working with academics to publish co-authored research and publishing in their own right. The movement is supporting prisoners to attend and speak at roundtables and events with decision-makers, as well as coming together to form a collective voice to shape new understandings of the nature of the sort of justice we need in our future.

The invisible and ignored behind the prison wall are not non-humans. A mere handful of people spend their entire life behind bars, and the majority return home seeking a better life. It is a travesty for the idea of 'Building Back Better' that so few organisations, whether in civil society, public or private sectors, reach out purposefully to include the wisdom of those with the lived experience of imprisonment to rebuild in a way that realises social justice. The Prisoner Policy Network has. Others need to take that step.

*Paula Harriott is Head of Prisoner Involvement at the Prison Reform Trust and a former prisoner committed to building prisoner leadership in the public and policy debate about criminal justice. She leads the Prisoner Policy Network at the Prison Reform Trust.*

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/PressPolicy/News/Coronavirus/CAPPTIVE>

<sup>3</sup> <https://knowledgeequity.org>

<sup>4</sup> <https://cloresocialleadership.org.uk>

# Participation on Whose Terms?

Javier Sanchez-Rodriguez

9 February 2021

What has Covid-19 meant to (me) us, people of refugee and migrant backgrounds, who have been working throughout the pandemic to support, not only our communities, but also the wider community in general?

I am one of the co-founders of The Anne Matthews Trust,<sup>1</sup> formerly known as Braich Goch-Red Arm CIC.<sup>2</sup> We run a critical learning centre in Mid-Wales where we specialise in providing sanctuary experiences and developmental support to organisations and individuals with similar backgrounds to ourselves.

Since the first lockdown started, our work has been very difficult as most of what we do is about creating residential experiences, which means bringing many people together under one roof, where we co-design whatever we want to learn and do. In

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theannemattewstrust.org>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.braichgoch-redarm.org>

our experience it is very difficult to find places where we do not feel the outsiders, foreigners, the tokens, or the racialised other.

Alongside creating a 'Food justice for all' project that provides 130 free and donation-based hot nutritious meals a week to the surrounding community and supports local growers and workers,<sup>3</sup> we have provided online support to the groups we work with, including our sister organisation Solidarity Hull,<sup>4</sup> a group of recently arrived and organised people of African descent. During the pandemic, they have found the agency, with limited resources, to provide free telephone and online advice in their own languages to the most vulnerable in their community to overcome confusion, fear and misinformation and to ensure that people's basic needs and wellbeing are met.

As people of refugee and migrant backgrounds, we are often told that we need to participate in discussions, forums and consultations where decisions are made about our wellbeing and lives. This assumes that we are all ready, able and willing to 'participate'. But to arrive at that level of engagement, there needs to be a massive investment of work, time and resources in order to create the agency necessary for individuals, groups and communities to decipher, analyse and strategise to generate responsive action. Otherwise, it is always the same people from our communities who engage, those with the confidence and already in jobs in the statutory sector, voluntary or private agencies. A minority within minorities, get to represent the rest of us.

It also fails to recognise the power dynamics at operation in decision-making spaces. Paternalistic governments promote systems of oppression where prescribed questionnaires and surveys

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theannemattthewstrust.org/our-res>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.solidarityhull.org>



are directed at getting the answers that the surveyor wants. Most people in our communities are bound and limited by the same colonial system that keeps its 'knees on our throats', making it impossible for us even to imagine that a different way of doing things, a different world, can be possible.

I have been a witness and a victim of cases where government and academic institutions invite a person of dark hue to 'participate' and one ends up being the only dark and 'exotic' face in the room, whose only function is to stand in the photo at the end of the session. I have also been in spaces where I have been called to co-design a programme or run a workshop, or give ideas and it is only after that I discover that everyone, except me, has been paid. This to me replicates models of exploitation and disrespect, as though some experiences and knowledge are more important than others.

This type of practice is the nemesis of real participatory democracy.

In its more radical form, participation means collective enquiry, where everyone's voices are heard and we all have equal amounts of time to talk and decisions are a collective consensus. To achieve this, we need 'communicative spaces for genuine dialogue', where our opinions and experience are respected and valued, where there is cognitive justice, where different knowledge and experiences converse and converge. This for us would be just the onset of a legitimate process of democratic deliberation.

Drawing on the experience of Paulo Freire and other popular educators, genuine dialogue can lead to transformational change to self and the world. It is in communion with others that we are able to learn about ourselves and our immediate reality, and the world around us. With this learning we can start to understand

the contradictions of our broken world, to develop a clear collective vision, to participate and be change makers.

Unfortunately, for many agencies and governmental bodies, these processes take too much time, and so in emergencies like the pandemic, but most of the time for that matter, only the 'experts' have valid solutions.

People from refugee and migrant backgrounds have found their own feet and been resilient in the struggle against this virus. We know what our communities need and we should be included in the decision-making process of strategies that affect our lives. But the way we are included should be determined by ourselves, within our own spaces where we are collectively able to decode and find solutions within our own conceptions and context of the world we inhabit. Our participation should be respected and remunerated when everyone else is being paid. Every time we are consulted, we should also be supported not just in symbolic ways but in a real concrete manner that translates into resources that would enable us to carry on with the work we are already doing.

*Javier Sanchez-Rodriguez is a Colombian peasant farmer, political activist and participatory action researcher. He is co-founder and director of Braich Goch-Red-Arm CIC, recently converted into the Anne Matthews Trust, in Mid Wales, a critical learning and resource centre.*

# The Queer House Party: Solidarity and LGBTQI+ Community-Making in Pandemic Times

Francesca Romana Ammaturo  
and Olimpia Burchiellaro

23 February 2021

LGBTQI+ persons are among the already marginalised groups most disproportionately affected by Covid-19, furthering isolation and lack of support.

A recent study by the Human Rights Campaign found that LGBTQI+ people are more likely to become unemployed as a result of the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The closure of LGBTQI+ bars and clubs,

---

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Campaign Foundation. 2020. The economic impact of Covid-19 on the LGBTQ Community. Human Rights Commission. [https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/COVID19-EconomicImpact-IssueBrief-042220.pdf?\\_ga=2.169186401.1174201493.1589206693-124555597.1585079069](https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/COVID19-EconomicImpact-IssueBrief-042220.pdf?_ga=2.169186401.1174201493.1589206693-124555597.1585079069)

many permanently,<sup>2</sup> has increased social isolation<sup>3</sup> and economic vulnerability. These spaces have always provided forms of support and community beyond the confines of heteronormativity. As a result of their closure, many of our LGBTQI+ friends – performers, bartenders, DJs, sex workers, organisers and activists – have seen their sources of income and wellbeing disappear. These are modes of livelihood and networks of survival that have taken years, if not decades, to build.

Whilst the pandemic has further threatened already precarious queer lives, new forms of sociality have emerged. Queer House Party,<sup>4</sup> a weekly virtual event which takes place on Zoom, is one such form of community-making which demonstrates not only the vulnerability but also the resilience and creativity of LGBTQI+ communities in times of crisis.

### The Queer House Party

Queer House Party is organised and hosted by LGBTQI+ activists and DJs from a flat share in South London, attracting around 400+ visitors from around the world every night. Founding member and resident DJ Harry Gay explains that Queer House Party started in the first week of the lockdown, as a way of

---

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, P. 2020. Several iconic LGBTQ+ venues in London are under threat of closure. *Dazed*, 30 October. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/50940/1/several-iconic-lgbtq-venues-in-london-are-under-threat-of-closure>

<sup>3</sup> Megarry, D. No date. 'I just want to talk to someone' – how Coronavirus is increasing isolation among older LGBTQ People. *Gay Times*. <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/life/i-just-want-to-talk-to-someone-how-coronavirus-is-increasing-isolation-among-older-lgbtq-people>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/queerhouseparty>

making some ‘extra cash’ and ‘getting our friends together.’<sup>5</sup> But after receiving over 1000 participants on the first night, they knew they were onto something bigger. Since then, Queer House Party has been providing much needed support for LGBTQ+ people whose (often primary) sources of income and sociality have been curtailed by Covid-19.

Each event features DJ sets and performances by drag queens, drag kings, spoken word artists and/or dancers. Participants are encouraged to ‘tip’ the DJs and performers via PayPal, the link to which gets shared frequently on the chat throughout the night. Participants can also make a ‘donation’ upon registering for the events, all the profits of which are shared amongst the performers and organisers. The parties have also been occasions to fundraise for various projects and campaigns, from The Outside Project<sup>6</sup> – an LGBTQI+ homeless shelter – and Black Lives Matter UK,<sup>7</sup> to Cybertease<sup>8</sup> – a virtual strip club run by a sex workers’ union – and the Dalston Superstore hardship fund.<sup>9</sup> Harry explains that ‘the past nine months have shown that once again queer people cannot rely on government support and most take care of each other.’<sup>10</sup> Indeed, although many have been left behind by the inadequate government furlough scheme – which privileges

---

<sup>5</sup> Sims, A. 2020. Meet the Londoners behind online club night Queer House Party. *Time Out*, 12 August. <https://www.timeout.com/london/things-to-do/meet-the-londoners-behind-online-club-night-queer-house-party>

<sup>6</sup> <https://lgbtiqoutside.org>

<sup>7</sup> <https://blacklivesmatter.uk>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cybertease.co.uk>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/dalston-superstore-hardship-fund>

<sup>10</sup> Gay, H. 2020. Queer people have had to rely on each other this year, and Christmas is no exception. *Novara Media*, 25 December. <https://novara.media.com/2020/12/25/queer-people-have-had-to-support-each-other-this-year-and-christmas-will-be-no-exception>

professional forms of employment – Queer House Party demonstrates that solidarity is key to our collective survival.

One of the most important aspects of Queer House Party is the feeling of community it provides. A recent survey conducted by the LGBT Foundation found that many LGBTQI+ people are currently living in unsafe domestic situations, with severe impacts to mental health and emotional wellbeing.<sup>11</sup> This exposes the limits of the government mantra of ‘stay safe’ by ‘staying indoors’ especially given the Conservative government’s cuts to domestic abuse services over the last decade.<sup>12</sup> Many comments on the chat throughout the night express a sense of gratitude for having found such a space, for having been rescued from yet another evening alone and/or in the company of homophobic flatmates/parents. Whilst Queer House Party cannot replace the provision of publicly funded services and social safety nets, it can provide increasingly isolated members of the LGBTQI+ community with an opportunity to socialise and to connect with others.

Queer House Party has also revolutionised how we think about accessibility in LGBTQI+ and virtual spaces more broadly. All parties provide BSL interpretation, audio description and captioning for deaf and blind members of the LGBTQI+ community. This enables many who wouldn’t normally be able to attend an LGBTQI+ venue in London to participate. As others

---

<sup>11</sup> LGBT Foundation. 2020. Hidden figures: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on LGBT communities in the UK. LGBT Foundation, May. <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/lgbt-website-media/Files/7a01b983-b54b-4dd3-84b2-0f2ecd72be52/Hidden%20Figures-%20The%20Impact%20of%20the%20Covid-19%20Pandemic%20on%20LGBT%20Communities.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Sisters Uncut. 2019. Under a Tory Government, domestic violence victims will continue to die. *The Guardian*, 11 December. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/11/conservative-government-domestic-violence-victims-die>

in this series have noted, failure to consider the experiences of those with disabilities in government responses has resulted in various setbacks to hard-won rights.<sup>13</sup> Putting accessibility at the centre of its events and mission, Queer House Party highlights the importance of paying attention to experiences of disability in the way we manage and respond to the pandemic. This has the potential to extend beyond the virtual to push for more accessible LGBTQI+ venues, many of which continue to remain inaccessible despite government legislation.<sup>14</sup>

### What can we learn?

So, what can we learn from Queer House Party to better inform and democratise responses to the Covid-19 pandemic?

Firstly, Queer House Party underscores that Covid-19 has exacerbated ongoing inequalities. Whilst over the past decade positive representation of LGBTQI+ people has been lauded as a sign of emancipation, this is clearly not enough. Here, the DIY, grassroots and defiant forms of radical resistance embodied by Queer House Party can really make a difference. The struggle to democratise our responses to Covid-19 must address ongoing systems of inequality, making the links between current challenges and decades of cuts to essential public services. The forms of marginalisation that Queer House Party seeks to redress are but a

---

<sup>13</sup> Adam, R. and Kusters, A. 2020. Deaf people and Covid-19: On hard-won rights and shifted priorities. *Involve*, 27 October. <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/deaf-people-and-covid-19-hard-won-rights-and-shifted-priorities>

<sup>14</sup> Godfrey, C. 2017. These LGBT clubbers say they feel shut out of the scene because they are disabled. *Buzzfeed News*, 5 August. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/chrisgodfrey/these-lgbt-clubbers-say-they-feel-shut-out-of-the-scene>

continuation of the struggle for radical inclusion which extends beyond the recognition of things such as same-sex marriage.

Secondly, in responding to the social and economic challenges posed by the virus it is important that we continue to centre the voices of those who are most vulnerable. Queer House Party shows us the fight for disability justice, for sex workers' rights, for economic justice and healthcare justice are intrinsically queer struggles. Queer House Party reminds us of the importance of building solidarity across movements and between categories of people that share a history of marginalisation by virtue of their non-normative economic, social, political or sexual practices.

Finally, many have already drawn parallels between the AIDS epidemic and Covid-19.<sup>15</sup> Whilst there are obvious differences, both shed light on how outbreaks disproportionately impact what Steven Thrasher terms, 'the viral underclass – a class of people who are systematically put in harm's way',<sup>16</sup> as well as the alternative forms of life and community that can emerge in the midst of a deadly virus. LGBTQI+ communities are well-positioned to teach us more about the practices of resistance and alternative forms of life that can emerge from times of crisis.

*Francesca Romana Ammaturo is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Human Rights at the University of Roehampton, focusing on the study of LGBTQI+ rights and social movements in Europe.*

---

<sup>15</sup> Tensley, B. 2020. Lessons the AIDS epidemic has for Coronavirus. CNN Politics, 5 April. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/05/politics/coronavirus-aids-hiv-sarah-schulman/index.html>

<sup>16</sup> Thrasher, S. 2020. Thinking AIDS, thinking Covid-19: Political responses, necropolitics, and marginalised populations. Buffett Institute for Global Affairs, 21 April. <https://buffett.northwestern.edu/news/2020/lessons-we-canand-cantapply-from-hiv-aids-to-covid-19.html>



***Olimpia Burchiellaro** is a Leverhulme Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Westminster, working on an ethnographic project on the politics of homocapitalism in the global South.*



# Student Democracy in the Face of Covid-19

Isobel Walter

25 March 2021

Unrest from students has exposed a gap in government support for universities throughout the pandemic, and a very limited acknowledgement of students' unique issues.

Students have lost out in a range of areas: accommodation contracts, payment for services not received, academic assessment. Mitigations have been put in place for other groups, where university students have been neglected. With each stage of the pandemic, trust has been broken between students and universities; and between students and government.

As Covid-19 has affected student experience, it has also shifted the ground of student democracy, at times in exciting directions and in ways that may have significant effects on democratic involvement by students in the long term.

## University decision-making

As one of a number of elected Student Executive Officers of Leeds University Union (LUU), the democratic voice of students has been key to our collaborations with the University as we have all tried to respond to the pandemic. The rapid changes throughout the past year have necessitated close working between the Students' Union and the University, as decisions which might have previously taken months or even years to implement have been quickly rolled out. We have really felt the value of our voice in meetings with members of the University Executive Group, Council and Senate, amplifying the experience of students. We are all going through things we have never known before and could never have predicted. It feels like this has had a positive impact on how our voice in these meetings is not only listened to but incorporated into decision-making. This is a win for student democracy and it will be important for us to reflect on how the student voice can be sustained post-Covid.

## Student participation

As student representatives, we have had to work creatively to gather the insights to inform this advocacy for students. We've obviously done a lot of online work through specific platforms and surveys which supplement anecdotal feedback, and trends spotted by our advice teams. This has helped us reveal frequently asked questions and recurring concerns.

LUU is particularly well-known for, and proud of, its Better Forums.<sup>1</sup> Years back we radically altered our Union democracy.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.luu.org.uk/student-voice/submit-an-idea>

Any student can submit an idea which is presented to a panel of 16 randomly selected students to consider and vote on whether it should become Union policy for the following three years. We've had to run these forums online for a year now, and we've discovered a lot of benefits to this new format. Use of the chat function has enabled lots of contributions from the Student Reps and members of the Exec in attendance, and many students presenting ideas found speaking online more accessible and less daunting. It has also aided time keeping for the Forum Facilitator which hopefully makes the forums more appealing for students to attend. Running our Forums digitally presents additional opportunities for sharing the discussions and outcomes more widely with the rest of the student body. More students can attend as observers, without the same impact of overwhelming the panel or idea holder which might have been the case had we crowded the physical space. I'm optimistic that running our forums digitally, and continuing to explore the flexibility, convenience and accessibility which online engagement provides, will drive increased interest in the Union's democratic processes.

## Campaigning

A final area of student democracy that has increased this year is campaigning. I'm hesitant to celebrate this activity, as whilst it is exciting to see students becoming more politically engaged, this is born out of frustration with their situations. Where students are angry at how their time at university has been affected by the pandemic, they are looking for ways to influence and improve this experience. Coming into the second term, we saw increased noise across social media from students supporting

two campaigns: Cut the Rent Leeds,<sup>2</sup> which is calling for better support for students who are paying rent for accommodation; and Save Our Grades,<sup>3</sup> which is demanding sufficient mitigation of the compromises to their academic studies. Again, political activity has moved online, in the form of petitions, open letters and social media campaigning.

On a national scale, students are also questioning whether they have received value for money this year. I am hearing repeatedly from students who are challenging how their tuition fees are being spent, when their access to campus facilities and face-to-face teaching has been severely limited. Ultimately, many students feel like they are not getting the service which they are paying for and were expecting, yet they are not protected by the same rights as most consumers enjoy.

### **Rebuilding trust**

We should not underestimate the challenge of involving students in decision making going forward, after many have felt so ignored. Delays or gaps in government support for students has driven a rift between students and their universities. Students not only need to be given opportunities to contribute to short, medium and long-term Covid-19 response, they must see actions as a result. Rebuilding trust between students and their universities must be a priority, and the limitations that Covid-19 has exposed by years of marketisation of the higher education system need to be challenged.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/cuttherentlds?lang=en>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.luu.org.uk/campaigns/protecting-your-grades>

***Isobel Walter** is the Union Affairs Officer at Leeds University Union for this academic year, one of seven elected student executive officers. Isobel studied English Literature and Theatre Studies at the University of Leeds and graduated in 2020.*





# Experts by Experience: Enabling the Voice of Survivors to Transform the Response to Domestic Abuse in the UK

Martha Tomlinson

22 April 2021

Covid-19 has upended everything. Domestic abuse is a major social problem at any time. But during a pandemic that restricts people's capacity to leave the home, vulnerability to abuse is intensified and the provision of support for victims becomes even more challenging.

SafeLives is a UK-wide charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse, for everyone and for good.<sup>1</sup> We work with organisations across the UK to transform the response to domestic abuse. We want what you would want for your best friend. We listen to survivors, putting their voices at the heart of our thinking. We look at the whole picture for each individual and family to get the right

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://safelives.org.uk>

help at the right time to make families everywhere safe and well. And we challenge perpetrators to change, asking ‘why doesn’t he stop?’ rather than ‘why doesn’t she leave?’ This applies whatever the gender of the victim or perpetrator and whatever the nature of their relationship.

To realise these ambitions, we work directly with the SafeLives Pioneers (a name they adopted themselves) – a group of survivors who have come together to use their experience and passion to change the world. Their personal experiences and insights inform everything we do and together we aim to transform the response to domestic abuse in the UK.

One of our Pioneers explains how survivors of abuse ‘should feed into decisions because they are the experts by experience ... by gathering the experience of survivors and understanding their reality an appropriate and realistic response can be formulated’.

Another adds: ‘Sadly, inter-agency partnership doesn’t always work as it should, and the impact and consequences these failures have on the lives of those victims during their most vulnerable time can have long-term and devastating consequences. Only those with lived experience are able to provide that much needed first-hand knowledge of what it is like from a victim’s perspective when things aren’t necessarily working as they should.’

When Covid-19 hit, we quickly identified the increased risks and focused on three priorities: keeping individuals and families safe during increased isolation, supporting staff and frontline practitioners, and ensuring the sustainability of specialist domestic abuse services.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://safelives.org.uk/news-views/domestic-abuse-and-covid-19>

From the start of lockdown, we established rolling surveys to hear directly from survivors and frontline services about the challenges they were facing and the support they needed.<sup>3</sup>

Survivors tell us that almost two-thirds have not asked for help since Covid-19 restrictions, most commonly because they were finding it difficult to reach out for support as a result of lockdown restrictions or felt let down previously by professionals. Three-quarters have concerns about their mental health and over a half, concerns around finances or fears for the safety of their children.

Specialist domestic abuse services have told us about their escalation in caseloads, most caused by an increase in clients being referred, but also because of staff absences. One in ten believe they had unsafe staffing levels; over a third that their ability to deliver a safe service has been compromised.

Drawing on these findings, we have worked with survivors to shape services that recognise the additional challenges that Covid-19 generates.<sup>4</sup> One Pioneer highlights the ‘incredible opportunity of being invited to speak at the “Hidden Harms Summit 2020” hosted by the Prime Minister. I spoke alongside an IDVA [Independent Domestic Violence Advocate] explaining how vital the role of an IDVA is. Within days the Ministry of Justice announced that IDVAs would have immediate access to court listings which they had been fighting for, for months. A real win!’

Another speaks of the importance of the surveys and interviews that have informed their work within the police and SafeLives. ‘The result was “Ask for ANI” which felt impactful and proactive.’ Ask for ANI (pronounced Annie), a codeword scheme rolled

---

<sup>3</sup> SafeLives. 2020. SafeLives’ survey of survivors of domestic abuse June 2020. SafeLives, June. <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20at%20Home%2020200615.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> SafeLives. 2020. Impact Report 2019–2020. SafeLives. <https://www.safelivesimpact.co.uk>

out by the Home Office into pharmacies in 2021.<sup>5</sup> It enables anyone experiencing abuse to indicate the need for emergency police response or help to find support. ANI stands for ‘Action Needed Immediately’.

These are just two examples of the ways in which the powerful insights of survivors have been brought to bear on decision-making during the pandemic. Their perspectives have informed other actions, including the regular Covid-19 calls hosted by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and the Ministry of Justice; the successful lobbying alongside sector partners that led to emergency funding from government; ensuring schools are a safe place for frontline providers to deliver work with children and young people; and conducting risk assessments for reopening community-based services.

SafeLives will continue to work to ensure that the voices of victims and survivors are heard, during the pandemic and beyond. We need to respond to their insights if we are to end domestic abuse. As one of our Pioneers stresses: ‘Those with lived experience should be at the heart and centre of all decision-making processes, both at national and local levels. They should be consulted at the very beginning and have continued input throughout the entire process. Their powerful voices should be heard and listened to.’ Another makes the simple observation: ‘We know the reality as we have been or are living it.’

*Martha Tomlinson has been a Research Manager at SafeLives since June 2018 after originally joining as Senior Research Analyst a year previously.*

---

<sup>5</sup> SafeLives. 2021. SafeLives comments on the new Ask for ANI codeword launch. SafeLives, 19 January. <https://safelives.org.uk/Ask-for-ANI-launch>

# The Best Time to Start Involving the Public in Covid Decision- Making Was a Year Ago. The Next Best Time is Now

Jon Alexander

26 April 2021

This piece starts, I'm afraid, with an unfortunate truth: the Covid crisis is nowhere near over, either globally, or here in the UK.

As WHO Special Envoy Dr David Nabarro put it on Sky News on 20 April, it is 'not a case of if but when' new variants in parts of the world 'beat the protection' offered by current vaccines.<sup>1</sup> There are indeed concerns this may already be the case with the variant now tearing through the Indian population.<sup>2</sup> That is not to be a complete harbinger of doom – it should be quicker to adapt

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/SkyNews/status/1384402068115439616>

<sup>2</sup> Roberts, G. 2021. Q+A: Indian coronavirus variant – what is it and what effect will it have? The Conversation, 20 April. <https://theconversation.com/q-a-indian-coronavirus-variant-what-is-it-and-what-effect-will-it-have-159269>

vaccines to new variants than create them from scratch – but even if vaccines can largely keep pace with mutations, Covid is almost certainly here to stay.

A recent survey for the influential journal *Nature* found that 89% of experts said it was either likely or very likely that it would become endemic in the human population.<sup>3</sup> If Covid is here to stay, that means social distancing in some form or other is here to stay; and that will have huge implications for everything from working patterns to spectator sport to public transport to ... well, everything.

This situation could have been avoided if the political response to Covid had from the very beginning been to involve the public in decision-making. This, after all, is exactly what happened in Taiwan, the country with the world's most successful response to the virus.<sup>4</sup> Their 'Fast, Fun, Fair' approach saw the government share information with citizens completely transparently from the very beginning; work from a precautionary principle, for example to shut down flights early and ensure PPE stocks were in place; and open the doors for all citizens to contribute their ideas, energy and resources to what has been explicitly characterised as a national team effort.<sup>5</sup> My favourite example is the creation of a simple telephone hotline which any citizen could call into and offer their ideas to improve the national response, with ideas from

---

<sup>3</sup> Philips, N. 2021. The coronavirus is here to stay – here's what that means. *Nature*, 16 February. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00396-2>

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, J. 2020. The nation you're not allowed to learn from. Medium, 4 May. <https://jonjalex.medium.com/the-nation-youre-not-allowed-to-learn-from-340d54498a16>

<sup>5</sup> Tang, A. 2020. A thousand-year-old dark room can be illuminated by a single lantern. *Involve*, 20 November. <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/thousand-year-old-dark-room-can-be-illuminated-single-lantern>

all kinds of people adopted, including a six year old boy. The net result is that a nation of 23 million people has, even today, fewer than 1200 cases and only 11 deaths, from the duration of the pandemic. There has been no national lockdown.

This is why I say the best time to start involving the public was a year ago. But as with the famous proverb about the best time to plant a tree being 20 years ago, the next best time is now.

If a Taiwan-style nation-as-team approach were adopted now, it might still be possible to eliminate Covid. But the core of the challenge at this point is perhaps different: arguably, we need to be talking about adaptation as well as elimination. Our lives are changing forever in this time, not just temporarily, and it is no longer possible to stop that from being the case. What is still possible, however, is to involve us all in deciding how to adapt, tapping the ideas and energy of everyone in figuring out how to make the best of this situation.

I for one can imagine possible paths forward that could be very positive indeed. We could cultivate a much more distributed, localised society, which would be much more resilient to Covid, but could also rebuild the sense of belonging and community that so many have come to lack in recent decades. We could have renewed motivation to create a nation without poverty: such a nation would be much less likely to see pockets of infection grow and proliferate as a result of people not being willing or able to acknowledge their sickness through fear of loss of income. New working patterns, if consciously designed, could give parents more time with children and all of us more time to contribute to and benefit from the communities of which we are part.

My point is not necessarily that this is what should happen, but that this is just me, one citizen, thinking off the top of my head. Imagine if we could bring together the ideas of all 60 million of

us in the UK, and structure that into a conversation that could inform government targets and ambitions, as well as triggering a groundswell of projects and initiatives that faced into the new future. Such a conversation could combine mechanics such as open idea generation platforms, citizens' assemblies, matched crowdfunding, and more – all tools and processes that are tried and tested, and proven to contribute to political legitimacy and trust as well as generating better ideas and greater social impact by virtue of tapping into more (and more diverse) brains.

When the pandemic hit, my company the New Citizenship Project<sup>6</sup> (in collaboration with Involve) was in the early stages of designing just such a participatory process on the issue of climate change, albeit on the much smaller scale of the island of Jersey. Despite the pandemic, we are now well under way, and it is working just as we hoped, if not better, creating real, island-wide engagement with the climate emergency.<sup>7</sup> When you involve people, you offer them agency in a situation; they respond by stepping up.

If we cannot go that far straight away, perhaps we could at least bring a deliberative element into the decision-making. I first called for the creation of a 'Covid Citizens' Reference Panel' a year ago.<sup>8</sup> This would see a randomly selected, statistically representative group of citizens called together – a lot like jury service – to deliberate on, respond to and inform government decision-making, perhaps on a monthly basis, representing the wider citizenry in

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.newcitizenship.org.uk>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.climateconversation.je>

<sup>8</sup> Alexander, J. 2020. Now is the time to stand up as champions of deliberative democracy. *Liberal Democrat Voice*, 27 April. <https://www.libdemvoice.org/now-is-the-time-to-stand-up-as-champions-of-deliberative-democracy-64275.html>



the process, and providing a first step towards true participatory decision-making.

The alternative is what we have today and have had for the last year: a Covid response that is rooted in a political system that is in turn predicated on politicians making decisions for us, rather than with us. This may have yielded a so-far successful vaccine roll-out in this country, but it has also yielded over 120,000 deaths compared to Taiwan's 11, and created a situation – with two years' worth of local, as well as mayoral, Welsh and Scottish elections looming – where there is a frankly huge incentive for our government to keep hidden from us the true nature of the challenges we face, and pretend everything will soon be OK.

This path cannot sustain much longer. The best time to step off it was a year ago. The next best time is today, and then the next day, and then the next.

***Jon Alexander** is Co-Founder and Director of the New Citizenship Project, a consultancy business on a mission to catalyse the shift in the dominant story of the individual in society from Consumer to Citizen. He is also a member of the OECD's Innovative Citizen Participation Network.*



## PART TWO

### **Lessons for Democracy**



# Hearing Diverse Voices in a Pandemic: Towards Authentic Inclusion

Ruth Ibegbuna

As the latest phase of lockdowns come to an end in the UK and more people step semi-vaccinated and blinking into the sunlight, feeling hopeful that something resembling their previous lives may return, there is an increasing focus on creating meaning from the year that was. The pandemic already feels like a mythical occurrence that stopped the world in its tracks and held us all spellbound as we tallied the rising numbers. The vaccines, the furloughed, the excluded, the unemployed, the dead.

Too often political leadership has been out of touch in part because it fails to reflect the diversity of society; it fails to land its messaging effectively or to 'read the room' at times of turmoil. The global pandemic arrived, further exposing divisions and pressurised fault lines of UK society. We share space on a relatively small

island and yet so many lives are unseen, unheard and unrepresented. We need to drive forward with increasing diversity in our decision-making. To stand still on this at a time when the world again begins to move would be real folly.

In lockdown, vision narrowed and priorities came closer to home. The things we missed were the things we wanted back first. Many clapped for NHS workers and felt better about their show of solidarity, while ignoring the details about what overworked and underpaid means. Nurses were labelled heroes, with no public discourse around their right to fair pay and safe working conditions. It is easy to feel sorry, harder to create or embrace change. It is easy to undertake small acts of kindness, without engaging in what structural difference and inequality means. We have experienced years of social fragmentation in this country, now exacerbated by social isolation. Finding new ways to knit the country back together, finding new ways to simply start a conversation between different groups, finding new ways to listen to new and different voices will take courage and commitment.

The pandemic taught us a lot about who we are. We saw our faith in established political leadership tested and instead we relied on the kindness and support of those living close by. The concept of ‘community strength’ came roaring back into fashion and was discussed in starchy language at the House of Commons. No longer the ugly step-sister of a strong society or a booming economy. It was community that kept us afloat, visited our elderly parents, fed our hungry children and ensured that fear, grief and loneliness did not consume us.

Forced back into our homes, we turned online and discovered newfound gratitude to those workers who became ‘essential’. The delivery drivers, the supermarket staff, the carers and domestic

workers whose minimum-wage jobs were elevated into the rarefied space of 'heroic'. Our mainly working-class workforce kept the country moving. Whilst most of us stopped and stayed at home, safe, behind walls and under masks, others had few options and ensured that the country kept calm and carried on.

### **Lockdown, leadership, London and localism**

The pandemic quickly assumed a rhythm reliant on traditional hierarchies. We watched each night as white men in suits spoke at us, from London lecterns. We avidly consumed the news and combed social media for contrasting data that could give us the more positive information we craved. Participation rates were initially low in decision-making. This was a time of 'command and control' leadership; obey, listen and live, the experts are talking. The very real sense of fear and disorientation ensured that the population complied. The model did not keep pace with the persuasion of social media and the rising levels of paranoia as many increasingly doubted what they heard.

Even pre-pandemic, this was a time of complexity in our relationship with our institutions. The trust and dependency of previous eras has been eroded slowly and changed the way that many think. Faith in experts has been shaken and there is a greater degree of cynicism when asked to believe the institutions empowered to uphold social order. Our trust in politicians, the church, the police, the media and others charged with shaping our society is at an all time low. When 'truths' arrive from these sources, they are widely doubted and often hotly disputed. The UK is not unique in this shift but in times of crisis this feels more unwieldy and therefore carries more risk.

The distant, directive national feel can be contrasted with a slower, emerging genuine sharing of power and responsibility that happens more often at a local level and has been witnessed most profoundly in the way that we organised ourselves to visit the vulnerable and feed those shielding. Major Tom's efforts in raising millions for the NHS may have lifted the nation and provided a welcome media distraction from the rising death toll but everyday there were untold heartfelt stories of ordinary people doing extraordinarily kind things to support their friends, neighbours and complete strangers.

Black and Asian communities watched with increasing unease, as from the outset it was clear that disproportionate numbers from minority communities were dying from this disease. At a time when the country was hearing the rallying cries of 'Black Lives Matter' and watching thousands take to the street to demand racial equity and social justice, it felt incongruous that there was so little discussion around the very real elephant in the room. Black and brown people were dying first and fast.

In Manchester, the Caribbean and African Health Network (CAHN), a grassroots community group, watched with consternation at the high levels of infection in the Black community and also the high level of scepticism around vaccination. The group worked hard with Black doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals and ran community sessions and an online webinar,<sup>1</sup> attended by over 1000 people and supported by the government's chief vaccines officer, Nadhim Xahawi. The grassroots saw the need and responded quickly and effectively. The national government on this occasion recognised that this was a direct way to

---

<sup>1</sup> CAHN. 2021. Covid-19 vaccines and the Caribbean and African community. CAHN, February. <https://www.cahn.org.uk/covid-19-vaccines-report>



communicate with a group facing increased risk and attended the event, adding kudos to the efforts of a small hardworking group of community-focused individuals.

Hearing diverse voices means proactively seeking them out. If decision-making is to work for all then we must listen harder and make space at the top tables for a diversity of thought, to allow varied life experiences to permeate. The presumption in times of real crisis is that one message must fit all. What then happens if the outcomes differ and intersecting factors such as race, age, geography, social class significantly affect life chances? The inclusion of those with knowledge, lived experience and trust from more vulnerable communities is key to transmit life-saving messages more quickly and to ensure that information is appropriately tailored. There have been examples in the UK and in other countries of institutions recognising that the credibility of the messenger is key to ensuring impact. Sharing the responsibility of delivering vital life-saving information to those working on the ground in communities can increase the chances of that message being adhered to.

In Berlin teams of outreach workers were enlisted to explain the dangers of Covid-19 to people who are often not reached through mainstream channels.<sup>2</sup> Multilingual migrant workers were deployed in ethnically diverse communities to communicate directly with those who may not have German as a first language and those who may not have close connections to health services in the city. The work led to the formation of an ‘Intercultural Education Team’. The aim was for the team to be able to break through the lack of communication for those who do not speak German

---

<sup>2</sup> MacGregor, M. 2021. Covid-19: The Berlin team spreading the word in the community. Infomigrants, 17 March. <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/30927/covid-19-the-berlin-team-spreading-the-word-in-the-community>

and to navigate past a distrust of institutions from many migrant communities who feel unwelcome in the country.

Many Northern towns spent most of the year in the highest tier of lockdown, watching the London media describe a ‘national’ picture of no relevance to them. Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham, temporarily dubbed ‘King of the North’, spoke for many at the time when he voiced what many were feeling. That their pain was less important and their stories of hardship remained unheard.

I don’t believe we can proceed through this pandemic by grinding people down. We need to carry them with us, not crush their spirit ... We are struggling. This pandemic has hit the North harder than it has other places because of the entrenched poverty in the North of England, because Westminster has neglected the North of England for too many years.

– *Andy Burnham*, 15 October 2020<sup>3</sup>

When communities feel excluded from the decision-making process, the sense of distrust, resentment and hurt intensifies. If we’re all in this together, it must look and feel so at all times. Fairness is critical. When communities are shut out of power at a time of peril, they will shout louder to disrupt a narrative that doesn’t work in their favour.

### **The true cost of structural inequalities**

We didn’t all share the same pandemic.

---

<sup>3</sup> Pidd, H. 2020. Ministers accused of being London-centric with Covid support. *The Guardian*, 22 October. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/22/government-accused-of-being-london-centric-with-covid-support>

Covid forced us to face up to inconvenient truths. The poorest, the oldest, those with disabilities and ethnic minorities faced increased hardship in every single way; through death, disease, unemployment, grief, risk and poor mental health.<sup>4</sup> These facts are brutal and undisputed. We are a hugely unequal society and if we are to have any hope of ‘Building Back Better’ or ‘Better Days Returning’ we can use the opportunity of the pandemic to commit to shifting the way we invite those outside in.

We are in a time when organisations, large and small, know intrinsically that participation is a desirable outcome. Participation of citizens in decision-making can make a difference but it must be done well. It takes time, effort and commitment to reach a point where people from diverse communities are brought into decision-making processes in a way that feels comfortable and effective. So many times I have witnessed energetic and well-meaning facilitation, usually from statutory agencies determined to drive forward levels of engagement. Jolly ‘ice breakers’, the liberal use of post-it notes and encouraging smiles all round as community members are invited to share their thoughts and contribute to the outcomes that everyone suspects have already been quietly agreed. The connection is fleeting and often transactional, rather than a deeper, more profound exploration of shared issues and solutions. We can change the ways that we offer communities opportunities to participate, so that we move away from ‘focus group fodder’ to engaged groups who can work together to source, share and lead solutions.

---

<sup>4</sup> Marmot, M. Allen, J. Goldblatt, P. Herd, E. and Morrison, J. 2020. Build back fairer: The Covid-19 Marmot Review. The Institute of Health Equity, December. <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review-full-report.pdf>

Participation can be seen as the solution to all possible challenges faced by the state. True, diverse voices can find new ways of approaching old problems. What they cannot do is unsettle entrenched systemic oppression and social injustice. There is a limit to the power of bringing new people into the same rooms, with the same mechanisms to affect old power dynamics. This often becomes frustrating for those invited in to participate who realise over time that their contribution is limited and that the depth of exploration of the issue is restricted. We have seen this recently with the emotive and overwhelmingly negative reaction to the 2021 report from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, which concluded that the UK does not have a systemic problem with racism.<sup>5</sup> No matter the diversity of voices in the room, there will be deep distrust, if not outright rejection of the conclusions, if there is the sense the participation is orchestrated to produce an outcome predetermined by the powerful.

One of the most memorable aspects of the pandemic occurred when ordinary people realised their collective power; for example, the campaign spearheaded by the footballer Marcus Rashford to ensure children on free meals continued to receive food during the school holidays. The government misread the mood and underestimated the public's ability to march into a moral chasm and do the right thing. Over an incredible 24 hours, organisations across all regions in the country stepped forward and committed to feed their hungry children. It was emotional, muscular and utterly grassroots. Communities realised that they could. Rashford's petition to end child food poverty, launched in October

---

<sup>5</sup> Olusoga, D. 2021. The poisonously patronising Sewell report is historically illiterate. *The Guardian*, 2 April. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/02/sewell-race-report-historical-young-people-britain>

2020, quickly gained over a million signatures.<sup>6</sup> It forced a second government U-turn with the announcement of the Covid winter grant scheme.

The issue mattered but so did localism. These were the children of somewhere and as the proverb states, it takes a village to raise a child. The ‘villages’ up and down the UK spoke. Despite the stress and financial burden of the pandemic, the UK prioritised feeding its children and proved that it would do so with or without statutory assistance. The undulating waves of support for the most vulnerable young people in the country provided hope at a time when many were struggling to source any elsewhere.

Without the amplification of committed celebrities, it was depressingly predictable whose voices were not heard. The extremely bleak Covid outcomes for disabled people received very little attention. Stories abound from support groups of those who were told, quite brutally, that they would be of low or no priority if they contracted the disease. With so many disabled people reliant on support from carers, the risk of transmission and the fear of infection was high and yet it seemed there was little concerted effort to centre these voices and provide additional layers of emotional, physical and economic support. Was there any recognition of how it may feel to hear a country sigh with relief in every news broadcast when they hear those who have died had ‘underlying health conditions’, when you are one of the millions in the UK who does?

Diverse voices in leadership help us with decision-making but also with tone and understanding the impact of messaging. In a crisis situation, allowances are made for clumsy actions and crude wording, but communities recognise when the playing field looks

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/554276>

alarminglly uneven. When Eid is cancelled with hours of notice but ministers cannot bring themselves to articulate that the same may happen at Christmas, people are aware. It matters. Situations like this are often excused in the moment but cultural memories are long.

When we talk of what we have learned as a country and how we have grown through this pandemic, again and again we come back to the untapped power of community. The fact that the invisible social contract that we hold with our neighbours is made visible. So many of us finally learned more about our neighbours and spoke (2 metres apart) to strangers in the street. We can create new bonds, and for a more healthy ecosystem, we should.

One of the most touching anecdotes I heard was that a young boy in the care system was told by his teacher that he was still allowed to attend school during lockdown because he'd been identified as 'valuable'. Just a small switch, from vulnerable to valuable tells a society so much about itself and this small story could be a microcosm of how we could do things better. Exiting lockdown and looking for real inclusion and ways to share power with those who have none. Taking more care over the labels we apply and the language we use could be a first step.

### **Towards authentic inclusion**

There is a need to unify the UK once more; to establish common goals for the common good. The period post lockdown is crucial for us to emerge with a shared sense of experience, and a collective desire to continue supporting others more vulnerable than ourselves. It would be so easy for this next phase to be a time

of accelerated individualism, where the frustrations of a year behind doors spill out into more than just hoarding toilet rolls. We must hold onto the best of what the pandemic illustrated, that we are more when we are one and when we work together to leave none behind.

Often those outside the corridors of power are more motivated, more efficient and more credible in communities than those formally designated to lead. We should now ask these local groups how the system can adapt to include them. For too long the implication has been that those outside must make some exceptional case to be let in and then, only let in for designated amounts of time to share expertise in their limited field.

When a deep crisis affects us all, it would be folly to expect a tiny number of London's great brains to contain all the wisdom, courage, connection, integrity, charisma and compassion needed to protect the whole of the country. We must give enough respect and resource to those trusted organisations and individuals delivering in our communities, every day, week after week. If we have learned anything from the past year, it should be that the heart, health and hope of the UK is dependent on us paying attention to the gradual erosion of care and attention to vulnerable communities. Expecting and accepting that some people must live in conditions that render them more susceptible to disease and death is simply not good enough. We are capable of collaborating, connecting and creating imaginative solutions for the short term – why not be bolder in our ambitions? Effective new participatory processes would allow more people to play a role in shaping services, voicing concerns, communicating with those furthest from view and ensuring that those out of sight are never out of mind.

We must move from talk of diversity into expectation of authentic inclusion. It is perhaps too much to expect old systems to create new ways and actually far more powerful to invite communities to design localised systems that work for them. For new minds to reimagine what a cohesive and compassionate community could look and feel like. If change is to happen we must be patient and forgiving and remember that it will take time for new robust inclusive participatory systems to emerge.

For institutions privileged enough to work alongside communities, there needs to be a recognition of power imbalance and then an intentional shift to share power. Institutions can learn deep lessons from communities by demonstrating some humility in admitting they do not have all the answers. The power of local knowledge and accrued wisdom can sit alongside the theory, expertise and resources needed to combat social harms. We run the risk of not heeding this opportunity for deep societal change. Covid has shown us our blind spots and how easy it is for malign forces to exploit them when powerful systems are merely top-down and centralised.

Covid could leave us with a legacy that we focus on a community's strength rather than its needs. Imagine the difference that boy felt on being told he was valuable after a lifetime of being described as a burden. Deficit thinking about so many in society is unnecessarily corrosive. There are strengths everywhere and Covid has shown us that a supermarket delivery driver can also be a lifesaver. Let's celebrate that.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Monika Neall for her support in writing this essay.



***Ruth Ibegbuna** is a social entrepreneur and founder of the youth charity RECLAIM, as well as The Roots Programme and Rekindle School. Ruth campaigns alongside young people and their communities for greater social justice and to remove the stigma faced by many disadvantaged communities.*



# Mutual Aid and Self-Organisation: What We Can Learn from the Rise of DIY Responses to the Pandemic

Matt Leach

I met a woman who had not eaten in three days. It was then that I realised we needed to get to work.

– *Community volunteer*, Big Local area

When Covid-19 arrived in Brinnington in Greater Manchester, the community was ready.<sup>1</sup> Well before Stockport Council arrived on the scene, local people, working out of the Brinnington Community Hub, had organised themselves, started putting together food supplies, identified those who were most at risk in their neighbourhood and delivered help where needed. Strong community spirit, a building in their own control, and a small amount

---

<sup>1</sup> Local Trust. 2020. Covid-19: Prioritising the physical and mental health of the community. Local Trust, 25 March. <https://localtrust.org.uk/news-and-stories/voices-of-big-local/community-matters-more-than-ever>

of funding meant they could make an immediate difference, when it was needed most.

They weren't alone. In mid-March 2020, as offices shut, transport paused, and shops, cafes and businesses started to close their doors, across the country, local people sprung into action: organising, coordinating, and implementing immediate DIY responses to the pandemic.

Overwhelmingly, this was spontaneous and of the moment – action organised over Facebook or WhatsApp groups by people who felt they needed to do their bit; or by existing community groups and organisations redefining themselves on the spot, and making use of their networks and resources to kickstart action in their local neighbourhood.

People didn't wait to be asked – they got straight to work organising and tackling practical challenges posed by the spreading pandemic and associated lockdown. From reaching out and supporting the lonely and isolated, keeping spirits up<sup>2</sup> and community facilities open, and ensuring people got fed,<sup>3</sup> the activities and initiatives were as varied as the places in which they were implemented. In total, across the United Kingdom, some 4,250 mutual aid groups were reported as having established themselves in the first weeks of the crisis.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Local Trust. 2020. A lens on lockdown with 'the Godfather of Black British photography'. Local Trust, 7 August. <https://localtrust.org.uk/news-and-stories/voices-of-big-local/community-photography-project-in-lockdown>

<sup>3</sup> Local Trust. 2020. Blackburn Community Unites to Fight Holiday Hunger. Local Trust, 29 October. <https://localtrust.org.uk/news-and-stories/voices-of-big-local/blackburn-community-unites-to-fight-holiday-hunger>

<sup>4</sup> Cooney, R. 2020. Analysis: What does mutual aid mean for the charity sector? Third Sector, 15 May. <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/analysis-does-mutual-aid-mean-charity-sector/volunteering/article/1683331>

This seemed to reflect the national mood, as people focused on community and neighbourliness and the Prime Minister announced ‘there is such a thing as society’. A survey undertaken by Onward at the time showed that 61 per cent would check on a neighbour and another 48 per cent would deliver groceries to someone in need.<sup>5</sup> Within local government, faith in the value of community organisations hit an all-time high.<sup>6</sup>

This was more than a cosmetic celebration of community spirit and voluntarism. For a moment, whilst more formal institutions struggled initially to organise, mobilise and respond, the power to make decisions and define and deliver critical local services de facto shifted. Community-based organisations and initiatives filled the gaps where traditional structures fell short. Indeed, the failure of a large-scale government-backed volunteering initiative served to highlight the advantages that grassroots volunteer-led activity could offer when compared to top-down models of involvement and participation.<sup>7</sup>

In many ways, therefore, the early stages of the Covid crisis presented a real-world test of the assertion that local people have the potential to take on a greater role in making decisions and delivering solutions for themselves in areas of activity that had previously been the responsibility of more formal institutions; and a practical exploration of opportunities and challenges that might

---

<sup>5</sup> Tanner, W. and Blagden, J. 2020. Research note: Covid-19 and community. Onward, 30 March. <https://www.ukonward.com/covid-19-and-community>

<sup>6</sup> New Local. 2020. Councils’ economic confidence plummets but faith in community hits all-time high. New Local, 28 May. <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/press-releases/councils-economic-confidence-plummets-but-faith-in-community-hits-all-time-high>

<sup>7</sup> Hodder, B. and Telegraph Readers. 2020. NHS volunteer army left disappointed: ‘I’ve been on duty for 568 hours and received no jobs’. *Telegraph*, 24 April. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/04/24/nhs-volunteer-army-left-disappointed-duty-568-hours-received>

arise from a rebalancing of responsibilities and power between individuals, community and the state.

So what lessons were learnt from that explosion of community activity in spring–summer 2020? To what extent was what happened a demonstration of community DIY in the moment, or something built on foundations that may have pre-existed in some communities prior to the crisis? And how might this inform our approach to ‘building back better’ as we slowly emerge from the worst of the pandemic a year later?

### **The crisis through the lens of Big Local**

One way to begin to answer these questions is learning from the Big Local Programme. Local Trust is the delivery agent for the programme, working closely with resident-led initiatives in 150 Big Local areas. The neighbourhoods were selected in 2010–2012, on the basis that they suffered from higher-than-average levels of deprivation and had missed out on their share of previous lottery or other public money, and were often starting from a position of having lower than average levels of community activity and participation. Each received £1.1 million in National Lottery grant funding over 15 years to spend on improving their local areas.

Whilst this represents a relatively small-scale investment year on year per head of the local population, what makes this funding different is that the money is placed directly in the hands of local residents, enabling them to spend the funds to improve the area on their terms, on their timeline, and in whatever ways they see fit. The aim of the programme is as much to support the development of community self-organisation, confidence and capacity in areas where it was considered to be lacking as to fund specific initiatives or types of activity.

Over the past year, Local Trust has followed the impact of the pandemic on Big Local communities, and sought to learn from the hyperlocal, DIY responses that emerged during the pandemic. This has included commissioning a major external ‘real time’ study of the impact of Covid on local communities<sup>8</sup> and our own in-house recording and analysis of interactions with those active within Big Local neighbourhoods.<sup>9</sup> As well as informing Local Trust’s own work, our hope has been that this research will provide some insight into the emergent models of community power that have sprung up at a local level during the crisis, their interaction with more formal institutions, and the lessons that can be learnt when considering how we can ‘build back better’ post-Covid.

### **The importance of pre-existing community organisation**

Perhaps the key (and, in retrospect, unsurprising) insight from the pandemic was that the explosion of community-led initiative in the early days of the crisis did not emerge out of thin air.

Neighbourhoods which already had active community organisations around which activities could be focused and co-ordinated were the ones most likely to have the tools and resources to quickly put in place plans, harness local voluntary endeavour and provide robust mutual aid-based responses.

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research-communities-responding-to-covid-19>

<sup>9</sup> Local Trust. 2021. A year of the pandemic: Reflection from communities on the front line. Local Trust, 22 March. <https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/a-year-of-the-pandemic>

The pre-existence of well established, community-led activity enabled rapid organisation and action when the pandemic struck, often at a much faster pace than achieved by statutory authorities.<sup>10</sup>

It took the council four weeks to get set up; we were up and running already.

– *Community worker*, Big Local Area

Many Big Local partnerships, after working in their neighbourhoods for a number of years, had built up a strong foundation of local social infrastructure. As community-level institutions with long-term support to grow and develop, they often had built deep knowledge of what works in their communities, and already had the infrastructure in place to address many of the issues that were exacerbated by the pandemic.

By way of comparison, evidence has emerged that in deprived areas with low levels of pre-existing social infrastructure, voluntary mutual aid activity has been less prevalent throughout the pandemic. These areas also received less than half the Covid-related funding per head of the population when compared to other equally deprived communities. It seems likely that there just weren't the networks and organisations to apply for the funding.<sup>11</sup> As the pandemic wore on, it appears that neighbourhoods without a strong presence of community-led groups and

---

<sup>10</sup> Locality. 2020. We were built for this: How community organisations helped us through the coronavirus crisis – and how we can build a better future. Locality, June. <https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/We-were-built-for-this-Locality-2020.06.13.pdf> p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> Left Behind Neighbourhoods. 2020. Communities at risk: The early impact of Covid-19 on 'left behind' neighbourhoods. Left Behind Neighbourhoods, 20 July. <https://www.appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk/publication/communities-at-risk> pp. 33–35.



organisations continued to be less well-equipped to coordinate volunteers and ensure support for vulnerable residents.<sup>12</sup>

It did not seem to matter much what sort of civic activity existed prior to Covid, more that something was there. For example, in the excellent Common Vision/Gulbenkian report,<sup>13</sup> the value of community arts groups beyond their creativity is well captured:

It's the fact that the [local arts] group exists as a fairly secure social entity that then allows it to be used in a time of crisis for all sorts of things.

Looking at Big Local areas, during the crisis we saw much the same phenomenon. Where they existed, hyper-local organisations were capable of reinventing themselves on the fly to meet the challenges facing their communities, repurposing activities and focusing on meeting need.

### **Places to meet and organise**

Access to spaces to meet, self-organise and coordinate activity seems to have been another critically important element underpinning many communities' responses. During the pandemic many of these community-owned or accessible places came into their own, serving as food distribution centres but also as venues for informal drop-in sessions for those feeling isolated and alone,

---

<sup>12</sup> Philipson, C. Yarker, S. Doran, P. Buffel, T. Lang, L. and Goff, M. 2021. Covid-19 and social inequality: Developing community-centred interventions. Policy@Manchester Blogs: Growth and Inclusion, February. <http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/health/2021/02/covid-19-and-social-inequality-developing-community-centred-interventions>

<sup>13</sup> Macfarland, C. Agace, M. and Hayes, C. 2020. Creativity, culture and connection: Responses from arts and culture organisations in the Covid-19 crisis. Covi. [http://covi.org.uk/dev4/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Creativity-Culture-and-Connection\\_Common-Vision-report\\_September-2020.pdf](http://covi.org.uk/dev4/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Creativity-Culture-and-Connection_Common-Vision-report_September-2020.pdf)

safe spaces for more formal mental health provision, and places where those struggling financially could receive income support. Where such buildings were closed, this significantly affected communities' ability to mount and sustain their response to the crisis.

In Thircroft Big Local in South Yorkshire, The Hub, built from scratch by the resident-led partnership in 2017, provided a much-needed focal point. Having access to storage, equipment, and a place to coordinate the distribution of food donated by local supermarkets made for an effective local response. The kitchen was repurposed to provide hot meals for thirty-five people four times a week. In all, it provided the necessary infrastructure to make sure vulnerable residents were identified and cared for throughout the pandemic.

The importance of community hubs to the success of local communities is something that has been long recognised. Before the crisis, there were an estimated 1,650 hubs in England, each of them providing an open and accessible space and vital services for local people. They vary in terms of size, ownership model, assets, staffing and income, with many of them facing challenges – even before the pandemic – in relation to their viability and sustainability.<sup>14</sup>

The absence of places to meet is a key factor in defining areas that have been 'left behind'.<sup>15</sup> When given control over use of resources, many communities prioritise access to places to meet

---

<sup>14</sup> Trup, N. Carrington, D. and Wyler, S. 2019. Community hubs: Understanding survival and success. Local Trust, 19 July. <https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/community-hubs-understanding-survival-and-success>

<sup>15</sup> Local Trust. 2020. Communities of trust: Why we must invest in the social infrastructure of 'left behind' neighbourhoods. Local Trust, December. <https://www.appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk/publication/communities-of-trust-why-we-must-invest-in-the-infrastructure-of-left-behind-neighbourhoods>

– and the majority of Big Local areas have sought to establish or build relationships with community centres over the years, thereby providing a base for local, resident-led activities, services and actions.

### **Pre-existing partnerships and networks helped get things up and running quickly**

Pre-existing networks and partnerships between communities and external agencies seem to have been another factor that was key to local areas' capacity to provide a co-ordinated community-led response to the pandemic. Research from the Third Sector Research Centre has shown that, compared to areas with less established relationships, Big Local communities that were well plugged into local networks were quicker-off-the-mark in mobilising in collaboration with other agencies to meet residents' needs during lockdown.<sup>16</sup>

We describe the network as an ecology of relationships. They were there before Covid, during Covid and they'll be there after it too.

– *Community worker, Big Local area*

The most effective responses in local communities were often where local residents, local authorities and voluntary and social sector organisations worked together, especially in areas where shared and collaborative working relationships had already been put in place before the crisis struck.

---

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, M. McCabe, A. and Macmillan, R. 2020. Rapid Research Covid-19: Blending formal and informal community responses. Local Trust, August. <https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/COVID-19-BRIEFING-4.pdf>

As time went on, there were examples of ‘triage’ structures emerging, with community-based organisations helping to coordinate resources and volunteers for local authority and social sector projects.<sup>17</sup> Tang Hall Big Local in York, for example, was already part of York Council’s hub network and a trusted local partner. The council understood that the Big Local partnership had expertise in local issues, and thus could solve them more efficiently than any outside body. In Firs and Bromford, Birmingham, the Big Local partnership, a community development agency Open Door and youth charity Worth Unlimited were already collaborating effectively before the pandemic hit. This meant vulnerable residents were quickly identified and supported in the first few days of lockdown.

In many Big Local areas, it has been reported that relationships between community-level organisations and external partners have strengthened as a result of the pandemic. The challenge identified by many is to build on the gains that had been made, and sustain them beyond the period of immediate crisis.

### **Leadership, representativeness and sustainability**

One aspect of the explosion of community-level activity in response to the pandemic that was noticeable by its absence was any significant discussion of representativeness, accountability or democracy – something that otherwise often dominates discourse around community power.

Community-led responses to Covid were often self-started by groups of individuals perhaps loosely linked by existing involvement in community-level activity, or negotiated between existing

---

<sup>17</sup> <https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/a-year-of-the-pandemic>

organisations based on capacity, reach and perceived levels of trust. Having been supported in establishing themselves over a number of years, many Big Locals had already made a name for themselves in their communities, and so were often trusted to broker networks at a neighbourhood level. And drawing on personal relationships and status to make connections between people and groups – as opposed to formal power structures – was often key to their success.

This enabled groups of people who are vulnerable or who often fall through the net to be catered for and, through local knowledge, provided a level of coordination of volunteer efforts, which avoided duplication of services. Their knowledge of the community made them best suited to tap into any local action, often more successfully than was achieved by larger, more formal agencies (either national or local) who developed more centralised, ‘command and control’ approaches to mobilising and coordinating support.<sup>18</sup>

However, whilst levels of local engagement and community volunteer activity could be high, increasingly it became clear that many communities were relying on one or two key players to make decisions and coordinate activity, making operations incredibly fragile. Sometimes these workers were people with a particular necessary skill (for example, the correct food hygiene qualifications to prepare hot food); if that individual became incapacitated, the whole network buckled.

In other areas, active community members experienced in mobilising and coordinating action were older and therefore more vulnerable. Their activity was limited to what they

---

<sup>18</sup> McCabe, W. and Paine, E. 2020. Rapid research Covid-19. <https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Briefing-6-FINAL-1.pdf>

could do from home, making communication and decision-making more challenging. Concerns have emerged about the practicality of maintaining a volunteer-led system and about how long they could continue emergency response work. In Corby, many of those volunteering in the community during lockdown were on furlough from the local council, raising questions about how sustainable emergency Covid responses could be after formal lockdown ended and these staff returned to work.

Local Trust has invested significant resources in providing support to those involved in working in their communities, most commonly through peer-based support networks, but also through more individualised leadership training. However, in many areas, lead volunteers and workers have felt isolated and described the stress of keeping their communities safe as ‘unsustainable’. Later in the crisis more widespread reports of ‘burn out’ emerged, with a need to focus on self-care and personal recovery once the crisis was over.

### **What does this mean for community power?**

Covid-19 has potentially changed our community forever, but – if we get this right – it will be for the better.

*– Big Local resident*

Much discussion during the pandemic has focused on the differential health and economic impacts of the crisis. Far less attention has been paid to another axis of inequality – between those areas able to mobilise and engage to support their community through the crisis, drawing on external support where needed, and those unable to do so.

Research from New Local shows that the pandemic has opened the eyes of many to the potential of empowered communities, but especially those in the public sector who have been collaborating with them throughout.<sup>19</sup> They are coming to realise that allowing communities more power and agency is not just a policy option, but may become an absolute necessity.

The pandemic has certainly demonstrated that – at their best – community-led responses to crisis can be well targeted, agile and quick to mobilise.<sup>20</sup> Much of this is to do with the authentic relationships, local knowledge, volunteer capacity and area know-how that communities tap into and harness.

But – as experience in the pandemic has shown – community-led action tended to be most developed and effective in areas with a strong base of community activity before the crisis. Where social infrastructure was weaker and levels of pre-existing civic activity were lowest, mutual aid was a much less obvious feature of the response.

This suggests that alongside post-pandemic initiatives focused on economic ‘levelling up’, sustained investment in developing community capacity is needed. The objective should be to build hyper-local social infrastructure, including a density of civic institutions (of all sorts) and shared places for local people to meet, associate and organise. A campaign backed by over 400 civil society, local government and private sector organisations – the Community Wealth Fund Alliance – has called

---

<sup>19</sup> Lent, A. and Studdert, J. 2021. The community paradigm: Why public services need radical change and how it can be achieved. New Local, March. [https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Community-Paradigm\\_New-Local-2.pdf](https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Community-Paradigm_New-Local-2.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Pollard, G. Studdert, J. and Tiratelli, L. 2021. Community power: The evidence. New Local, February. <https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Community-Power-The-Evidence-FINAL.pdf>

on the government to commit the next wave of dormant assets to establish such a Fund.<sup>21</sup>

The ability to connect and engage, to develop relationships of trust, has been key to the success of community responses to the pandemic. This indicates a need on the part of the public sector to more clearly recognise the value of community organisations and the vital role they play in the ecology of local provision. They can sometimes be dismissed as lacking legitimacy because they are not part of formal democratic processes. However, community action is the fabric of democracy. At the community level, legitimacy comes from a group's long-term presence in an area, informal relationships based on trust and reciprocity and a track record of delivery. And, ways need to be found to support and enable those who choose to 'step up to the mark' and take on responsibility for making a difference in their community.

The pandemic provides a lesson in what sort of devolution deal is needed to strengthen community responses and to make society more resilient against future shocks which are as likely to be environmental as much as public health. It shows that strong communities are able to work effectively in partnership with the public sector in a crisis, reducing pressure on local government and making sure appropriate support gets to those most in need. Our experience of the pandemic signals that a new relationship needs to be negotiated between the public sector and communities, one in which the local authority plays an enabling role, supporting, promoting and connecting community responses. In effect, what we need is to shift power to communities, since they have shown that they can rise to the challenge.

---

<sup>21</sup> <https://twitter.com/CommWealthFund>



***Matt Leach** is Chief Executive of Local Trust, a National Lottery community Fund-endowed charitable trust delivering the Big Local programme in 150 communities across England.*



# How the Pandemic Has Accelerated the Shift Towards Participatory Public Authorities

Donna Hall, Simon Kaye and Charlotte Morgan

The response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the worst and most prolonged emergency in recent UK history, has revealed a startling capacity for rapid adaptation on the part of many communities and local institutions. This experience holds significant implications for how public authorities need to change if they are to adopt more participatory and deliberative approaches in the long term.

This essay is informed by a series of policy research projects on the role of communities and local authorities during the crisis, as well as long-standing experience of the organisational changes needed to embed and enable more participation within a locality.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For our most relevant research, see Kaye, S. and Morgan, C. 2021. Shifting the balance. *New Local*, January. <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Shifting-the-Balance.pdf> and Tiratelli, L. and Kaye, S. 2020. *Communities vs. Coronavirus: The rise of mutual aid*. *New*

Civil liberties and formal democratic rights have undoubtedly been one of the victims of the Covid-19 pandemic. Whole sectors have had to respond with little time to talk, few ways to convene in the public sphere, and little room for debate in such a life-or-death situation. At the same time, some kinds of participation have blossomed. The avenues for directly engaging with public authorities have become more limited, but digital approaches and new networks have seen some institutions become more open and inclusive than before.

‘Co-production’ between citizens and public services, and direct individual involvement in the life of local communities have both, in many places, become more of the norm. Successfully partnering with communities that have been newly mobilised by the pandemic has required a culture-shift: a transformation within public authorities to embrace different ways of getting things done.

### Local vs. National

One finding is quite clear from the experience of the pandemic: where national-scale responses and centrally organised schemes frequently ran into difficulty in the UK, localities and local institutions often succeeded.<sup>2</sup> Our country’s centralism – disregarding the capabilities of non-central institutions, designing policies that are not effectively adapted for implementation in different places – have held back its crisis response.

---

Local, July. [https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Communities-vs-Coronavirus\\_New-Local.pdf](https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Communities-vs-Coronavirus_New-Local.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> A salutary example lies in the relative performance of national contact tracing approaches compared to local alternatives – see Iacobucci, G. 2020. Is local contact tracing the answer?. *British Medical Journal*, 17 August. <https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m3248>. An alternative approach could have seen locally-embedded public health experts take the lead on track-and-trace systems.

The exigencies of the Covid-19 pandemic placed visible strain on our over-centralised systems of government and decision-making. A combination of one-size-fits-all policy-making created suboptimal results and administrative overload within Whitehall and Westminster, slowing the pace. National policies were made at a gradual pace that arguably led to more loss of life as opportunities for early intervention were missed.<sup>3</sup> International lessons on the infrastructure and capacities needed to contain the spread of the virus were also learned at a slow pace.<sup>4</sup> Public health messaging – though effective – was often informed by an outdated understanding of the measures required,<sup>5</sup> magnified unintended consequences,<sup>6</sup> and positioned members of the public as powerless avoiders-of-risk rather than active participants in emergency response.

In contrast to the outpouring of productive voluntarism that played out in localities, attempts by national government and institutions to organise ‘volunteer armies’ – such as via the NHS ‘GoodSAM’ app which was intended to dynamically match volunteers to requests for help – yielded minimal results. While this approach was obviously well-intentioned, its failure is not particularly surprising. Why should we expect successful

---

<sup>3</sup> British Medical Journal. 2020. UK’s response to Covid-19 ‘too little, too late, too flawed’. *British Medical Journal*, 15 May. <https://www.bmj.com/company/newsroom/uks-response-to-covid-19-too-little-too-late-too-flawed>

<sup>4</sup> Ham, C. 2021. The UK’s poor record on Covid-19 is a failure of policy learning. *The British Medical Journal*, 1 February. <https://www.bmj.com/content/372/bmj.n284>

<sup>5</sup> Feng, S. Shen, C. Xia, N. Song, W. Fan, M. and Cowling, C. 2020. Rational use of face masks in the Covid-19 Pandemic. *The Lancet*, 20 March. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30134-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30134-X/fulltext)

<sup>6</sup> Illman, J. 2020. Coronavirus response could create ‘very serious unintended consequences’. *HSJ*, 5 April. <https://www.hsj.co.uk/policy-and-regulation/coronavirus-response-could-create-very-serious-unintended-consequences/7027321.article>

organisation of neighbourhood-scale, hyper-local volunteering via a massive, central system?

As we discuss below, voluntary and mutual aid efforts have flourished at local scales, particularly where local authorities looked for ways to enable such work in contextually appropriate ways. Different approaches taken in the devolved nations may have played an important role here – normalising long-term thinking and community engagement, and incentivising healthier and longer-standing frameworks for such approaches to a far greater extent than in England.<sup>7</sup>

Councils often found local ways to deliver effective public health messaging, opening productive new channels of communication between citizens and the local state. Barking and Dagenham Council deployed locally well-known figures in its communications, Newcastle City Council ventured onto TikTok to help reach younger residents, and Birmingham City Council created a dedicated campaign to help engage on the specific issues created by the pandemic among BAME, disabled, and LGBTQ+ communities.<sup>8</sup>

To some extent the centre's failings have been the product of the same brute logistical problems that also deepen the challenges for programmes of more involved citizen participation at the national scale. This is a populous, diverse, and complex country: not an easy system to influence from the very centre, and not an easy system to adequately represent. Traditional representation seldom genuinely captures the views or understands the relevant experiences of all those who are said to be represented. More deliberative approaches may help at this whole-nation

---

<sup>7</sup> Kaye and Morgan. *Shifting the balance*, pp. 46–61. <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Shifting-the-Balance.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> See the 'Councils Respond' series curated by Charlotte Morgan for these and other examples <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/tag/councils-respond>

scale, but still depend upon models of representation in order to function. Traditional vote-aggregation, meanwhile, massively oversimplifies questions of policy or politics, but can at least make it plausible for whole publics to express a (highly framed, highly domain-limited) view.

An alternative solution to the ‘there are too many of us’ logistical problem for democracy is one that is startlingly underexplored in the UK. Localism and subsidiarity could allow for a more full-blooded, co-productive and participatory kind of citizenship to flourish. Yet the UK remains perhaps the most centralised country of its size and complexity in the world.<sup>9</sup> This is an under-discussed aspect of our country’s democratic deficit. While some decisions and objectives should clearly be set at this larger scale – and entail a meaningful degree of democratic involvement from citizens – the prospects for inclusive and deep participation are magnified. Many decisions could thus be better made, at a more local level.

### **The local democratic paradox**

Within circumstances that necessitated the suspension of elections and limited people’s right to gather for peaceful protest or demonstration, we have nevertheless seen the increase of some kinds of democratic engagement at the local scale. This is a local democratic paradox: more open and engaged public

---

<sup>9</sup> For a summary of the UK’s comparative centralism, see Hawksbee, A. and Kaye, S. 2021. Smart devolution to level up. Commission for Smart Government, March. <https://www.governsmarter.org/smart-devolution-to-level-up>. In recent years different aspects of the UK’s outlier status in this regard have been identified by IPPR, the UK 2070 Commission, and the Treasury itself.

authorities amid historic limitations on everyone's ability to be physically present.

The crisis catalysed the creation of new participatory networks and, broadly, a greater institutional willingness to reach out to and seek input from communities who are less often heard. In some places this has taken the form of experimentation with more direct or deliberative approaches. The London Borough of Newham's decision to trial a standing citizens' assembly from May 2021, for example, has been explicitly identified with the need to address inequalities highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

Councils have proven willing to experiment, finding new routes to include communities in important conversations. Manchester City Council created a dedicated telephone helpline to assist digital participation during the pandemic, while North Ayrshire supported local businesses to assist digital inclusivity.

In many cases these new avenues of engagement were made possible by the rapid growth in use of remote and digital tools. Sheffield City Council set up online workshops with communities to involve them in local response planning. Such was their success that the council is continuing to hold the workshops

---

<sup>10</sup> Newham London. 2020. New era of 'People Power' in Newham to boost democracy and participation. Newham London, 22 October. <https://www.newham.gov.uk/news/article/526/new-era-of-people-power-in-newham-to-boost-democracy-and-participation>. 'The Covid-19 pandemic has both highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities and injustices, creating further barriers to democratic participation. The disproportionate impact on some populations – in particular black and minority ethnic communities – has been acutely clear, including in Newham. Addressing this democratic deficit is central to our determination to create an environment where people no longer feel disconnected from the decisions that affect their lives.'



to inform its new ‘dialogue-based approach’ to service design and delivery.<sup>11</sup>

Several local deliberative forums adapted and continued through the pandemic by adopting digital practices. The Camden Health and Care assembly switched to digital for all but its first session in 2020, and Lancaster’s People’s Jury on climate change was taken wholly online, holding evidence sessions, hosting discussions, and publishing a detailed set of recommendations in November 2020 which have since been committed to by the council.

Clearly, the viability of these participatory approaches is contingent on local institutions’ adoption of digital and remote working practices. But it is perhaps unsurprising that these developments have coincided with a notable uptick in public satisfaction in and trust of local institutions.<sup>12</sup> Such shifts are playing out in the context of declining faith in institutions, low turnout, and comparatively few formal avenues for participation<sup>13</sup> – a low starting point from which to measure – but nevertheless indicative of a shift in the relationship between citizen and state.

Councils’ ability to adopt participatory innovations and digital practices during this time has been made possible due to the removal of some important institutional blockages at the national scale. The long-held and widespread ambition to allow remote

---

<sup>11</sup> Kaye and Morgan. *Shifting the balance*, p. 34. <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Shifting-the-Balance.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Local Government Association. 2020. *Resident satisfaction with councils’ response to Covid-19*. Local Government Association, May. [https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Resident Satisfaction Covid 19 Report June 20.pdf](https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Resident_Satisfaction_Covid_19_Report_June_20.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> See 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2020-trust-barometer> and the 2019 Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/reports/audit-of-political-engagement-16>

attendance at council meetings was finally realised in 2020 by hasty legislation designed to keep local systems working. The success of this approach in some places – in achieving more transparent and inclusive practices overall – has led to calls to ensure that the change is made permanent. Ironically, any such change in England will need to be approved by the UK Government: further evidence of our over centralised norms.

### **Local participation – and the culture-shift needed to make it work**

Community participation has been an indispensable part of the pandemic response, and the diversity of functions assumed by established civil society organisations, voluntary groups, and self-organising mutual aid speaks to the broader re-imagining of citizens' roles that emerged amid the crisis.

The most important relationships for communities have been 'vertical', in the sense that councils often hold an effective 'make-or-break' role when it comes to the impact of participatory action in times of crisis.

The thousands of spontaneous, voluntary mutual aid groups that emerged during the earliest stages of the first national lockdown were powered by an enormous new 'workforce': people whose usual livelihoods had been rendered untenable by the necessity of economic paralysis. Rapid analysis suggests that these highly informal groups were able to operate more nimbly and flexibly than existing public service structures.<sup>14</sup> By identifying need in the community, organising grocery purchase and delivery, and

---

<sup>14</sup> Tiratelli and Kaye. Communities vs Coronavirus. [https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Communities-vs-Coronavirus\\_New-Local.pdf](https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Communities-vs-Coronavirus_New-Local.pdf)

ensuring that medication found its way to those who required it, the entire ‘shielding’ policy for the most vulnerable people was arguably delivered through the voluntary efforts of such mutual aid groups.

In many places, however, these efforts were stymied by the stance of established institutions. The best results appear to have emerged where councils struck a moderate balance between the poles of laissez-faire disinterest and well-intentioned micro-management. Some groups, because of their informal and rapidly emergent nature, struggled with formal aspects of the work that they took on, such as guaranteeing the safety of volunteers or managing funds.<sup>15</sup> In such cases, a degree of guidance and facilitation – and indeed direct resourcing – could constitute critically important interventions from the council. Councils that have helped community groups to thrive are those that have made space for them to develop organically, set up grant schemes to assist their activities, and supported them to resolve logistical and bureaucratic challenges.

In other cases, however, heavy-handed public authorities crushed the efforts of mutual aid groups during the pandemic.<sup>16</sup> Threading this needle was not a matter of luck, but of experience: places and councils with a culture favourable to participation and community power found themselves in a stronger position. Often, the different approaches adopted by councils was predetermined by factors that predated the pandemic crisis. Previous experience

---

<sup>15</sup> It should also be noted that many mutual aid groups demonstrated an extraordinary ability even in these areas, establishing their own safety schemes, data protection approaches, arranging internal helplines for volunteers, and organising sophisticated ways to handle money.

<sup>16</sup> Tiratelli and Kaye. *Communities vs Coronavirus*. [https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Communities-vs-Coronavirus\\_New-Local.pdf](https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Communities-vs-Coronavirus_New-Local.pdf)

of and investment in community development and existing strong ties with voluntary and civil society groups were both predictive of facilitative public institutions during the pandemic.

For many councils, the demands of the pandemic have proved to be the foundation of a more participative and open approach. Councils, civil society organisations and businesses were all required to adopt collaborative and innovative approaches at high speed. These collaborations gave rise to innovative practices and long-awaited shifts in the way institutions get things done, such as experiments in internal collaboration and institutional openness in Kingston upon Thames, and direct collaboration with voluntary and community groups to run hubs for neighbourhood service delivery in North Ayrshire.<sup>17</sup>

### **A different relationship between citizen and state**

This was not only about adopting the digital tools that allowed communities to self-organise and engage in new ways. For many councils, working so closely with the third sector and communities to respond to Covid-19 lockdowns has produced an epiphany of sorts. In a real life-or-death public health emergency, the traditional siloed, hierarchical and bureaucratic ways of working in the public sector fell apart. In its place emerged a more collaborative culture and a more agile model of service delivery, both of which have produced tangible successes and allowed councils to rediscover the value of listening to communities.

In some places these are lessons which had already been learned long before the start of the pandemic. Localities where councils

---

<sup>17</sup> Kaye and Morgan. *Shifting the balance*, p. 34. <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Shifting-the-Balance.pdf>

and institutions had already invested time and effort into community development and engagement found themselves to be far more resilient when this latest crisis descended.

The experience of Wigan – and the ‘Wigan Deal’ model for revitalising the local relationship between citizen and state – is a well-researched and commonly-cited example of how listening to communities, embedding integrated, pan-public service, and place-based neighbourhood teams, and institutional culture-change over a sustained period can prepare a council and a community for crisis.<sup>18</sup>

The Deal takes the form of an explicit social contract, describing a more active relationship between the council and communities, and extending to incorporate all local public services. Conscious movement of residents from the role of passive recipient to active citizen is at the heart of this approach: it is literally a ‘deal’ that both sides will step up in new and different ways to create a more balanced and participatory norm. The results speak for themselves. Healthy life expectancy increased by seven years within Wigan’s most deprived communities following the introduction of the Deal. Numbers of looked-after children fell by 10%.<sup>19</sup> The same period saw an overall increase in institutional trust in the area, with public approval of the council rising even during a time of heavily constrained finances.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> See Wigan Council’s explanation of the Deal approach <https://www.wigan.gov.uk/Council/The-Deal/The-Deal.aspx>

<sup>19</sup> Hall, D. Brown, A. and Gagliani, M. 2019. ‘Tight on values, loose on delivery’: Donna Hall on leading The Deal in Wigan. Centre for Public Impact, 22 May. <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/insights/tight-values-loose-delivery-donna-hall-leading-deal-wigan>

<sup>20</sup> Pollard, G. Studdert, J. and Tiratelli, L. 2021. Community power: The evidence. *New Local*, 23 February, p.73. <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/community-power-the-evidence>

Several good practice lessons emerge from this example of a public authority's pivot towards more open and participatory working. Though often dismissed as a 'soft' variable within the context of public services, the council's ability to unify behind a shared vision and communicate it in a clear and consistent way proved to be important. Analysis from The King's Fund suggests that 'clarity and constancy of purpose' over many years were key to achieving many of the Wigan Deal's benefits.<sup>21</sup>

Wigan's experience also shows how investment in community infrastructure can be crucially important for participatory working – and highly compatible with wider efficiency. The council invested over £13 million in a Community Investment Fund to shore up the infrastructure at the foundation of local communities, as well as transferring assets such as swimming pools, community centres, and libraries to new more directly accountable models of community delivery in neighbourhoods.

The ongoing success of the Wigan Deal rests upon the creation of a meaningful dialogue between the council, local institutions of many kinds, and residents. These sometimes take the form of consultation processes, but these are more full-blooded than is usually the case when a local authority consults the public. In drawing up plans for the Borough through to 2030, the council engaged in a 'Big Listening Project' involving 6,000 people.<sup>22</sup>

Changing the culture and expectations of institutions in Wigan, especially within the most resistant parts of partnerships, took

---

<sup>21</sup> Naylor, C. and Wellings, D. 2019. A citizen-led approach to health and care: Lessons from the Wigan Deal. The King's Fund, 26 June. <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/wigan-deal>

<sup>22</sup> Centre for Public Impact. 2019. The Wigan Deal: A Case Study. Centre for Public Impact, 22 May. <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/case-study/the-wigan-deal>

time. A ‘BeWigan’ place-based organisational development programme was created to drive different, more asset-based conversations with local people across public sector agencies, based on attitudes and behaviour rather than just technical ability. Hosted by frontline workers, it tapped into the values and mindset of the place and ultimately supported public servants to be more innovative in how they worked.

While many areas benefited from the emergence of spontaneous new mutual aid groups during the first national lockdown, places like Wigan saw existing community action groups repurpose at speed to deliver essentials for hundreds of shielding households.<sup>23</sup> Such efforts were greeted by an already highly facilitative local state, rather than the scepticism or micro-management evident in other parts of the country. Rather than react to a crisis with an instinctive need to assume control and micro-manage the response, places with this history and civic infrastructure saw councils step further back and make space for genuine community leadership.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Perhaps the most striking effect of the pandemic for public authorities was its ability to remove the usual barriers that

---

<sup>23</sup> See Clarke, G. 2021. Volunteers continue delivering food and books to Wigan residents during a pandemic. *Wigan Today*, 30 March. <https://www.wigantoday.net/news/people/volunteers-continue-delivering-food-and-books-to-wigan-residents-during-pandemic-3182023>

<sup>24</sup> See Clarke, G. 2021. Cut-price community grocery to open in Wigan to help shoppers affected by pandemic. *Wigan Today*, 18 February. <https://www.wigantoday.net/news/people/cut-price-community-grocery-to-open-in-wigan-to-help-shoppers-affected-by-pandemic-3138878>; Kaye and Morgan. Shifting the balance, pp. 36–37. <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Shifting-the-Balance.pdf>

prevent more open and participatory relationships with the communities that they serve. If lack of time and opportunity were the greatest obstacle for citizens, the economic paralysis and furlough schemes brought on by lockdown changed the equation. If an overly bureaucratic, risk-averse, and insular culture was the primary barrier for councils and public services, then the urgency and scale of the crisis itself created all the incentives needed for new approaches to emerge.

These special conditions will fade as the pandemic passes and our economic and social recoveries become the main story. It is crucial that the innovations that they gave rise to do not fade with them. This is doubly true given the arguably greater challenges that await us in coming years. Economic and environmental resilience can both be strengthened by the kind of hyperlocal thinking that emerged at speed in response to the pandemic.<sup>25</sup>

Two core themes emerge from the examples discussed in this essay which could be helpful for the cause of strengthened participatory and democratic culture as we emerge from the pandemic.

First, there is raw and, particularly in England, essentially untapped value in localism. A thicker kind of citizenship is possible at local scales. Part of our deeper crisis in public services and institutional legitimacy can be ascribed to our forgetting the local, and assuming that the kind of minimal, transactional, client-like relationships we have with the central state – at best supplemented by the occasional desultory consultation – are the

---

<sup>25</sup> See Tiratelli, L. 2020. Towards resilience: Redesigning our systems for a better future. New Local Government Network. [https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Towards-Resilience\\_Sep-2020.pdf](https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Towards-Resilience_Sep-2020.pdf); Webb, J. Stone, L. Murphy, L. and Hunter, J. 2021. The climate commons: How communities can thrive in a climate changing world. IPPR, 11 March. <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/the-climate-commons>



only game in town. As this crisis has reminded us, there are many towns where a very different game is underway.

Second is the idea of trust. In our experience and research we have seldom come across examples where a leap of faith on the part of a public authority has been punished. More often than not, communities step up – and are equipped with much needed tacit, contextual expertise. Our institutions nevertheless tend to operate on the assumption that community leadership or co-production are risk factors, rather than opportunities.

The experience of the pandemic could yet correct such assumptions, with the prize of a more collaborative and less infantilised citizenry than the one that first was told to enter lockdown in March 2020.

**Donna Hall** CBE is the chair of New Local and Bolton NHS Trust and honorary Professor of Politics at the University of Manchester. She was previously the CEO of Chorley Council and later CEO of Wigan Council, where she was the architect of the ‘Wigan Deal’.

**Simon Kaye** is a Senior Policy Researcher at New Local, specialising in democracy, self-governance, and the work of Elinor Ostrom. He has previously worked as Research Director at the Project for Modern Democracy and as an academic at King’s College London.

**Charlotte Morgan** is a Senior Policy Researcher at New Local, specialising in devolution and local government. She previously worked on devolution and Brexit strategy for Cornwall Council.



# Citizen Voice in the Pandemic Response: Democratic Innovations From Around the World

Antonin Lacelle-Webster, Julien Landry  
and Ann Marie D. Smith

Emergency measures in response to Covid-19 – such as stay-at-home orders, curfews, social distancing, and bans on gatherings and strategies to roll out vaccinations – raise questions about governance in times of crisis.<sup>1</sup> They have had far-reaching implications for civic space and for civil society actors working to strengthen transparency, accountability, participation, and inclusion in governance.<sup>2</sup> Amid this disruption, new forms of

---

<sup>1</sup> Brown, F. Z., Brechenmacher, S. and Carothers, T. 2020. How will the Coronavirus reshape democracy and governance globally? Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/06/how-will-coronavirus-reshape-democracy-and-governance-globally-pub-81470>

<sup>2</sup> Afsahi, A., Beausoleil, E., Dean, R., Ercan, S. A. and Gagnon, J. P. 2020. Democracy in a global emergency five lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.

participatory and deliberative governance offer both innovative channels for collective action and new windows to understanding how democratic values and principles can be put into practice in times of crisis: how individuals and communities can be engaged to manage and contain the spread of disease.

In this chapter we aim to make sense of these emerging practices, drawing on data collected by the Participedia project, a platform for crowdsourcing, cataloguing, and comparing participatory political processes around the world.<sup>3</sup> The essay draws on two Covid-19 related collections on Participedia. The first is collated by graduates of the Coady International Institute at St. Francis Xavier University in Canada, providing first-hand accounts of how organisations, networks, and communities responded in the first months of the pandemic to sustain or adapt their practices of transparency, participation, accountability, and/or inclusion in decisions.<sup>4</sup> The second collection investigates the use of deliberative processes to explore citizens' perspectives on the trade-offs inherent in public responses to the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> We can only

---

*Democratic Theory*, 7(2), v–xix. <https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2020.070201>; Barreto, M. B., Benedict, J., Leão, D., Mbataru, S., Narsee, A. and Van Severen, I. 2020. People power under Attack 2020: A report based on data from the CIVICUS Monitor. CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation. <https://civicus.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/GlobalReport2020.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://participedia.net>

<sup>4</sup> Participedia. Collection: Coady Institute Graduates. <https://participedia.net/collection/6495>; for a more thorough analysis of these cases, see Landry, J., Smith, A. M., Agwenjang, P., Blankson Akakpo, P., Basnet, J., Chapagain, B., Gebremichael, A., Maigari, B. and Saka, N. 2020. Social justice snapshots: Governance adaptations, innovations and practitioner learning in a time of Covid-19. *Interface: A Journal for and About Social Movements*, 12(1), 371–382. <https://www.interfacejournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Interface-12-1-Landry-et-al.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Participedia. Collection: Citizens voices and values on Covid-19. <https://participedia.net/collection/6501>. For a more thorough analysis of these cases, see Lacelle-Webster, A. 2021. Deliberative spaces in times of

scratch the surface of governance innovations around the world, but through these diverse cases we provide insights into how participatory and deliberative processes can enhance the political response to health and other emergencies.

### **Reconfiguring public space: New digital channels of participation**

Many of the measures implemented to limit the spread of Covid-19 have constrained the public sphere, forcing shifts in political mobilisation and organisation, as well as participatory and deliberative engagement. The pandemic is reconfiguring how individuals and communities engage in productive relationships with public authorities resulting in many new citizen-focused experiments that are reimagining decision-making processes in emergency contexts. With pandemic-related directives hindering effective face-to-face engagement, the global crisis has accelerated an ongoing trend towards digital governance and civic tech. These new processes demonstrate adaptability, creativity, and innovation in the use of technology to drive access, provide information, make and maintain connections, deliver services, enable participation and feedback, foster transparency and accountability, and spur further innovation.

Digital technologies have been used by governments and political leaders to gather information about public views and preferences or share information with the broader public. In the United States, online deliberative townhalls were organised with members of Congress to share information with their constituents and

---

emergency. Medium, 23 February. <https://participediaproject.medium.com/deliberative-spaces-in-times-of-emergency-fab50aa83bb7>

identify concerns in their district.<sup>6</sup> A digital platform was used in Scotland to gather public input on the approaches and principles that should guide public health measures.<sup>7</sup> Similar tools were used as part of broader engagement efforts in France around the development of a vaccine strategy<sup>8</sup> and in Bristol in relation to Covid recovery planning.<sup>9</sup> Governments, public health agencies, and other stakeholders have also leveraged digital practices such as virtual hackathons to crowdsource strategies in response to the pandemic. Taiwan is an illustrative case of a government that has embraced ‘civic tech hacktivists’ and digital innovation as an integral part of its highly effective ‘fast, fair, and fun’ approach to the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

Pandemic-induced technological innovations are increasing the reach of deliberative processes such as citizens’ assemblies that are usually conducted in-person, but the pandemic has forced organisers to rethink their structure and organisation. Both the Climate

---

<sup>6</sup> Participedia. 2021. Connecting to Congress: Online townhalls on the COVID emergency. Last modified 16 February. <https://participedia.net/case/6560>

<sup>7</sup> Participedia. 2021. Scottish crowdsourcing exercise ‘Coronavirus (Covid-19): Framework for decision making’. Last modified 3 March. <https://participedia.net/case/6667>

<sup>8</sup> Participedia. 2021. Citizens’ committee on vaccination against Covid-19. Last modified 15 April. <https://participedia.net/case/7380>

<sup>9</sup> Participedia. 2021. Bristol Citizens’ Assembly. Last modified 27 April. <https://participedia.net/case/7218>

<sup>10</sup> Tang, A. 2020. A thousand-year-old dark room can be illuminated by a single lantern. *Involve*, 20 November. <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/thousand-year-old-dark-room-can-be-illuminated-single-lantern>; Nabben, K. 2020. Hacking the pandemic: How Taiwan’s digital democracy holds COVID-19 at bay. *The Conversation*, 11 September. <https://theconversation.com/hacking-the-pandemic-how-taiwans-digital-democracy-holds-covid-19-at-bay-145023>

Assembly UK<sup>11</sup> and the French Citizens' Convention on Climate<sup>12</sup> – large scale randomly-selected bodies – had to rapidly move online and both held special sessions to consider the Covid-19 crisis and generate recommendations. The broader public engagement exercises discussed earlier informed the online deliberations of a 'citizens' committee' on scientific, logistical, and democratic challenges of vaccine distribution in France and Bristol's Covid-19 recovery plan. Similar online deliberative processes based on random selection have been organised on pandemic-related issues in Oregon,<sup>13</sup> West Midlands,<sup>14</sup> Nantes,<sup>15</sup> and Scotland.<sup>16</sup> These processes tend to rely on sessions that are shorter than face-to-face meetings, combining synchronous and asynchronous tools to engage participants in creative ways.

Alongside government-led initiatives, digital technologies have also been used creatively by civil society actors to adapt their work under pandemic conditions. The advocacy work on human rights and sexual and gender-based violence of Partners West Africa-Nigeria (PWAN) relied on remote engagement strategies (social media, call-in radio, televisions, website) to conduct its

---

<sup>11</sup> Participedia. 2020. Climate Assembly UK and the Covid-19 crisis. Last modified 17 November. <https://participedia.net/case/6671>; see also Allan, S. 2020. How we moved Climate Assembly UK online. *Involve*, 5 May. <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/project-update/how-we-moved-climate-assembly-uk-online>

<sup>12</sup> Participedia. 2020. Extraordinary online session of the Citizens' Convention on Climate: Finding a way out of the Covid-19 crisis. Last modified 15 May. <https://participedia.net/case/6550>

<sup>13</sup> Participedia. 2020. Oregon Citizens' Assembly on COVID-19 Recovery. Last modified 17 October. <https://participedia.net/case/7114>

<sup>14</sup> Participedia. 2020. Citizens' Panel West Midlands. Last modified 30 October. <https://participedia.net/case/7085>

<sup>15</sup> Participedia. 2020. Nantes Métropole Citizens' Convention. Last modified 21 December. <https://participedia.net/case/7180>

<sup>16</sup> Participedia. 2021. Scottish Parliament Citizens' Panel on COVID-19. Last modified 15 April. <https://participedia.net/case/7381>

awareness campaigns, bringing novel rights issues and violations to the fore, and ensuring Covid-19 safeguards for survivors.<sup>17</sup> Through online meetings and live media broadcasts with elected officials and leaders of community and national organisations, the Mombasa County Child Rights Network (MCCRN), a network of child rights advocates, enabled children and young people to voice their priorities, fears, and anxieties during the pandemic.<sup>18</sup>

Ensuring open communication and transparent relationships between decision-makers and the public is key to provide a foundation for generating public input, identifying discrepancies in the government response, developing and maintaining trust in government responses, and reducing the impacts of misinformation. In Nepal, for instance, Sharecast – a new media organisation working to promote citizen and audience participation online and through local radio – launched a nationwide survey and provided the national Covid-19 Response Task Force with data on people’s awareness of and attitudes to the virus, including public opinion and feedback on the government’s response.<sup>19</sup> Sharecast helped key stakeholders understand the public views about Covid-19 responses allowing them to better address public needs.

The shift to digital technologies presents trade-offs and ethical concerns about surveillance, discrimination, the digital divide, data sovereignty, and data privacy.<sup>20</sup> Such issues have themselves been

---

<sup>17</sup> Participedia. 2020. Rights awareness in Nigeria through virtual and media engagement during COVID-19. Last modified 22 May. <https://participedia.net/case/6554>

<sup>18</sup> Participedia. 2020. Emerging responses to children’s rights during COVID 19 in Mombasa, Kenya. Last modified 4 June. <https://participedia.net/case/6545>

<sup>19</sup> Participedia. 2020. COVID 19, Citizen’s pulse (A national survey on COVID 19-Nepal). Last modified 7 October. <https://participedia.net/case/6543>

<sup>20</sup> International IDEA. 2020. Taking stock of global democratic trends before and during the covid-19 pandemic. International IDEA, December. <https://>



the focus of deliberative processes, as with the use of contact tracing applications in New South Wales, Australia<sup>21</sup> and British Columbia, Canada.<sup>22</sup> Both sought to identify values and principles to guide the use of technologies within a particular political and social context. Yet, questions of power, responsibility and the ability to limit (e.g. prohibitive costs) or enable (e.g. access to a wider audience of rights holders) participation are also key factors in determining whether the digital public space is legitimate and meaningful. Through their experiences in the pandemic, practitioners recognise the ways in which online engagement can both exacerbate and ameliorate inclusions and exclusions. For example, online deliberative processes have been able to reach out to participants who would not usually be willing to attend face-to-face events but can be more transactional environments if not carefully curated.<sup>23</sup>

### **Disproportionate impacts and differentiated responses**

The pandemic is not blind to structural inequalities such as gender inequality.<sup>24</sup> On the contrary, it has exposed and intensified

---

[www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/global-democratic-trends-before-and-during-covid-19-pandemic.pdf](http://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/global-democratic-trends-before-and-during-covid-19-pandemic.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Participedia. 2021. Deliberative consultation on trade-offs related to using 'Covidsafe' contact tracing technology. Last modified 20 February. <https://participedia.net/case/6573>

<sup>22</sup> Participedia. 2021. Public input into pandemic planning: Deliberating tradeoffs in covid-19 policymaking. Last modified 27 February. <https://participedia.net/case/6585>

<sup>23</sup> Involve. 2020. Practitioners' network session: Pandemic practice progress. Involve, 15 October. <https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/Pandemic Practice Progress Report.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Grown, C. and Sanchez-Paramo, C. 2020. The coronavirus is not gender-blind, nor should we be. World Bank Blogs, 20 April. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/coronavirus-not-gender-blind-nor-should-we-be>

inequalities across societies. Alongside the disproportionate impacts on women and girls, the Participedia case studies point to adverse consequences for boys, persons living with disabilities, the elderly, the rural poor, and other vulnerable groups.<sup>25</sup> Advocacy for women's rights in Ghana by NETRIGHT, a national women's rights network, reminds us that engagement by 'governments has not been sufficiently broad or inclusive to ensure the voice and concerns of a majority of people – such as women and other vulnerable populations' – are heard, let alone responded to.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the efforts of MCCRN to address heightened sexual exploitation of both boys and girls is a recognition of the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on children, and an attempt to include their voices in decision-making around Covid-19.<sup>27</sup>

In Nepal, information from remote villages is typically slow in reaching those who govern, and the responsiveness, effectiveness, and quality of services provided to these communities suffer. The Community Self-Reliance Centre (CSRC), an organisation that advocates for landless and smallholder peasants, has worked with grassroot participation through Land Rights Forums (LRFs) to provide the government with real-time data and accurate information on Covid-19 from rural areas. This supported a more local response to overcome delayed communication and misinformation, which 'affects illiterate people from remote areas in particular and [has] increased health-related tensions in the country'.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> See also International IDEA 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Participedia. 2020. Advocating for women's inclusion in Ghana's COVID-19 Response. Last modified 19 May. <https://participedia.net/case/6551>

<sup>27</sup> Participedia. Emerging responses to children's rights during COVID 19 in Mombasa, Kenya. <https://participedia.net/case/6545>

<sup>28</sup> Participedia. 2020. Community addressing the impact of COVID-19 on landless farmers and smallholders in Nepal. Last modified 26 August. <https://participedia.net/case/6553>

These examples speak to the need for a differentiated response. However, many measures put forward by government and civil society too often overlook the ‘gender, racial, intergenerational, economic, and health inequalities’ exacerbated by the crisis.<sup>29</sup> As the crisis is rapidly evolving and requires government to make quick decisions, it is important to recognise the unequal ways different social groups are affected and to capture this plurality of experiences. For example, online forums were convened in South Australia to engage leaders from a range of culturally and linguistically diverse communities to prevent another wave of Covid-19. The initiative aimed at fostering a mutual collaboration and trust between the government and communities.<sup>30</sup>

While a number of deliberative processes have proven effective in bringing together representative cross-sections of populations in formats that allow them to identify issues and gaps in government responses that are sensitive to structural inequalities, the challenge is to do this in a timely fashion given the speed of response that may be needed in emergency conditions. This points to the need for such processes to be a more permanent or institutionalised element of our governance systems and for investment in civic infrastructure that enables socially and politically marginalised communities to organise and voice their perspectives.

---

<sup>29</sup> Afsahi, A. et al. 2020. Democracy in a global emergency. <https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2020.070201>

<sup>30</sup> Participedia. 2020. Covid-19 Culturally and linguistically diverse community forums: South Australia. Last modified 11 November. <https://participedia.net/case/7086>

## Community action, collaboration, and leadership

The pandemic has had far-reaching implications for national-level institutions, governance, and politics, especially in political systems that struggle with cultures of corruption. A case in point is Cameroon where the pandemic represents one of many crises. In the English-speaking regions, people have avoided government responses in favour of alternate pandemic programmes set up by civil society groups.<sup>31</sup> Sharecast's work in Nepal as well as the creation of deliberative processes are other reminders that public trust – based on accurate and timely information – is key to an effective response.

In cases where governments are not trustworthy, everyday people must contend with challenges around misinformation and misconceptions related to the virus. In Nepal and Kenya, for example, people turn to alternative and often unreliable sources of information for guidance, including traditional and religious authorities.<sup>32</sup> Misinformation can fragment the shared meaning that binds together communities and shapes both the perception of and the response to the crisis.<sup>33</sup> The Covid-19 crisis requires not just rapid, efficient, and transparent responses, but also ones that garner buy-in, trust, and legitimacy through community-based responses and processes.

---

<sup>31</sup> Participedia. 2020. COVID-19: Rethinking emergency preparedness and response in Cameroon. Last modified 30 July. <https://participedia.net/case/6544>

<sup>32</sup> Participedia. Community addressing the impact of COVID-19 on landless farmers and smallholders in Nepal. <https://participedia.net/case/6553>; Participedia. Emerging responses to children's rights during COVID 19 in Mombasa, Kenya. <https://participedia.net/case/6545>

<sup>33</sup> Rosenblum, N. 2020. The democracy of everyday life in disaster: Holding our lives in their hands. *Democratic Theory*, 7(2), 69–74, <https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2020.070209>

Local connections play a critical role in the capacity to respond to the crisis and many of the cases on Participedia are grounded in communities or initiated by local authorities. For example, Love in Action Ethiopia (LIAE), an organisation that seeks to empower the most vulnerable groups, has facilitated and mobilised community-driven responses to raise awareness, provide emergency supplies and address the needs of communities. Through Community-Based Covid-19 Task Forces, they worked with local and regional government offices in ways that foster the capacity of local governments and strengthen the collaboration across civil society and government at the local level.<sup>34</sup> Experiments with deliberative processes have also attempted to strengthen collaboration between communities and local and regional governments. A multi-pronged pilot project in British Columbia, Canada combined community conversations (self-facilitated online deliberation with friends and family) with small- and large-group deliberations.<sup>35</sup> The Nantes Métropole citizens' assembly included a 'mirror advisory group' of participants who discussed health measures and shared their concerns and observations directly with local elected representatives.<sup>36</sup>

A common theme in these stories is that success in responding to the pandemic depends upon collaborative efforts – often across sectors – whether built on existing relationships, networks, or partnerships, or requiring new initiatives to bring people and organisations together. In Nigeria, for instance, PWAN's prior

---

<sup>34</sup> Participedia. 2020. Community engagement for COVID 19 – Ethiopia. Last modified 11 November. <https://participedia.net/case/6557>

<sup>35</sup> Participedia. Public input into pandemic planning. <https://participedia.net/case/6585>

<sup>36</sup> Participedia. Nantes Métropole Citizens' Convention. <https://participedia.net/case/7180>

advocacy among law enforcement agencies and community leaders was critical in forging new relationships, allowing them to pivot their advocacy to a focus on Covid-19.<sup>37</sup> In Ethiopia in contrast, ‘government leadership, faith-based organizations and community actors have worked hand in hand unlike previous times.’<sup>38</sup> The collaborations forged by NETRIGHT in Ghana and the children’s organisations in Kenya are other cases in point. Similarly, governments have drawn lessons from past experiences that deliberative processes can foster citizen buy-in, trust, and legitimacy to adopt this form of engagement during the pandemic.

These cases show that leadership that comes from within communities and is shared among everyday people is central to effective responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. This type of shared leadership has not only been effective in responding to the pandemic, it is also an avenue to advance citizen participation in governance generally and to foster deliberative and inclusive democratic practice.

## Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted governance in many ways, in some instances for the better. The participatory and deliberative processes we have surveyed in this essay are a reminder that, across the globe, responses anchored in community participation and citizen voice have provided meaningful solutions and glimpses of hope. If structural inequalities are to be recognised and responded to, this multifaceted crisis requires approaches

---

<sup>37</sup> Participedia. Rights awareness in Nigeria through virtual and media engagement during COVID-19. <https://participedia.net/case/6554>

<sup>38</sup> Participedia. Community Engagement for COVID 19 – Ethiopia. <https://participedia.net/case/6557>

through which citizens' voices and values can shape collective responses. The diversity of practices and innovations recounted here reflects the versatility of deliberative and participatory democracy to do just that. These processes – whether driven by civil society and community groups, or by governments – attest to positive developments when they adapt or innovate spaces for citizen participation, deliberation, and organisation.

Many of these examples took place amid a diminishing civic space in many countries, in particular, for traditionally excluded groups. In such circumstances, deliberate and strategic steps are required to ensure the voices of various groups and communities are safely included, and their rights are upheld. In these shifting sands, trust, relationship-building, adaptability, flexibility, creativity, and collaboration appear to be paramount in pursuit of an equitable and accountable pandemic response.

Despite significant differences in methods and applications in vastly different political, social, and cultural landscapes, the cases explored in this essay are similar in that they seek to engage people in a time of crisis through participatory and deliberative practices. In such contexts, people are not passive, but rather political agents capable of thinking and acting collectively to address a defining collective challenge. As the pandemic continues to evolve, so too will the specific and localised challenges, such as vaccine roll-out, economic fallout and widened gender-based inequities. And future crises, whether health pandemics or other emergencies, will strain governance arrangements and local communities. In this context, the role of inclusive, participatory, and deliberative democratic practice will be critically important in seeking collective solutions.

## Acknowledgements

We thank Mark E. Warren, Patrick Scully, and the editors for their generous comments on earlier versions of this essay. We also recognise the work of the Coady International Institute graduates Patience Agwenjang, Patricia Blankson Akakpo, Jagat Basnet, Bhumiraj Chapagain, Aklilu Gebremichael, Barbara Maigari, and Namadi Saka.

*Antonin Lacelle-Webster is a Ph.D. candidate in political theory at the University of British Columbia and a researcher with Participedia.*

*Julien Landry is Senior Program Teaching Staff at the Coady International Institute (St. Francis Xavier University) where he leads the Institute's programmes on advocacy, citizen participation, social accountability, and governance.*

*Ann Marie D. Smith is a leadership, institutional strengthening and project consultant to governments, nonprofits, and community groups, primarily in Jamaica, the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa regions.*



# Is Democracy Too Much Trouble in a Pandemic?

Archon Fung

Is democracy a luxury in pandemic times? Faced with China's vigorous response and rapid recovery, it is tempting to suspend our democratic commitments and instead invest our hopes in a scientific authority to deliver us from the plague of Covid-19. The inevitable messy squabbling between different perspectives in democracy seems antithetical to the decisive public policy and widespread compliance required for effective pandemic response. Citizens in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and many other countries protested against mandated social distancing and closures of businesses and schools throughout the past year. Many people doubted the seriousness of the disease, resisted public health measures to contain it and still hesitate from taking the vaccine. This discord scales up into conflicts and confusions between jurisdictions, with cities and states adopting different stances towards the disease and measures to address it. We see

inconsistent, seemingly irrational, variations in the stringency of shut-downs, masking and social distancing requirements, and standards for quarantine, testing and vaccination.

Perhaps it would have been better for strong, competent leaders to guide society through this health emergency and reserve the cacophony of democratic governance for less troubled times. In a pandemic, should citizens repress their democratic impulses to advocate for their interests, speak their minds, and even form their own judgements in deference to wiser, stronger authorities? Should leaders expect, even demand, such deference and quell dissent for the sake of maintaining order, uniformity and confidence in the measures necessary for public health?

The experiences of this past year suggest that the idea of wise and benevolent authoritative leadership in a pandemic is a chimeric. Though the challenges are more daunting and urgent, some of the most powerful arguments for democracy in 'normal' times also apply to pandemic times. The democratic dynamics of participation and deliberation potentially contribute to at least three areas of pandemic governance: the search for truth, reconciling competing values and social action. Over the course of this pandemic year, democracies have reaped these contributions unevenly and imperfectly. The mixed success of democracy in pandemic offers three general lessons. First, participation and deliberation create distinctive social capacities for addressing the pandemic's challenges. Second, therefore, we should be slower to flee democracy for authoritative leadership in this and other emergencies. Third, however, reaping the benefits of participation and deliberation requires good political structures and practices, as well as civically responsible citizens. Such structures, practices and responsibility sometimes have been in short supply.

## Truth in a pandemic

The pandemic has brought uncertainty and fear. Reliable truths – about risks posed by the disease, the scale of its harms, how it will flow and ebb, and, most of all, what we should do about it – have been much needed but sometimes difficult to obtain. Politicians, physicians and journalists have urged us to ‘heed the science’ throughout this pandemic. Good advice as far as it goes. Certainly, heeding the science is better than giving in to conspiracy theory, superstition or uninformed intuition.

But scientific consensus, much less agreement among other experts and political authorities, has proven to be elusive. Especially when faced with the novel circumstances of an emergency, the truth is hard to come by. At first, many thought and hoped that Covid would be contained in China, then to Southern Europe, then to Europe, then to just portions of the United States. Despite many officials resisting containment measures on the grounds that public health fears were overblown,<sup>1</sup> these projections turned out to be wrong. At the pandemic’s outset countries and governments within countries differed in the amount of information they provided.<sup>2</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) and the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) initially advised that people should not wear masks – even as Chinese and other Asian

---

<sup>1</sup> Goodman, D. 2020. How delays and unheeded warnings hindered New York’s virus fight. *New York Times*, 18 April. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/new-york-coronavirus-response-delays.html>

<sup>2</sup> Fung, A. 2020. The 5 things we need to know to fight coronavirus. *Politico*, 13 March. <https://www.politico.com/news/agenda/2020/03/13/the-5-things-we-need-to-know-to-fight-coronavirus-128058>

health officials advised the opposite – until the WHO and CDC altered their guidance in April 2020.<sup>3</sup>

In each of these areas, the messy democratic dynamics of pluralist contestation and public deliberation contributed, in time, to more accurate official and public understandings and to constructive social course corrections.

In early 2020, when the federal government and many state officials were invested in keeping Covid-19 out of the United States, several medical researchers in Washington State suspected that the disease had already spread much more widely than commonly thought. Seattle medical researcher, Trevor Bedford, analysed sequenced genomes from the first and second cases of Covid-19 in his state.<sup>4</sup> He inferred that they were connected, that Covid-19 had been spreading inside Washington for the prior six weeks, and that perhaps several hundred people were infected but undetected. Just days earlier, CDC official Dr. Nancy Messonnier had said that ‘our containment strategies have been largely successful. As a result, we have very few cases in the United States and no spread in the community.’<sup>5</sup> Though he was much ‘lower’ in any hierarchy of status, authority, or expertise than Messonnier, Bedford was right and she was wrong. His dissenting views informed the public debate about Covid-19 and helped form a more accurate public picture of the reality of the disease in those early, confusing, days of the pandemic.

---

<sup>3</sup> Goodnough, A. and Sheikh, K. 2020. C.D.C weighs advising everyone to wear a mask. *The New York Times*, 7 May. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/health/cdc-masks-coronavirus.html>

<sup>4</sup> Bedford, T. 2020. Twitter, 1 March. <https://twitter.com/trvr/b/status/1233970271318503426?s=21>

<sup>5</sup> CDC Newsroom. 2020. Transcript for the CDC Telebriefing Update on Covid-19. CDC Newsroom, 26 February. <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/t0225-cdc-telebriefing-covid-19.html>

Another, more tragic, error concerns early advice from the CDC and the WHO. These authoritative public health agencies advised that individuals should refrain from using face masks because they judged that private mask use would not meaningfully prevent disease spread and that such personal protective equipment should be reserved for medical professionals. Some Asian public health officials were scathing in their criticism of this advice,<sup>6</sup> creating a geographic axis of expert disagreement. In the domestic US debate, some outside of the public health field such as Zynep Tufekci argued against this position of CDC and WHO experts in social media and on public opinion pages.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, a combination of public criticism and mounting evidence of asymptomatic Covid spread caused both the CDC (in April 2020)<sup>8</sup> and WHO (in June 2020)<sup>9</sup> to reverse their initial guidance and instead recommend widespread use of face masks.

In these important episodes during the pandemic, public participation and open deliberation did the democratic work of

---

<sup>6</sup> Li, I. and Zuoyan, Z. 2020. Q and A with HK microbiologist Yuen Kwok-yung who helped confirm coronavirus' human spread. *The Straits Times*, 10 March. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/exclusive-qa-with-hong-kong-microbiologist-yuen-kwok-yung-who-helped-confirm>; Cohen, J. 2020. Not wearing masks to protect against coronavirus is a 'big mistake,' top Chinese scientists says. *Science Mag*, 27 March. <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/03/not-wearing-masks-protect-against-coronavirus-big-mistake-top-chinese-scientist-says>

<sup>7</sup> Tufekci, Z. 2020. Why telling people they don't need masks backfired. *The New York Times*, 17 March. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/opinion/coronavirus-face-masks.html>

<sup>8</sup> Leetaru, K. 2020. Mask-wearing guidance: A timeline of slow-to-shift messaging. *Real Clear Politics*, 22 May. [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/05/22/mask-wearing\\_guidance\\_a\\_timeline\\_of\\_slow-to-shift\\_messaging\\_143264.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/05/22/mask-wearing_guidance_a_timeline_of_slow-to-shift_messaging_143264.html)

<sup>9</sup> Guzman, J. 2020. WHO now advises healthy people to wear non-medical face masks. *The Hill Changing America*, 8 April. <https://thehill.com/changing-america/well-being/prevention-cures/491725-who-no-evidence-wearing-a-mask-can-protect>

approaching truth. The initial positions of authoritative leaders and experts was importantly mistaken (as it often is in novel and complex situations); others offered useful, dissenting, correctives in public debate; and the dynamics of curiosity, accountability, and public judgement pressed officials and policy to come closer to what we now regard as the truth about the pandemic.

But the truth does not always emerge, much less prevail. Among leaders and parts of the public in many democratic societies, some doubt the severity of the pandemic, the efficacy or safety of Covid-19 vaccines, suspect nefarious origins of the pandemic, and espouse other beliefs that are unsupported by available evidence. There is no guarantee that public participation and debate in pluralistic democracy will tend towards the truth. But certain practices and dispositions make the success of that quest more likely. Approaching truth is more likely when participants earnestly seek the truth rather than, for example, using the public sphere as an arena to score political points, sharpen distinctions of identity or group membership, or avoid dissonance. Because truth in emergencies is so obviously difficult to come by, everyone – official, expert and citizen alike – should engage in public discussion with the humility that accompanies a profound sense of fallibility. One durable lesson of this pandemic year is that it is easy to be wrong and hard to be right.

### Value clashes

In the pandemic as in normal times, a central challenge of democratic governance is to reconcile conflicting public and private values in law and public policy. Throughout the pandemic, many bristled at the restrictions that they suffered under various lockdown orders. What is the appropriate balance between freedom of movement and lockdown? This broad conflict between shut-

downs and other social distancing limitations to protect public health and desires to work, care for family, socialise and recreate obscures important distributional questions. Even at the peak of shut-downs, substantial portions of the workforce in every nation – so-called ‘essential workers’ – continued to work. But who counts as essential and so able to continue economic activity but also therefore faces greater risk of infection? Scarcity accompanies many emergencies and that scarcity creates conflicts over distribution. In this pandemic, testing for Covid has been scarce – especially in the early months of the pandemic – and vaccines in most countries remain in short supply. Economic relief has also been the subject of conflict, with different countries prioritising different groups – incumbent workers, consumers, small businesses, larger businesses, families or children.

In the pandemic environment, filled with fear and uncertainty, these value conflicts sometimes exacerbated underlying political divisions. Opposition leaders and protest groups marched in European and American cities to protest government ordered shut-downs and anti-pandemic measures such as mandatory face masks. At the time of writing, Americans of various political orientations differ sharply in their desire to take a Covid-19 vaccine, with 40% of Republicans reporting that they ‘definitely or probably’ will not get vaccinated while only 10% of Democrats saying so.<sup>10</sup> Some American political leaders took advantage of the pandemic to heighten xenophobic and nationalist animosity.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Goldstein, A. and Clement, S. 2021. The public's concerns over the Johnson and Johnson coronavirus vaccine are widespread, Post-ABC poll finds. *The Washington Post*, 26 April. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/poll-johnson-johnson-vaccine/2021/04/26/a1085b26-a3ad-11eb-a774-7b47ceb36ee8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/poll-johnson-johnson-vaccine/2021/04/26/a1085b26-a3ad-11eb-a774-7b47ceb36ee8_story.html)

<sup>11</sup> Itokwitz, C. 2020. Trump again uses racially insensitive term to describe coronavirus. *The Washington Post*, 24 June. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-again-uses-kung-flu-to-describe-coronavirus/2020/06/23/0ab5a8d8-b5a9-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-again-uses-kung-flu-to-describe-coronavirus/2020/06/23/0ab5a8d8-b5a9-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff_story.html)

As political actors exploited the pandemic to advance agendas and solidify identities that long preceded it, so too underlying economic and political advantages determined the winners and losers of many of the pandemic value conflicts. Sometimes, this plays out in what Kay Schlozman, Sidney Verba and Henry Brady call the ‘unheavenly chorus’ of interest group politics.<sup>12</sup> In every democracy, but in some more than others, interest groups exert unequal power and influence due to their economic resources, levels of organisation, insider status and other advantages. In normal times, the logic of unequal group power governs many political decisions. During the pandemic, this same logic enabled better organised groups in many places to enact the Covid-19 policies that favoured them. In some American communities, well-organised public school teachers – seeking to avoid Covid-19 exposures – secured school shut-downs and remote learning for the entire pandemic year. In other communities with comparatively weaker teacher organisations (among other factors), school shut-downs were much shorter.

But the path through which pre-existing patterns of power and advantage determined the outcomes of value conflicts was more often through *non-decisions* than active political and public policy choices. The burden of exposure to Covid-19 was determined partially by who was deemed an ‘essential worker’, but perhaps much more by who had the sort of job that could be performed remotely using digital technologies – and by which organisations decided to permit and enable such work. Socio-economically disadvantaged individuals and communities suffered much higher

---

<sup>12</sup> Schlozman, K. Verba, S. and Brady, H. 2020. *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691154848/the-unheavenly-chorus>



harm from the disease due to greater exposure, less access to healthcare, and co-morbidities, resulting in the tragic inequality that African American and Latino Americans were two to three times more likely to be hospitalised and to die from Covid than white, non-Hispanic Americans.<sup>13</sup> When the availability of tests for Covid infection was scarce in the first months of the pandemic, it seemed – at least in the United States – that particularly advantaged groups such as professional athletes and those associated with colleges and universities received an out-sized share of available tests.

In some domains, however, the pandemic seems to have opened possibilities for resolving conflicts of value and distribution with more solidarity and equality. Perhaps driven by the realisation that we are all highly vulnerable to the disease, albeit not equally so, some Covid politics focused on supporting those most in need. In many countries and communities, the allocation of vaccines seems to have roughly tracked need – with the elderly, essential workers and those who have health conditions that render them vulnerable – in contrast to allocation of much Covid testing in the US according to the market principle of capacity to pay. In many countries, unemployment support and income maintenance to offset pandemic losses has arguably also tracked need. In the United States, some hope that the losses of the pandemic will spur a lasting expansion of social provision, as the Great Depression did in the early twentieth century.

These three contradictory patterns – exacerbating political polarisation and other conflicts, reproducing prior patterns of

---

<sup>13</sup> CDC. 2021. Risk for Covid-19 infection, hospitalization, and death by race/ethnicity. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 23 April. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>

inequality and spurring redistributive reform – have all been present in the politics of Covid in democracies. But less visible in the pandemic have been efforts to resolve conflicts of values and claims on scarce resources through a higher quality of public participation or deliberation.

Over the past several decades, in many settings in countries all over the world, governments and citizen organisations have developed a wide array of innovations in democratic governance<sup>14</sup> that bring together citizens to consider challenging public questions and make decisions about them on a more equal and reasoned footing.<sup>15</sup> Bodies such as citizen juries,<sup>16</sup> deliberative polls<sup>17</sup> and citizens assemblies<sup>18</sup> are designed to make public decision-making more inclusive by reaching out to groups who typically participate less in public affairs; more equal by levelling opportunities to contribute and influence; and more reasoned through information and structured discussion. Though the urgency of survival and rescue can make democratic quality an afterthought, these kinds of innovations can help increase the legitimacy of – and popular acceptance of and compliance with – the inevitably difficult resolutions of value conflicts in emergencies.

---

<sup>14</sup> <https://participedia.net>

<sup>15</sup> Dryzek, J. S. et al. 2019. The crisis of democracy and the science of deliberation. *Science*, 363(6432), 1144–1146. <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/363/6432/1144>.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.cndp.us/about-us/how-we-work>

<sup>17</sup> <https://cdd.stanford.edu/what-is-deliberative-polling>

<sup>18</sup> Participedia. 2021. Method: Citizens' Assembly. Last modified 29 April. <https://participedia.net/method/4258>

## Social action

At the beginning of 2020, few would have believed that hundreds of millions of people in democratic societies all around the world would shut down much of their lives and shelter in their homes for months on end. And yet many did so willingly, without widespread protest. From the commanding heights of policy-making, it is easy to lose sight of the reality that how a society fares in emergencies like pandemic and war depends inescapably on how the people respond to that crisis. Do they act with solidarity, generosity and an eye towards advancing a common good even at the price of self-sacrifice? In free democratic societies, law and command can secure only limited compliance; meaningful social action depends upon willing and committed citizens.

Albeit with important and well publicised deviations, the citizens of many democratic societies around the globe acted with surprising commitment and restraint, shutting down large portions of their familial, social and economic lives for long periods. Beyond taking individual action to protect public health, there are countless stories of mutual aid, from individual mask-making in the early days, pop-up and scaled-up food banks and pantries, support for the elderly, looking after family and neighbours, to many healthcare workers traveling to the hardest hit communities and countries, and so on.

One ongoing question concerns the proper mix between governmental and social action. How much should public health action occur through government agencies, and how much through partnership between government and community organisations? How best to inoculate as many people as possible with the new Covid vaccines? Efficiencies of scale might weigh in favour of large government run vaccination sites in sports stadiums and

convention centres. Or, on the other end of the spectrum, accessibility could favour distributing vaccines in a far more decentralised way, through centres of local community activity. Relatedly, is information about public health measures and vaccine safety best communicated through official channels or through community leaders and intermediaries? The best course surely differs across communities that have, for example, varying levels of organisation and trust in public institutions.

### **More, better democracy in a pandemic**

Fear, risk and panicked urgency create authoritarian temptations in emergencies like pandemics. With the benefits of hindsight, China's draconian anti-Covid measures may prove more attractive than the uneven and protracted efforts of democratic countries. Nevertheless, democracy creates participatory and deliberative resources that societies can draw upon to succeed in the face of existential threats such as Covid-19. Many societies benefited from those resources in their efforts to ascertain truths about the pandemic, to resolve conflicts of value and distribution legitimately, and to generate the broad-based social actions that pandemic control requires.

In these arenas and others, popular participation and public deliberation helped. But as a general matter, these democratic processes operated haphazardly, imperfectly, in fits and starts. In most countries and communities, there was little agreement about, or even explicit attention to, the role of participation, deliberation and democratic governance in meeting Covid's many challenges. As a result, sometimes the old political patterns – with their attendant inequities and pathologies – drove decisions and outcomes. But there were also meaningful

innovations that at times brought new, sometimes dissenting, perspectives and evidence about Covid to bear in the bright light of public discussion.

Perhaps the most durable lesson for democracy from these Covid times is that we should be more deliberate and ambitious about harnessing the potential of participation and deliberation to address daunting social challenges even, or perhaps especially, in emergencies. If fortune smiles, humanity won't face this particular threat of pandemic for a hundred years or more. But we will certainly face other emergencies and social crises such as climate change, migration, war and economic deprivation. Our response should not be to turn away from democracy, but to re-double our commitments to it.

*Archon Fung is the Winthrop Laflin McCormack Professor of Citizenship and Self-Government at the Harvard Kennedy School. His research explores policies, practices and institutional designs that deepen the quality of democratic governance.*



# **Conclusion: A Manifesto for Democracy in a Crisis**

Tim Hughes and Graham Smith

We started the ‘A democratic response to Covid-19’ project in the early months of the pandemic with two related concerns. Firstly, we suspected that the prevailing narrative – that we were ‘all in this together’ – was papering over significant disparities in the impact of Covid on different groups in society. Secondly, we were troubled that decisions were being taken by relatively small and closed groups, with little attempt to bring in the insights and experience, or build the understanding and support, of wider society.

These concerns have been largely borne out over the past year. Understanding of the differential impact of Covid-19 has seemingly been absent from much of national decision-making, and trust in the government’s approach has been seriously undermined at times by how decisions have been taken and communicated.

The Covid response has often felt like a tale of two parts. On the one hand, a centralised response from national government and its scientific advisors that has delivered important interventions, such as the vaccine programme, but often felt slow, unresponsive and tin-eared to the experience of different groups in society. On the other hand, a community-led response through mutual aid groups that has, among other things, supported people to shield, kept people fed and supported the vaccination effort, but has been unequal and inconsistent across the country. As a number of contributions to this book suggest, a neglected phenomenon has been the extent to which communities of interest and identity have also played a significant role in supporting people through the pandemic.

The response at all of these levels has been key to tackling the virus, but there are significant lessons to be learned as we build our way out of this crisis and ensure we are better prepared for future crises. The uncomfortable truth is that this emergency is not yet over, and there will be others around the corner that we must be ready to face. It is essential that we develop our collective capability to respond to future crises.

The experience of the past year has demonstrated to us that a good emergency response requires a number of key ingredients: 1) decisions to be taken at appropriate levels, 2) trust in the people and institutions taking key decisions, 3) a good understanding of how people are being affected and their likely response to decisions, 4) fast innovation and adaptation to the circumstances, and 5) concerted action at all levels of society.

We believe that this points towards the need for a deeper democratic response to future emergencies. Firstly, to ensure that decision-making benefits from the knowledge, experience and trust



of all in society. And secondly, to enhance our ability to collectively adapt and respond in the face of unforeseen circumstances.

Here we outline a five-point manifesto for building a democratic and effective response to future emergencies. These points will not only serve to better prepare us for future crises, but also make our democracy more vibrant and fit for the future.

### **Establish mechanisms for ongoing public dialogue**

During a crisis certain things need to be decided and driven from the centre. Setting lockdown rules, communicating public health advice and delivering the vaccine programme, for example, have all benefited from a significant element of central planning. But to be effective this requires 1) an understanding of how the impact of the crisis is being felt across society, and 2) consent and support across the breadth of society to undertake the actions that need to be taken.

Decisions taken without knowledge and understanding of the experience of different social groups can easily have unintended consequences and make the situation worse. It is important that decision-makers seek out, understand and respect the value of lived experience when weighing up the courses of action available to them. This will often require a different way of working, challenging long established prejudices and institutional cultures.

Public trust is an essential currency for governments at any time, but particularly so during a crisis where the public's consent and support is often essential for taking fast and effective action. During Covid, it has been key to ensuring that people listen to public health advice, consent to and abide by restrictions, and take the vaccine. But, as the saying goes, trust takes years to build,

seconds to lose, and a lifetime to regain. Decisions taken that are not grounded in understanding of the values, hopes and fears of the public can often result in backlash. Going into an emergency, public institutions need to ensure that they have built a bank of public trust that they can cash-in to take difficult decisions. And during an emergency, they need to ensure that they take decisions in the right way to retain that trust and confidence.

Of course, it can be challenging to involve the public in the heat of a crisis, particularly from a standing start. Much better to have mechanisms and infrastructure for ongoing public dialogue already established. This is not to expect that all decisions during a crisis can or should involve public participation. Rather, building an understanding of how people think about and experience different issues during 'normal' times can create firmer foundations for taking difficult decisions in moments of crisis. And where unique decisions and trade-offs must be made, ongoing mechanisms will make it much quicker and easier to understand public sentiment. This should include embedded public deliberation methods that can engage members of the public in deep and sophisticated ways about hard choices that need to be made.

Making participation part of how governments and other public authorities work outside of an emergency can create the foundations of trust, understanding and collective intelligence to tackle crises when they emerge.

### **Invest in communities**

A centrally driven response can only take you so far in responding to a crisis. Covid has demonstrated that an effective emergency response requires action from all levels of society, from

Whitehall to the town hall, to community groups and beyond. When disaster hits, we often look to those immediately around us – whether in our neighbourhood or other social networks – to provide help and support. As the various contributions to this book have argued, community led – whether community of place or interest – action can be significantly more responsive and agile to circumstances as they benefit from lived experience, resources, infrastructure, trust and established relationships. These are the foundations for effective mobilisation and collective action of communities.

The impact of the pandemic would undoubtedly have been significantly worse without the army of volunteers, community organisations, local businesses, social enterprises, charities and public servants that have innovated and adapted to tackle the crisis. However, community action during a crisis does not happen by itself. It is rooted in existing relationships and initiatives, and supported by the infrastructure and resources available in the community. This is something that needs to be invested in and developed over time.

Investing in communities has a range of benefits, including improvements to confidence and skills, health and wellbeing, trust and relationships, and self-help and volunteerism. It can help to build the adaptability and resilience of a community, which are key qualities at the best of times, but particularly so when faced with an emergency.

The pandemic has demonstrated the power of local and community action to organise in response to crisis. But in order to improve our capability to overcome future emergencies – and to enrich democracy outside of crises – we must develop the networks, resources and infrastructure that provide the foundation for effective collective action.

## Tackle inequalities in society

Covid-19 has laid bare the inequalities in our society. The contributions to this book illustrate vividly the wide variety of experiences of the pandemic, the impact structural inequalities have had on access to decision-making and the effect of the crisis on those excluded from power.

One of those inequalities has been access to resources and infrastructure within communities. While some communities were able to repurpose existing initiatives, resources and infrastructure, others did not have this opportunity as these elements were not present. In investing in communities, as we outline above, it is essential that we particularly target those that have historically been under-resourced and overlooked.

The pandemic has also illustrated inequalities of access to power and decision-making. As revelations come out about billionaires lobbying ministers via text message, the absence of the lived experience of diverse social groups from decision-making appears particularly stark. As well as fit for purpose lobbying rules that ensure integrity and protect the public interest, participatory infrastructure is needed that focuses on hearing the voices of those excluded from power and tackling the structural inequalities that shape decision-making.

A related inequality that has featured heavily during the pandemic is digital exclusion. Many households lack the necessary access to devices, data and skills. Covid has required the vast majority of democratic processes to be moved online. This has increased accessibility for some in society and enabled engagement by people who may not have participated face-to-face. However, for others it has created new barriers to engaging with democracy. Many participatory and deliberative processes

have responded by providing the necessary training and hardware for participants to take part, but it is not enough for a basic democratic right to be supported on an ad hoc basis. We need a national effort to ensure everyone has access to the means to participate.

There is much to be learned from the past year where new modes of participation have emerged and old forms have been transformed. The pandemic has hastened the shift to digital engagement, as well as opening up the potential of new blended models of digital and face-to-face participation. This holds exciting potential for the future, but we must ensure that we are actively tackling all exclusions that prevent people from engaging with democracy.

### **Involve citizens in shaping the future**

As we hopefully begin to exit this crisis, significant decisions lie ahead of us about the future. ‘Build back better’ has been a common refrain since early in the pandemic, but what does ‘better’ mean and who decides? As we deal with the collective trauma of the past year, it is important that we can come together to imagine what a better future could and should look like. While some forward-thinking public authorities have begun to engage their citizens in imagining that future, this needs to become a common practice of building with people.

We face difficult questions that involve significant judgement calls and trade-offs if we are to prepare for future crises. What are the most likely crises to hit us in the future? Where should we invest resources to increase our ability to mitigate and/or adapt to different potential crises? What are we prepared to do differently to help prevent crises from happening? One of the lessons

that we can take from the pandemic is that reserve capacity can be critical to our resilience. For example, a healthcare system that has spare resources may seem wasteful in ‘everyday’ times, but will be significantly better prepared when crisis hits. What level of redundancy are we prepared to invest in (and where) to be better prepared for the future?

These strategic decisions all require broad understanding and ownership in order to ensure their sustainability and public support. Democracy, practiced through our traditional representative systems, often struggles to effectively plan for the long term and safeguard the interests of future generations. Short-term drivers such as electoral cycles and the dead hand of vested interests increase the risk of stumbling into crises and lessen the chance of us being properly prepared. Future generations cannot be present to defend and promote their interests. Participatory and deliberative institutions, then, have a critical role to play in ameliorating drivers of short-termism and bringing diverse voices to bear on possible futures. Deepening democracy to enable better thinking and collective planning for the long term.

### **Learn the lessons from this crisis**

Important lessons can be learned from this pandemic. This is not necessarily about laying blame for mistakes that were made in complex and challenging situations, although it is important to ensure that decisions were taken in the public interest. What is more critical, however, is identifying how we can collectively be better prepared for future emergencies and not repeat past mistakes. After all, ‘those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it’. We have laid out some of the lessons we draw from

the crisis, but there will be many more insights to be gleaned from across society.

These lessons are not limited to the government's response, but stretch across sectors and geographies. Some will have societal implications, whereas others will be deeply personal. As we write this, there are growing calls for a public inquiry into the handling of the pandemic. It is important for learning the lessons, ensuring accountability and providing a semblance of closure that this should start soon, be properly resourced and have full independence.

A standard public inquiry, however, will not be sufficient for the job. We need a process that embraces a participatory and deliberative ethos, reaching out far-and-wide to understand the lessons from across society, helping us process our collective and personal trauma, and providing the foundations for us to build our futures together.

Covid has been a terrible crisis. Now is the time to embrace our shared responsibility to better prepare for the future.

