



## **RAISING OUR GAME POST ELECTION**

**Notes on a World Café event  
at the King's Fund, 12 May 2015**



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## Introduction

Each year in early May the Centre for Inclusive Futures hosts a networking reception informed by the 'World Café' method. People taking leadership roles at all levels from family life to national policy-making meet to celebrate work done in the preceding year, sustain and extend relationships and share their learning with other participants with the aim of enhancing our contributions in the coming year.

To structure conversation around the third of these aims we always have a 'big question'. In 2015 around 40 of us met four days after the U.K. General Election results were declared. Our big question was an obvious one:

### **Looking forward after the General Election, what are the promising opportunities and strategies for building more sustainable and inclusive communities in the coming years?**

In truth, many of us were still angry, disappointed or anxious about the outcome of the election and the prospects of another five years of Conservative government, given the huge damage done by the previous Coalition to the social fabric of our country and the lives of people at risk of disadvantage. And indeed the new government had already lost no time in confirming some of its worst intentions, for example, the abolition of the Human Rights Act. (Of course, we appreciated that our friends in Scotland may have reason to see things differently.)

So our initial thoughts following the Election probably focused more on concerns about further damage to vulnerable people and our communities likely to arise from dishonest, divisive and discriminatory policies. But I think we all understood that however justified our disappointment, we need to move on to explore how best to make constructive responses driven by hope, not fear.

We were helped here by a recent publication from the New Economics Foundation (nef), introduced to us by its co-author Sarah Lyall, *Responding to austerity: How groups across the U.K. are adapting, challenging and imagining alternatives*. We were inspired by a blog already published by another participant, Sally Warren, *Let's be fierce not furious!* And Philippa Russell reminded us that 2015 is the 20th anniversary of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The DDA did more than any legislation in the last century to improve the rights of disabled people but it was highly controversial at the time. Although some of those rights have been weakened in the last five years, the DDA still represents a landmark on the long road to civil rights for disabled people. We need to safeguard the DDA provisions and also remind ourselves that we have achieved much against considerable opposition at times!

In World Café style, we set out on an evening of rotating small group discussions to share ideas and experiences. Of course, I was only party to a small proportion of what were probably hundreds of different conversations but this method makes space for a plenary session in which participants share insights and examples which have impressed them. I have drawn on these ideas in the summary which follows. I have tried to identify 8 key **principles** to inform our thinking and action – and illustrate these more concretely with *promising examples*.

## **Eight Principles**

### **1. Stay grounded in our values while always seeking to imagine better ways of meeting these in contemporary Britain**

We want to see our society as one which values diversity, welcomes everyone as equal citizens and seeks to use all our contributions in building a better future – one in which we live in harmony with ourselves, each other and our natural world. Put more technically, we always need to be creating actions which recognise the connections between, and aspire to meet the ‘triple bottom line’ of environmental protection, sustainable economies and greater social justice.

I myself like the formulation of these aims from the economist Tim Jackson (‘Prosperity Without Growth’): Real prosperity ‘resides in the quality of our lives and the health and happiness of our families. It is present in the strength of our relationships and our trust in the community. It is evidenced by our satisfaction at work and our sense of shared meaning and purpose. It hangs on our potential to participate fully in the life of society.’

*Jo Kidd shared with some of us ideas behind her latest community initiative - the Abbots Mill Project. This project is creating a centre for sustainability and social justice, using power from renewable resources, principally through re-instating a waterwheel into one of the mill races of the former Abbot's Mill in the centre of Canterbury. The project teaches people about living in harmony with our natural environment, with non-human animals and with each other. It is a peaceful, welcoming and accessible place for all. Simultaneously it is fostering concern for the environment, recreating local economic assets (e.g. green energy production) and modelling social inclusion.*

### **2. Help each other to stay strong**

We need to be prepared for (continuing!) a long struggle. Effective action requires vision and courage. We are at our best when we find ways of supporting each other when things are difficult and inspiring each other through sharing experiences.

*Sally's blog, referred to above, commits her organisation, Paradigm, to continue its investment in supporting networks which 'connect people, ideas and action'. The World Café method itself is a powerful way of providing a 'safe space' for a diverse range of people to explore common challenges and seek to create a shared understanding of positive ways forward.*

### **3. Challenge the indefensible!**

Much of current economic and social policy is 'sold' on the basis of misleading commentary (the false narrative on the requirement for public sector 'austerity', the myth of 'shared sacrifice', the rhetoric against 'welfare' and those who need public support). This context is easily exploited by the unscrupulous (the government itself in fostering prejudice against poor and disabled people, rogue landlords, extortionate loan companies, etc.) We need the courage and organisation to challenge negative ideas and actions.

*Nef's 'Responding to austerity' study details many examples of people fighting back, from the 'Hardest Hit' collective which exposes the disproportionate burdens imposed on disabled people to the campaign of 'Psychologists Against Austerity', which warns about the current increase in mental/emotional distress . We might add the recent emergence of the Learning Disability Alliance as a new campaigning organisation supporting the voice of people with learning disabilities at the national level.*

### **4. 'Be the change you want to see'**

This quotation attributed (not entirely accurately) to Gandhi still captures an important principle. We have most control over what we do ourselves. We need to demonstrate inclusion and compassion in our own daily lives and especially reach out to people at particular risk of disadvantage. This is the starting point for linking personal experience, local action and our aspirations for a better future.

*Paul Davies told some of us about his experience as an independent member of the panels undertaking care and treatment reviews for people in 'Assessment and Treatment Units' for return to their communities. For many the 'system' seems to have lost sight of their essential humanity. It lacks the capacity to really listen to people, hear their story and act with compassion and urgency. We need the courage to see people as they really are and stand alongside them in regaining their personhood. In a different context, Jackie Downer and Sheila Hollins told us about 'Books Beyond Words' and ways of using them (for example in book clubs) that enable people, who are often not heard, to grow in their own lives and find new ways of expressing themselves, but equally importantly help their supporters to understand the realities of people's lives.*

*Philippa reminded us of the importance of enabling people to be creative and recognise themselves as active citizens. She described her son's and his friends' involvement in 'Partners in Art' and the value to creating spaces where everyone can come and share talents, ideas, and new relationships. She commented that in some places, personalisation and personal budgets had 'opened doors' for people with learning disabilities and their families, but felt that we all had to be part of a social movement to protect and 'grow' our communities. She felt that the commemoration of VE Day the previous week was a useful reminder that (to quote Churchill) 'great things can grow from disasters if it was the will of the people'.*

## **5. Get involved wherever possible with fellow citizens taking action for a better future**

Austerity is having multiple local impacts like dependence on food banks, eviction from one's home and increased exposure to 'hate crime'. We have a rich tradition of community activism in the U.K. Building on Principal 4, we can strengthen local initiatives and campaigns by 'joining up' ourselves and seeking to ensure that this resistance is itself inclusive.

*For example, food banks need volunteers and volunteers can demonstrate solidarity with all those facing food poverty. 'Focus E15 Mothers', the campaign defending housing rights in Newham has gained national attention by attracting wider participation. People facing prejudice and hate crime can gain from personal support and advocacy. And credit unions and time banks are valuable means of offering mutual aid.*

## **6. Demonstrate elements in an alternative vision through many practical examples**

Otto Scharmer, in his development of 'Theory U', calls this 'prototyping' – not just imagining a better world but trying out various ways of creating this and thus strengthening our capacity to share persuasive new stories. In turn, we can spread innovation by what Margaret Wheatley (in 'Walk Out, Walk On') calls 'scaling across'.

*This, of course, is how the 'An Ordinary Life' initiative built nation-wide support for closing institutions and enabling people with learning disabilities to return to their communities. Nic Crosby shared with some of us an important current demonstration of this vision in the work of In Control's 'Children's Programme', which is helping 'looked after' children placed 'out of area' to return to their families and engaging 'upstream' to prevent family break-down. This programme makes use of public policies which permit individuals and families to have personal (health and social care) budgets. Its success (e.g. in Middlesborough) relies on a common sense approach which focuses on the strengths of young people and their communities, emphasises the value of*

*relationships and works with the young people, their families and others in their lives to discover 'what would it take' to enable them to succeed.*

## **7. Listen to and seek to build relationships with people who are not yet 'on our side'**

Fellow citizens and people in different roles may, of course, have different perspectives and attitudes. But we can't build a new society just with those who agree with us. We need to take a 'mindfulness' approach to understanding others ('listening with quiet mind and open heart') and in so doing, perhaps discover ways of creating common ground.

*Noelle Blackman told us a positive story of how her therapeutic organisation, at risk of needing to rent new premises, had sought a dialogue with their commercial landlords and reached a new agreement based in mutual respect. Sue Carmichael talked to some people about the relationship building she has been doing to interest librarians in welcoming a new audience not usually seen in libraries (people with learning disabilities) to Books Beyond Words book clubs.*

## **8. Build alliances with other groups and organisations to advance a wider agenda**

This is an extension to Principal 7. As we have noted earlier, communities (and municipalities) face inter-connected challenges, for example in relation to delivering environmental protection, economic sustainability and social justice. Yet even in the field of disability, there has been a history of associations based on different impairments working separately for their particular interests. And not engaging with other associations concerned for example with responding to climate change or protecting employment rights. Yet by recognising inter-connections in these challenges and mapping local assets (thinking for example about the interests and contributions of local government, the NHS, universities, trade unions, churches and the wide variety of civil society associations) we may find 'win – win' strategies and strengthen our capacity for effective action.

*There are many potential examples. Energy costs are a big factor in household poverty. Waste of energy is significant in the slow progress being made to address global warming. A big programme to promote local energy production and insulate houses would address both challenges and promote employment. To take another example, the NHS and its suppliers are typically the largest local employer. Many disabled people, including people with learning disabilities, have work skills and a reputation for reliability but are disproportionately excluded from the labour market. NHS efforts to boost employment of disabled people (e.g. following the 'Project Search' model) simultaneously contribute to stability in the workforce, improving the health*

*and well-being of these people and strengthening a culture of inclusiveness in the NHS itself.*

## **Taking Action**

In the words of Alice Walker 'We are the people we have been waiting for!' We can try each day to take some action, often small, to make a positive difference – and link up these efforts to achieve more substantial change. Understanding the reality of people's lives, imagining a better future, building stronger networks, doing something about it. The box below summarises our eight principles.



## **Raising Our Game: Eight Principles**

- 1. Stay grounded in our values while always seeking to imagine better ways of meeting these in contemporary Britain**
- 2. Help each other to stay strong**
- 3. Challenge the indefensible!**
- 4. 'Be the change you want to see'**
- 5. Get involved wherever possible with fellow citizens taking action for a better future**
- 6. Demonstrate elements in an alternative vision through many practical examples**
- 7. Listen to and seek to build relationships with people who are not yet 'on our side'**
- 8. Build alliances with other groups and organisations to advance a wider agenda**

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