



UCL EVERYDAY ECONOMY RESEARCH EVENTS 2021



EVERYDAY ECONOMY RESEARCH AT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON:

Progress Report by Judith Ryser

The Everyday Economy research initiative at UCL engages with lived experiences, local places and co-design work, focusing on less known dimensions of local economic activity and lived realities. It engages local people, lay citizens and both formal and informal decision makers to participate in co-design work, which enables researchers to think about the impact of economic development on places and activities of value as perceived by local people.

The Case for Event Engagement

The Everyday Economy Events form part of the process of community engagement. They aimed at reflecting on completed work with the participation of the local people who contributed to the research, deepening contacts outside academia and sharing the research more widely. Due to the pandemic, the two UCL Bartlett everyday economy events had to be conducted remotely online.

The first event was concentrating on academic research investigating what makes places tick and the possibilities to study them. It deliberated on current participatory action and research methods of examining everyday life and ordinary places. It provided the opportunity for academic researchers to share their experiences of engaging with community activists in real world situations with all the other researchers and local participants of the everyday economy projects, as well as engaging a wider audience.

The second event was investigating evidence of everyday economy useful for decision makers by sharing experiences of participatory action research. Researchers and activists working with communities presented their initiatives and how they contributed to everyday economy and reflected together on promising paths for further cooperation and co-production. They also sought to engage the wider audience in sharing their experiences.

Emphasis was given to engaging all participants of the two events in identifying means of engaging actively in community research and how findings would contribute to the next phases of the research.

The purpose of this report is to synthesise the research presentations of the two events and to select key issues of the participation exchanges as a basis for critical comment on research content and process, with particular attention to events engagement and to highlight the key relational and procedural points of relevance to further research.

UCL EVERYDAY ECONOMY RESEARCH WEBINAR EVENT, 1 JUNE 2021

What Makes Places Tick? Is There a Way to Measure it?

Current participatory action, research and methods of studying everyday life and ordinary places

Webinar Programme 1 June 2021

11:00am - 11:15am: Welcome

- Dr Lucy Natarajan - Introduction

11:15am - 11:35am: Place History

- Dr Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (UCL History) - Oral History Interviews
- Prof John Tomaney (UCL Bartlett School of Planning) - Sacriston History

11:35am - 11:55am: Current Activities

- Dr Frances Holliss (London Metropolitan University) - Working from home
- Dr Maeve Blackman (Durham Miners Association & UCL Bartlett School of Planning) - Community networks

11:55am – 12:15am: Future Visions

- Dr Sara Hassan (University of Birmingham) - University-community research
- Dr Lucy Natarajan (UCL Bartlett School of Planning) - Civil Society focus groups.

12:15pm - 1:00pm: Open to the 'Zoom Floor'

- All participants Q&A and panel discussion
- Poll & Wrap up

Speakers:

- Dr Lucy Natarajan (UCL Bartlett School of Planning)
- Dr Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (UCL History)
- Prof John Tomaney (UCL Bartlett School of Planning)
- Dr Frances Holliss (London Metropolitan University)
- Dr Maeve Blackman (Durham Miners Association & UCL Bartlett School of Planning)
- Dr Sara Hassan (University of Birmingham).

Moderator:

Dimitrios Panayotopoulos Tsiros (UCL, Bartlett School of Planning)

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/everyday-economy/news/2021/jun/everyday-economy-research-launch-event>

Lucy Natarajan

[UCL, Bartlett School of Planning]

<https://publicpractice.org.uk/resources/local-plan-engagement>

As leader of the Everyday Economy community research, supported by a UCL Bartlett Innovation Fund she introduced the project, its aims and expected usefulness. It is based on the recognition of the need to rethink the conventional approach to the economy. Growing socio-economic inequalities preoccupied politicians as well as researchers well before the pandemic, but the latest government policy of 'levelling up' across the country is being met with caution and sometimes doubt of being the most appropriate approach to redressing a long standing trend which has established roots in the local cultures of deprived communities. Unlike global and macro-economic strategies, the research focuses on 'everyday economy' and how economic activities are generating value in specific places, not least because the value of place-based everyday economic activities tends to be overlooked, although they contribute essential local services, social care and basic support for the community.

The impact project aimed to encourage reflections on participatory action research and sharing experiences of everyday economy at two events of dialogue between researchers and community activists, with active participation of the audience. The first event was dedicated to the presentation of current participatory work, and how research was conceived and methods developed to study everyday life and ordinary places in cooperation with local activists. The second event focused on work and experiences of local community engagement and useful evidence garnered on everyday economy during this process.

In particular, the first event focused on sharing research about what made a place tick, whether there was a way to measure it and to showcase how local people were involved. The research presentations were organised to start with place history and to move to current activities and future visions.

Presentations: Reflections on Everyday Economy Research

1 Lucy Natarajan

[UCL, Bartlett School of Planning]

About the Everyday Economy

Lucy Natarajan who was curating the Everyday Economy research events at the Bartlett Planning School, University College London introduced the concept of the everyday economy research and clarified that it comprises a collection of projects with various elements led by different participants. She also mentioned that UCL had conducted some of this research in support of the UK 2070 Commission.

She presented a definition of everyday economy which links these projects. A common point of the various research activities showcased during this event was awareness that the economy is not working equitably geographically, for diverse social groups or for all generations. This led to a critical review of how to approach the economy, by detecting the negative impact of following money and the pursuit of constant growth. The UCL Everyday Economy research towards the UK 2070 Commission made a start by analysing the negative effect of following money, rapid change of technologies and relentless retooling in search for growth and constant consumption, a mainstream approach contested by many other institutions. Here, the idea of 'everyday economy' centres on everyday impact on people and places of the economy and aims to generate different views about the economy, as well as the conceptualisation of 'everyday economy' as the foundation of the economy.

Accordingly, everyday economy is defined as 'basic', resting on non-exportable goods, such as social services and conspicuous care. It is foundational of the economy in that

it is providing mundane services experienced in everyday life, such as hairdressing, food shopping, social care, etc. It is about regular essential things. Thus there is a need to refocus on ordinary, experienced, reproductive economic processes which are not constantly renewing themselves and resorting to exciting high-tech tools, but regular and essential for everyday activities. These characteristics of everyday economy underpin a new way of understanding the economy. They focus on growing value by fostering social values, cultivating and nurturing the roots of the economy in local places, as well as on the reproduction of communities in building up their capabilities and capacities which, together, would create sustaining places.

Moving away from the current framing of the economy the 'everyday economy' research sees economies through an everyday social and place-based lens. It learns from lived experiences and social values, but also about both capacity and vulnerability of communities. A new research methodology delves into closer detail within the place-based context of local communities to gain a better understanding of community agency. A starting point is to present existing studies of the past, present and planned for the future at this event. Often, academic research is confined to a finite time period which may hamper action research aiming at community engagement which is likely to require continuity over a longer time period. Research on Understanding Sacriston encompasses all three timelines and has continuity, while researchers of completed projects in Birmingham on hard to reach communities and in London on impacts of working from home are seeking ways of establishing continuity to build on achievements, including lessons learnt from cooperation between academics and local activists. It is revealing that personal circumstances of researchers, such as working from home or maternity leave can trigger new ways of working and open different opportunities for community research.

2 Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite

[UCL, 20th century British history]

Place History: Oral History Interviews in Sacriston

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for left-behind neighbourhoods (launched in July 2020) considers interventions that will improve the future prospect of left-behind neighbourhoods. It is important to study history to understand the present and how people feel about good or bad change. Oral history is particularly suited for this purpose. She conducted interviews in Sacriston, a 'left-behind' mining area near Newcastle in the North East of England where people are rooted in the place in which they are living and how they see their own future as well as that of Sacriston.

There were lots of pubs and workers' clubs in this small mining village which date back to the time when men went drinking in pubs and gathering in their workers' club. The inhabitants of Sacriston tended to do things for families rather than as individuals and this trend persists. It is reflected in the current way of doing things together in a number

of mixed groups, such as arts, crafts and camera clubs which are now run from the community centre.

These activities represent continuity as well as change since the closure of the mine. There still exists a diversity of local shops, services and different food outlets, - although no longer a fish and chip shop - dating back to the time when people shopped locally and knew everybody. Since the nineteen-eighties, the new way of shopping was based on the car and people no longer know each other well in the village. Nevertheless oral history shows their belief that they need to act collectively, for example shopping locally again to help preserve what infrastructure still exists. This demonstrates that people are thinking about the economy and community together and are thus more interconnected than they believe they are. What matters is to concentrate on what people think about the now, and not only about what they regret from the past. The oral history study reveals that both the community and the local economy have changed and are changing in a nuanced way.

3 John Tomaney

[UCL Bartlett School of Planning]

Understanding Sacriston

His research supported by the UCL Challenges Grant is based on the premise that achieving Durham equity has to be set in the longer time frame story of left-behind places. He selected Sacriston from where he originates among the many declining mining villages in the county because he considers it a fascinating place with inspiring people and a strong social infrastructure.

He presented a short history of Sacriston colliery (1839 – 1985) where dirty, difficult and dangerous work was periodically deadly. The mine and the chapel were the key institutions for the local community and framed the infrastructure of drinking and praying. Mining was cohesive and the miners' lodge organised the workforce into what became a union. Their job was their symbol of identity, and their institution brought workers together in self-organisation. There was also an extensive religious infrastructure provided by Methodists and churches of many other denominations. The retail offer consisted of small independent shops, as well as the cooperative with high quality goods, set up and operated by villagers in a beautiful building. Sacriston was the place with the highest amount of Coop members in the UK. The Coop and the collective movement were linked to the local labour party. Annie Errington, a miner's wife was a key figure; she visited the USSR and was vilified for it but she was elected to the Guardian Board and many other social agencies. Nationalisation of coal mines in 1960 improved work conditions, but also mechanised the mines and ran them down after that. The closure of the mine, the primary employer, left developmental problems corroborated by low socio-economic indicators. Shops closed down and houses were boarded up and could be bought for one pound.

This history informed the research design of understanding left-behind areas. Besides the described situation of Sacriston other indicators are relevant to capture inequality. The long standing north-south divide, the post-industrial regeneration of big cities which is increasing the gap between city and country and now the red wall concept indicate that despite a shift to service jobs, free ports, etc. many of these types of areas still remain left-behind.

Focus groups were used to contribute to a more qualitative understanding of economic change in left-behind places. Their findings were a sense of loss in the village, but also a recognition of a complex pattern of changes, some welcome, such as better child care and socialisation, while employment for men remained a problem. Income supplements led to some material gains and better living standards, but not for all which could create divides in a place where confidential issues are known by everybody. Nevertheless, the local community preserves a strong sense of belonging and is showing resilience during Covid, although not everybody in the village is connected to the traditional identity coming from mining, which was reflected in the participation of the regeneration projects.

As a next step the research will focus on the social infrastructure which people had built themselves, in particular everything of value built by miners and their organisations. Covid had brought pre-existing problems to light, such as poverty, insufficient food, loneliness, etc. and lack of tackling these problems at the time. The research method is to cooperate with places who are acting against these issues in 2021. The Biden administration is committed to rebuilding social infrastructure, but has not yet shown how to do this. Thus, the research aims to explore solutions with the local agencies and focus on concrete doable projects. For example saving and recycling the Coop in Sacriston is worthy of study and how other development projects can be grafted on such an initiative.

4 Maeve Blackman

[DMA: Durham Miners Association, UCL Bartlett School of Planning]

Understanding Local Community Networks: Deepening Connections with Ex-Coalfield Communities

It is important for the Durham Miners Association (DMA) to understand the mining communities today, where they live in County Durham, what is worth for them to preserve, and what needs improving. The Sacriston action research was designed to harness heritage to revitalise a coal field community. The core aims were to:

- reactivate the heritage of the Durham Miners Association, using its collections, culture and traditions;
- recommission and refurbish the Redhills “workers’ palace”, the seat of the miners community in a former coal field area with a grant of £7.25m, to be opened in 2023 for

community activities to regenerate culture and prosperity across the whole Durham coalfield area;

-revitalise communities by creating networks between all ex-coal mining communities in County Durham, based on their cultural identity dating from mining times to catalyse hope and aspiration through shared culture, heritage and endeavour.

The commissioned action research was in exploration mode. The research question was: what might it achieve out of its area? The research method aimed to identify and build on local community networks which are spread over a vast coal mining area and harness local heritage to revitalise the communities. The existing community network is a group of people and organisations supported by DMA who help organise local sports, history discussions, marches with banners, etc. traditions which have survived over time, and to celebrate their heritage more generally.

Practical issues explored in the research project were that the community network may set up a lodge or become affiliated to the DMA; organise a Community Day to celebrate the history of the area; start reading or local history discussion groups; and march at the annual Miner's Gala with local banners groups. The DMA offers support for such activities with publicity and promotion, grants, partnerships and sponsorships, as well as signposting other organisations and networks to create a broader form of support of the lodges.

The Sherburn Community Survey consisted of 13 concrete questions aimed to engage local people in shaping the future of Redhills and how it is expected to support local communities, but also to gain more knowledge about everyday life and expectations, and encourage communities to participate in planning for their future. Continuity in developing the community network is essential and the next step aims to explore different methods of learning about communities by building on face to face relationships.

5 Sara Hassan

[University of Birmingham, University-community research, Arabic speaker of Egyptian origin]

Research With - Not Of - Communities

The action research, completed in 2019, was carried out with 15 institutions in an area of urban transformation in Birmingham's inner city which comprised a big social housing estate but also a number of small housing developments. The aim was to develop new ways of researching in cooperation with communities and networks in Birmingham and to evaluate their impact on academic research institutions. The method consisted of recruiting community researchers and to provide them with some training of basic research methods and ideas. The expected benefits of this action research were for academics to understand hard to reach groups.

The research project was labelled as a success of engaging the community. There were a number of positive outcomes. Some of the community researchers, most of them from minority ethnic backgrounds, continued their education and one did a master degree based on his community action research project experience.

The research led to other projects of investigating “engagement of the community with achievements for the community”. The projects looked at nine dimensions of engagement which were not only academic notions but included other types of knowledge, as well as collaborative ways of thinking to understand issues better for the policy arena and for more collaborative work.

One evaluation project formed part of the Home Office programme for refugees. Although the interviews were done with other objectives in mind, they enabled the researchers to learn a lot from the refugee community. The initial aim was to achieve betterment for refugee conditions of those who were resettled elsewhere in Scotland, Wales and England, to find out what was in place to help them, and how the researchers would impact on the evolution of these communities. The researchers received a wealth of information and ideas from the refugees which contributed to their thinking of how to incorporate such action research into the academic mainstream.

Current academic research has gaps because it focuses on researching people without interaction with them. Researchers should get involved instead in coproducing more with the ‘researched’ by valuing them and their knowledge comprehensively and not just in terms of their perceived role in the economy. This would require a sea change of the ‘it is not for us’ mentality of such communities which are remote from universities where researchers in turn tend to consider that they have no importance in the life of refugees. Thus a new aim became to change this narrative during the action research, both to change attitudes of the academic institution and its perception, as well as that of the local communities.

6 Frances Holliss

[London Metropolitan University, Cities Institute]
www.workhomeproject.org.uk www.theworkhome.com

Working From Home

This research started with investigating the architecture of home working before the pandemic. Before Covid-19, 14% worked mainly from home in the UK, amounting to 4.2 million, a growth of up to 44,8% in 20 years, according to 2014 ONS statistics. In 2016, 95% businesses employed less than 10 people but they contributed one third of all employment and one fifth of all turnover. Most of these micro-businesses were run from their own homes, or had been at some point, according to Reuschke and Houston (Microbusinesses in the City, 2016).

Covid brought about a massive explosion of homeworking from 14% to 49,2% (ONS, 23 April 2020). By May 2020 50% middle class people still employed were working

from home full time, but only one fifth of working class people. This is expected to continue because homeworking suits both employers and employees. 88% want to continue homeworking post-Covid, and 70% are equally or more productive (WISERD, August 2020). This change has major implications on how people inhabit, work and use the city, including the architecture of homeworking, how to conceive and design housing, neighbourhoods and cities.

She studied the mixed use of buildings from medieval times to present day changes. She investigated who were the home-base workers over time and their spatial and environmental needs and explored whether the work-home may have become a new building type between 2004 and 2007.

It was easy to find middle class and visible working class homeworkers for semi-structured interviews and building surveys, but not many others who encountered important constraints and feared loss of their accommodation which was isolating them further. Historic as well as contemporary tenancy agreements and other covenants prescribed that premises were for residential use only and not for conducting a business from home. These restrictions meant that renters had to obtain written permission to run a business, such as child minding from home. Sometimes they encountered contradictory situations when one institution, such as a housing association gave contrary instructions to other institutions such as local authorities. Often, working from home meant deprivation to make space available for homeworking in already crowded living conditions. Families on benefits were earning petty cash from home which illustrates the problems of informal work and how to become legitimate.

A baseline ESRC funded project prepared for interdisciplinary research collaboration in partnership with a housing association. After initial resistance because of possible neighbour complaints the AHRC funded the 2011-12 Connected Communities project: "Towards an affordable work-home, a community based initiative" with home based workers in social housing, in cooperation with Carol Wolkowitz, University of Warwick, sociology department; Paul Egglestone, University of Central Lancashire, school of journalism, media and communications; and Viv Nichols, Newlon Housing Trust.

The research aims were: a baseline study of home-based work in social housing:

- contributing to legitimise existing and encouraging prospective home-based workers amongst social housing residents;
- developing social economic connectivity and sense of community among social housing resident home based workers and other people in the neighbourhood to reduce social and economic isolation and exclusion;
- exploring spatial and environmental problems raised by home based work in social housing and involving social housing residents in the development of design briefs for future affordable work-homes;
- understanding, legitimising and encouraging home working in social housing;
- creating connected communities and social networks which contribute to the local economy;
- understanding spatial and environmental problems.

Newlon Housing Trust reversed its policy against homebased work which it encouraged and supported instead. The project used an innovative methodology consisting of community journalism and open space participatory design.

Four events generated high level of engagement of connected but hidden communities and managed to improve their situation.

Participants of the first event set the agenda on post-it stickers and a report written on the day listed voted priorities: the need for more space (adapting existing homes, using disused spaces and voids, besides building purpose built work-homes); creation of support networks to set up new homeworking businesses; ideas for businesses which are outgrowing their own home; and how to operate without any money by setting up a microcredit community.

At the second one day event participants were using card board and glue to create their perfect work space for homeworking. The filmed results of this participatory design event showed how articulate people were about what they needed to support homeworking.

A third event to help participants to build their own website was very successful and popular, but lack of longer term help with further development, maintenance and technical support of their website prevented its survival, as securing long term management and financing of websites is essential for such projects to thrive in future.

A fourth event was a business fair, giving the participants an opportunity to exhibit and sell their homework products and services and to take up business support which uncovered the problem of lack or absence of literacy among these homeworkers, something that needs to be addressed in future.

The strategies which contributed to the success of this project by researchers with housing partners and community participants were:

10,000 letters sent to the inhabitants; personal telephone contacts with the principal investigator and community workers; networking on social media and flexible approach; open space methodology enabling everybody to participate freely; holding events in the same venue; offering child care, paid fares and hot meals; openly filmed 'dairy room' interviews by community journalists; and participatory design workshop.

Lessons for future community engagement projects were the need to make sure not to raise unrealistic expectations; to secure funding for ongoing commitment by participants, researchers and research partners and for websites on an ongoing basis; as well as to obtain a familiar venue close to the target community.

The legacy of the research project was to create a strong sense of collectivity and community which made people want to continue to meet, as they did for about two years.

Sadly, a bid for £2.36m submitted to FEC ESRC to take the project further with three housing associations in deprived areas: "Out of the shadows, cross community action based research to investigate new design and governance frameworks for home-

based work in social housing” was not successful, possibly because it contradicted government policy opposed to social housing. Although the architectural appraisal project of homeworking was abrupted, Frances Holliss published “Beyond Live/Work, the architecture of home based work” (Routledge 2015). All this points to the problem of continuity and longer term commitment of academic research to be mutually beneficial for both researchers and local communities.

7 Lucy Natarajan

[UCL Bartlett School of Planning]

with **Hyunji Cho** and **Elisabeta Ilie**

Civil Society Focus Groups Research – Researching the Future with Communities

The Civil Society Focus Groups research was set up to provide research contributions to the UK 2070 Commission which examined spatial inequalities across the country, including the north-south divide and found that the lack of spatial national planning and long term thinking about inequity contributed to widening the inequalities gap also between communities, between and within regions and cities, as places are not only overlooked in economic terms but also left behind procedurally.

A study of economically left-behind places, normally identified via GDP/GVA metrics showed that the UK has extreme levels of inter-regional inequality in productivity terms in comparison with a number of OECD and EU countries. ¹

In the UK decision-making is centralised historically as well as at present. This is disconnecting communities from decision-making even about their own spaces ² and makes them mistrust the government.

The research used focus groups methods to look at inequalities from a new perspective, understand and explain symptoms of inequality, detect reasons for these inequalities and how they have become abstracted. The research was based on hearing the views and dreams of locals on their places and their futures directly.

The research challenge was how a small team would be able to hear from places, to talk about spatial strategy where there is none, how to engage with people about their future and how to activate change in cooperation with local community organisations which are closer to communities, their local context and history and are working with local problems from a different perspective. It was considered important to involve civil society in the action research, engage with the realities of the place, recognise social

¹ See table: McCann, 2019 <http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/01-McCann-UK-Regional-Inequality-Debtes.pdf>

² Illustrated by the Josef Roundtree Foundation <https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/covid-19-day-reflection-injustices-must-not-be-forgotten>] JRT UK Poverty 2020 Report and Findings <https://www.jrf.org.uk/event/ethnicity-and-covid-19-addressing-impact-pandemic-black-and-minority-ethnic-people>

organising modes because of their longer term place agency. Deliberating the future was the method to identify community priorities, what needs to change and what possible strategies can generate such change.

Lessons for spatial strategy (of the 2070 Commission) was to get a sense of the types of local priority concerns, barriers to action, and types of work needed to support people locally. Characteristics of being 'left-behind' places were seen as unconnected parts of town, degradation of ecology, loss of funding streams, a general sense of loss, social anxiety and other types of spatial and mental barriers to action. They informed the type of work able to support these local communities, such as coordinating networks, propagating tools, helping with social infrastructure and connecting different areas.

As the research was aimed to contribute to the national picture of left-behind places, it was not possible to obtain in-depth knowledge of specific local places which, moreover, were under a lot of pressure, lacking time and resources to engage in further projects. This was compounded by the pandemic which was also an impediment for the researchers in building initial contacts, hampered by travel restrictions and unfamiliar online communication.

A key problem with action research is timescale. Such projects tend to be short term and finite, while redressing left behind communities is a very long term endeavour and requires continuity to succeed. Nonetheless, fostering community driven actions and building on what local communities want from spatial strategies has to become part of spatial planning in the future.

Exchange with Participants

An important objective of this enabling event was the interaction with all participants. The discussion exchange helped identify and clarify some key issues shared among all the research teams and contributed new issues to the debate.³

Continuity

An essential issue raised was continuity which is fundamental for community research. Many participants confirmed that only a long term relationship with communities can lead to building trust between researchers and communities, referred to during the presentations. Resorting to The Local Trust was highlighting the importance of building trust⁴ and the Civil Society Focus Groups Research showed a need for the formation of a long term team of academic researchers involved in community engagement research to ensure continuity. Importantly, the teams found that, conditional to sharing an agreed common approach, it was essential to be able to interchange individual

³ The issues are selected from my perspective as an outside participant in the exchange of this engagement event.

⁴ <https://localtrust.org.uk/> <http://www.ca-north.org.uk/supporting-individuals/warm-hubs>

members of their research teams over time to facilitate continuity, as this would be more conducive to individual researchers' needs.

Funding

Funding was seen as a main hurdle, as even willing communities do not have the means for long term research, and considering that local authority finances have been overstretched over decades of austerity and other local institutions may not be available or forthcoming to finance such research. The government's levelling up strategy does not include more sustainable public sector funding. Some form of co-funding may be the way forward between higher education research establishments and local institutions with focus on the local economy and public engagement politics to advance community engagement, as well as changing institutional practice and policy.

Impediments

Many other impediments of research cooperation between academics and local communities were evoked, also by participants not directly involved in the everyday economy research projects.

On the academic side there is the precarious and transient position of young graduates who themselves do not have continuity due to short term or lack of research funding, although many of them are contributing their own time once involved in community action research. There is also the attraction of senior academics to 'sexy' research industries, preferring to engage in high level political global competition for corporation sponsored research rather than in declining communities with struggling SMEs.

On the community side the fact that employment tends to be available in cities makes the younger generation move away from their declining communities, making it even harder for them to recover. Local institutions which played a prominent role in declining communities like the church and the trade unions in Sacriston may have lost relevance and power. Nevertheless, researchers asserted that religious and other place-based anchor institutions which are close to the communities should be mobilised to contribute to community engagement as they have historic knowledge of the community, are often involved in social capacity building, but do not always use their own communal spaces to that effect. They could form part of the local social capital because they have an integrated picture of the local communities, as opposed to charities which are usually serving a single objective and are not necessarily place-based.

On the local public sector side (local authorities, other public utility agencies, etc.) the impediments are not only lack of finance but also lack of devolved powers to take an active role in 'levelling up' while government is centralising powers alongside redistribution of UK-wide tax payers' money with selection criteria imposed top-down. Some believe that a new model of local authorities is needed to enable communities to meet their own needs. It would rely on the stories of how communities are building their own infrastructure and capture local authority support to extend this. However, if

community research is local authority funded it is likely that the subject of the research will be the local authority which is bound to tell its own story.

If finance of community research towards levelling up comes from the central government this may well create an extra top down tier of government within regions, as central government is already overtly opposed to local leaders and mayors and is inclined to control the local level themselves, thus distancing the local communities even further.

The geopolitical level is also impacting on everyday economy and requires innovative responses from the bottom up. An example was mentioned of an East Berlin community which resorted to employing each other after German reunification when they realised that the capitalist state was unable to provide full employment.

Formal and informal economy

Regarding the relation between formal planning and the informal economy the view persists that statutory or strategic, national planning has an important role to play in managing the economy. Limited deregulation is often done for economic not social reasons, devolving responsibilities but without allocation of corresponding finance. In the local view taxation on planning and building needs to change to be more equitable and facilitate working from home, while local authorities need to retain more locally raised finance. Research on the informal economy tends to remain confined to local communities, but once it becomes formalised it may become bureaucratised and could even cease to exist.

Alternatives

An alternative approach to current cooperation between academic research and community action research may be to train local communities and establish local technical research teams to gain better engagement, insight and depth for such projects. Local authorities have pioneered to train locals and recruit them as researchers. This includes members of marginal communities such as refugees who have genuine insight of their everyday economic conditions. An obstacle to this is the poverty of working people and those who want to work. A lot of working class contribution to community research is hidden and unpaid and their lack of spare time and energy limits their formal community engagement. A first step to support the informal economy may be a universal basic income, although it has a lot of flaws.

Future issues

Opinions differed about duration of community research. Some consider it completed with recommendations, possibly proposals for solutions, but for most others this approach seems to have little impact on necessary follow-up actions. Another way of taking such research forward would be to use it as a basis to change community related academic research and let it contribute to an action plan. Yet others consider continuous discussion essential for both sides to create joint knowledge and share it widely. Some gave examples of such sharing between universities linked to action research in different parts of the country. Such continuity is also able to extract more place-based value from community participation for the city councils of the regions.

Another way forward proposed was to create community network initiatives to share experiences and tackle problems with the contribution of academic research.

The question whether understanding communities has to be place-based attracted different responses. Some saw it not necessarily as geographical, especially in cases of very large regeneration developments with thousands of homes, but as more related to common interests. For others still, the intergenerational perspective was essential to build constructively on the past and create a better future for communities. This includes young children, as well as teenagers and young people starting families, as well as older people on the other side of the lifecycle.

Finally, daily life experience of communities was considered to differ widely between cultures, for example between London with its long commutes and provincial areas where people are more anchored in place.

Everyday Economy Research UCL:

Useful Evidence of Everyday Economy for Decision Makers
Sharing experiences of participatory action research

Webinar Programme:

5:00 – 5:05: Welcome

- Dr Lucy Natarajan (UCL, Bartlett School of Planning)

5:00 – 5.05pm

- Jane Kennedy (University of Bath, London Prosperity Board) – Evidence for decision makers
- Caroline Theobald (First Face to Face) – Connecting lived experience to policy makers
- Jessica Cargill Thompson (Urban Research) – Working with local authorities and communities

5:35 – 6:00pm: All participants Q&A and panel discussion

6:00 – 6:30pm

- Jessica Prendergrast (Onion Collective CIC) – Systems thinking and community business futures, Watcher Somerset
- Dominique Lancrenon (Territoire Europe) – Participatory circular economy and the Effet Papillon, Dunkirk, Hauts-de-France
- Ross Forbes (Durham Miners' Association) – A beacon for cultural and social capital Redhills, Co. Durham

6:30 – 6:55 All participants Q&A and panel discussion

6:55 – 7:00pm: Wrap up & Close

Speakers:

- Jane Kennedy (University of Bath, London Prosperity Board)
- Caroline Theobald ('First')
- Jessica Cargill Thompson (Urban Research)
- Jessica Prendergrast (Onion Collective CIC)
- Dominique Lancrenon (Territoire Europe)
- Ross Forbes (Durham Miners' Association)

Moderator:

Dimitrios Panayotopoulos Tsiros (UCL Bartlett Planning school)

Lucy Natarajan [UCL Bartlett Planning School]

<https://publicpractice.org.uk/resources/local-plan-engagement>

She introduced the second event of Everyday Economy research, supported by a UCL Bartlett grant, which is about how to rethink the economy and understand and support the ordinary everyday economy close to people's lives. She invited the speakers to present their direct experiences of working with local communities and encouraged all the participants of the event to engage in the two open discussions.

Presentations, First Part: Perspective of Local Community Engagement of Academics and Other Local Stakeholder Activists

1 Jane Kennedy

[research into place based leadership systems thinking, evidence based policy making; visiting fellow Bath university; responsible for policy, data hub and research on happiness and wellbeing at London Borough of Newham]

Evidence for Decision Makers

She presented her research with local communities in the London Borough of Newham. Her action research was paid for out of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). It focused on economic resilience, community capacity building and understanding social networks.

The various communities she studied in eight neighbourhoods differ widely between them. Some are diverse like in the Docks, others are very homogeneous and localised in and around Stratford and East Ham. What they have in common is preoccupations about the environment, cleanliness and community gardens. They all have community assemblies comprising local resident working groups, local authority officers, and the voluntary sector which together set the agenda of priorities for place shaping by means of direct and online voting and in working groups. The study focused on the impact of significant regeneration in the docks and related prosperity on poverty of existing residents and those just outside this area.

Another research project aimed at how to design and provide work space, but especially how to help people into jobs in this area of comprehensive and rapid transformation. The research investigated the impact of physical change on people over the short term; how long term physical expansion and regeneration of this part of London's East End related to local communities; and what effects these growth opportunities had on local communities. Evidence was sought about what local people feel about their places and their expectations about their future.

One action research project focused on fear of crime. It sought to engage cooperation of local people (young, old, women, ethnic minorities, etc.) to obtain their views on how the built environment affects their everyday lives and behaviour. It explored how their fear changes over time (day and night, longer term) and in different places, etc., what was making them feel unsafe, how this affected their behaviour, and which interventions they considered would make them feel safer. The findings included public transport improvement, better street lighting, creating places to go to which make them feel safe and, most importantly, making support available. All these findings opened up an evidence base for decision makers.

2 Caroline Theobald

[social learning and development enterprise: 'First', 'Face-to-Face'
to support young people in the North East of England]

www.youarefirst.co.uk

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/caroline-theobald-cbe-153b871/?originalSubdomain=uk>

[Co-founder Charlotte Windebank]

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/charlottewindebank/>

Connecting Lived Experience to Policy Makers

In contrast to Jane Kennedy, Caroline Theobald started her action research in the North East of England with people. She went from people to places and what would empower people to shape and use them. Born privileged, she married a fisherman and decided to provide the same middle class standards of the south for her children and the local communities in the north. It motivated her action research to generate useful evidence linked to experiences and especially the role of ordinary people in regenerating local economies.

This was a major challenge in an very deprived area where low self-esteem was rife, expectations non-existent, life expectancy well below UK average, unemployment high and often for life, participation in higher education low and exacerbated by Covid, and few people in highly paid, high skilled jobs.

She was aware that twenty years of top-down, piece-meal interventions had not made any statistical difference but considered that statistics did not reveal local abilities. For her this meant a complete turn-around approach. The most important way of achieving change for the better was to recognise local abilities and to give local communities a voice, the opportunities and the tools to realise their potential. She set up various agencies to accelerate this process: a 'rich club', social enterprise programmes and 'understanding enterprise' courses in schools, short term work placements for students by mobilising successful local businesses to take them on, and other initiatives run by young people themselves by setting up 'First' and 'Face-to-Face'.

For her levelling-up was about social prosperity, health, wellbeing, creating opportunities, harnessing the potential of individuals. The shock of the picture of wholesale inequality in the UK was her driver for action. Listening to lived experiences, obtaining feedback from students and secondary school children on how they grew up in the north-east of England gave her practical ideas of what would help them work harder, make life easier, create head space to learn and how to articulate these realities as implements for future policies.

Jane Turner, a female role model, set up the Teesside Task Force as an independent levelling-up initiative to showcase success stories of students and apprentices which are essential to make change happen. Hard evidence defied existing prejudices. It was clear that girls and young women did not feel the way the elite portrayed them and boys were not only good for loading washing machines. The 'power of women'

campaign aimed to lift and shift aspirations of girls and young women by giving them access to role models which strengthened their belief that they can achieve their dreams. Focus groups formed who demanded “give us a voice and we raise to the challenge”, and insisted that boys needed education too.

All these undertakings accumulated a wealth of experience and hard evidence to demonstrate the real potential of local communities in contributing positively to everyday economy. It showed that for policy and purpose to be effective they must come from the “ground floor”, experience of high unemployment, low self-esteem and absence of aspirations.

It was essential for Caroline to co-work with the key stakeholders of the region: Durham university, the local authorities, networks of connections to the job markets. Towards that she was devising an entrepreneurial system to provide the skills employers demand, and is cooperating with sustainable businesses which she considers essential for a future-proof recovery. All this had to take place below the usual radar of policy makers and big business so that local people who needed access to new ideas could develop their latent abilities, seize opportunities and take action at their own pace and according to their abilities.

3 Jessica Cargill Thompson

[urban researcher specialising in social life research, gives courses on marketing, is also a journalist; worked in the private sector and later as engagement officer in local authorities]

http://www.social-life.co/publication/understanding_southwark/

Working with Local Authorities and Communities

From her work with local communities during the consultation process of local planning, she realised that genuine public participation is labour intensive, expensive in terms of time and money, thus normally out of reach for local authorities, despite the statutory obligation they have to consult the public when establishing their local plan. However, only if people are engaged fully can they express themselves more intuitively. She makes a clear distinction between engagement and communication, or what in planning is termed participation as opposed to consultation.

She worked for the London Borough of Waltham Forest with community engagement during the process of producing the local plan. The local authority recognised that communities are shaping their neighbourhood and established a practice note of how staff was to engage with the communities. When formal consultation became difficult under Covid restrictions it took place outdoors, where stalls were set up in the high street to present the local plan which was not known by the local people. Leaflets were distributed to all the business and residential addresses in the borough and people who signed up to the plan consultation were sent a printed newsletter. Although not everybody has access to digital information and some have navigation problems, the

local authority's preferred the digital mode of communication and encouraged residents to respond online to the plan which was made available on the local authority website. The plan was neatly organised and presented in sections to which people could also respond by email or in writing. Moreover, online meetings were arranged to explain the plan and enable people to comment on it orally.

This became her case study of how local authorities were working with communities and she compared it with local engagement planning of other boroughs.

She found that although consultation through official channels is required by statute, officers were careful not to jeopardise the plan and chose a format to make their life easy while conforming with the regulations. Planning officers were supposed to take people's comments on board but although they received diverse comments from citizens they did not include them in the official report to the inspector. In total 756 general formal comments were made and 960 comments on the local plan. Some 800 unofficial comments were also important but none of them were taken into account.

She talked to local community groups about which form of communication worked for them and which did not. Although people underwent a steep learning curve they disliked the online consultation platform which they considered unsatisfactory with disturbing glitches. Thus they sent responses by email and letter, which meant that the technical intentions of the planning officers did not work out and the responses tied them up for a month. She concluded that, ideally, people should be allowed to respond intuitively instead of having to conform to a formal and framed digital consultation structure, but was also aware that such an approach is expensive in terms of time and money.

Her other ethnographic project at Elephant and Castle focused on place and space research to understand the needs for local engagement by means of stakeholder interviews and site observations which produced differentiated results. One aim was to identify how such an approach could be best used in planning consultations more generally. Considering the cost of such an in-depth area identification, she considers that the most promising way forward could be to turn such ethnographic research into a social enterprise objective.

Exchange with Participants

Ethnographic approach

From the presentations, the merits of the ethnographic approach were convincing, especially for the local communities.⁵ However, a key question remains how to

⁵ The points made about this section of the event are from my perspective as an outside participant in the exchange of this part of the engagement event.

demonstrate to planners and politicians its exact benefits, over and above cheaper online capture of local opinions to satisfy statutory obligations. In particular, it would be necessary to explore how this approach will feed into the formal consultation process to make a mark, and how it could ensure that views would be taken on board in a final proposal of intervention.

According to the community researchers, the high value of the ethnographic approach lies in the fact that people can express themselves freely on how they feel about the built environment without having to articulate this in what for them are alien planning or architectural languages. Such informal communication would also make it easier for planners to understand the genuine needs of communities and how they could be fitted into the planning policy process. Waltham Forest Borough council was progressive in having carried out early characterisation studies to underpin the local plan.

Evidence

The exchange with participants raised the issue about type of evidence. The current system as it is applied by the mainstream focuses on 'hard' (statistical) evidence which excludes intuitive knowledge, even more so any passion or inspiration. The question should be how to capture a broader range of evidence, information and stories to obtain a more differentiated picture of people's needs and wants.

Genuine public participation

The exchange with all participants found that ideally a genuine planning consultation process should be tailored to the community, thus enabling people themselves to define the way they express their views. However, it was pointed out that local authorities tended to stick strictly to the statutory process as they do not want to be picked up by the planning inspector for non-conformity. In reality, planners may listen but do not capture people's views in the official planning documentation. There is thus an issue of transparency or cover story. An opposing view was that planners would not be criticised for listening to people, provided they described how this was done.

Interactive communications

Another reality discussed was the precarity of local authority resources, in terms of skills, time and money after years of austerity regime, although urbanism is a service of public interest. Nevertheless, even if local authorities organise participatory workshops during the planning process often local people cannot free time to attend. Thus the consultation process needs to offer a wide range of communication channels, including face to face events and online modes to avoid the current high level of disappointment of local communities with the consultation process. At present, consultations are too narrow, one off and initiated too late in the planning process. It should be part of the research agenda to work out how public participation in the plan making process can be improved to the satisfaction of local communities.

Some opined that the planners may not be the right people to run the consultation process. Focus groups on the ground are an alternative, as they listen to people, even to difficult questions. Instead of producing dry administrative reports, Teesside went

public on what individuals had said and including this brought life into their reports on public participation. These findings were further fed into a think tank set up by Tees university which could contribute to ongoing evidence beyond the report. Other forms of cooperation are deliberating democratic processes which can take place in terms of assemblies, citizen trusts, cooperatives and many other types of groupings.

A number of local authorities are experimenting with innovative ways of engaging local people in challenges of change, for example how to deal with climate change issues. Such deliberative methods tend to be led by progressive politicians. Their aim is to improve mutual understanding of divergent standpoints, critically assess conversations between experts and residents in the area, and to recognise the costs of winning proper responses through ethnographic surveys, citizen assemblies or other forms of interaction which, moreover, have to take place throughout the planning process and further during implementation. There was agreement among many participants of the exchange that these methods are standing a better chance than the current cheap options to achieve behavioural changes proposed by the residents themselves and to gain acceptance of how to shape formal approaches to infrastructure.

Engagement vs consultation

It was proposed that the UCL everyday economy action research initiative could assist in working out better approaches to public participation instead of receiving-end consultation. The starting point would be the recognition that engagement and consultation are two different things. Conventional consultation is front loaded, has often already taken place, or is handled as a mere formality. Conversely, engagement has to be continuous and long term. Genuine participation is bound to be about empowerment and may even help develop a new cohort of possible planners of tomorrow, perhaps including also local women.

Nature of community research

The discussion elaborated on a cohort of students at UCL Bartlett who are carrying out community based participatory research. They are using methods of engagement which have the capacity to lead to community action by local people and, moreover, to engage those who would not respond to formal planning consultation. Among others, they have been justifying the value of ethnographic and art based approaches. Instead of taking community contribution at face value they helped local communities to set up social enterprises themselves and to lead their own campaigns to show what other outcomes can be achieved.

Other issues of cooperation between academic researchers and volunteers were explored. When PhD students – no matter how well intentioned - are working with voluntary sector people it often means that they have to fit also into someone else's agenda. This raises the question of how this approach tallies with co-creation instead of set questions. An open conversation is required making participants part of a forum where they can contribute to formulating the questions they are asked. Such alternative approaches would become part of a learning process to generate genuine mutual interaction between researchers and community activists. The same innovative

approach would be needed for interaction between local communities and local authorities. In and of themselves learning outcomes can be modes of policy, but they can generate new ideas outside policy as well.

What became clear from the exchange on the various field experiments presented at the event is that equitable interaction and mutually beneficial cooperation in urban development processes are not confined to a rapprochement between academic research and community action research, but reaches out to a much broader range of stakeholders. Besides similar links between local authorities or local politicians and local communities other groups may play an independent part in contributing to innovative outcomes of such interactions. For example, youth can be trained to formulate questions and in a setting of youth work these participants can create the research questions themselves which is a real opportunity for young people to actively shape the situation from the start. Some went further, as they consider that they have a lot to learn when working with young people with a mutually beneficial aim, because youths tend to listen, learn and do things differently. Conversely, experts may not be best placed to conduct conversations with local residents as their backgrounds and experiences may differ too widely. Similarly, local authority websites may be too complex for local communities to be able to engage with them. Thus a prerequisite is some common ground where the various languages and modes of interpretation can work towards a mutual understanding. If the gap is too wide, there is little chance of fruitful cooperation towards a mutually beneficial aim.

Presentations, Second Part: Live Experiences of Local Community Engagement

Lucy Natarajan introduced the second set of speakers and their affiliations and also mentioned what they have in common. She encouraged all the participants to voice their reactions and suggestions during the concluding exchange.

4 Jessica Prendergrast

[Onion Collective]

<https://www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/community-power-the-evidence/>

<https://medium.com/onioncollective/attachment-economics-everyday-pioneers-for-the-next-economy-d0a9ac20080>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/jessica-prendergrast-b2719035/?originalSubdomain=uk>

Systems Thinking and Community Business Futures

She worked in the peripheral area of West Somerset with the lowest social mobility in England which needed to change. Only 26% of young local people go to university, thus there is a need to provide skills for them to become social entrepreneurs.

Her action research involved direct action and gathering evidence on the everyday economy. It aimed to be an innovative contribution to the theory of social change, paying attention to the changes local people wish to make, and being mindful of

underpinning their ambitions. The action research used traditional methods, such as interviews, structured meetings, workshops and other relational activities, as well as interactions such as computer games. It was important to combine a quantitative and a qualitative approach, collecting emotional data in the field, as well as grounding the approach in academic literature.

The research team found that personal agency had remained stubbornly low during traditional regeneration approaches. Thus they opted for a holistic, place- and culture-based approach, which is not only attributing the same attention to economic, environmental and social dimensions, but also including the cultural dimension to underpin common experience and humanity, missing most in traditional community engagement research. The cultural dimension encompassed attachment of the local communities to their cultures, expressed in rituals and customs. This led the researchers to base their action research on “attachment economics” in the art school. The aim was to reflect everyday economy literature when broadening understanding of emotional, personal aspects of everyday economics which is reflecting division and fear, and to explore ways of how to respond to economic politics. The research is highlighting economic narratives which are more inclusive and reframed to mean “all of us”. These narratives are paying more attention to everyday economy and exploring a wider idea of what should be included in it to make people more responsive and take on more agency to uncover the real possibilities of substantial change.

The second phase of the research aims to build on the findings from people’s existence in a boundary period and to point to a new ethos: reconceiving people as living well together on one planet, establishing human interaction and connections and responding to each other with community spirit as pioneers of the next economy imagination in practice.

An important part of this action research consists of different considerations about what evidence is meaningful and needed. It has to be based on local people, the local government network and local rights and recognise that qualitative relationships are meaningful for locals. The connection between value and nature tends to be overlooked and evidence tends to be generated as linear and in silos rather than as an adaptable concept which is able to capture complex processes of connections across disciplines and fields of action.

The research refers to power, agency, imagination, attachments and potential challenge to conventional thinking which could arise from a new system of measuring. People do not ask for more things, so the research question is how to work more with imagining how to provide evidence which could explore and find answers to the fundamental questions about wellbeing, agency, better decision making, and what the future is to be made of. Tomorrow’s “imaginings organisation” would have to develop practices and imagining techniques which are life changing for people, and provide them with agency to foster human connections and make it possible to involve people in the process of shaping their future. A prerequisite of such research is deep and long term community work.

5 Dominique Lancrenon

[Co-President of SFU (Société Française des Urbanistes)]

<https://www.territoire-europe.eu/les-membres/>

<https://fabriquesdesociologie.net/EnRue/>

Participatory Circular Economy and “Papillon Effect” in Dunkerque, France

Dominique is an activist of Fab Labs and its “butterfly effect” in Dunkerque, a city which has lost its heavy industry and is struggling with its post-industrial regeneration. Their site of action is located in a large area where public transport is free of charge, and includes the site where a social housing estate with 300 dwellings was demolished.

Her action research is not done with authority management or according to the usual key words; instead it is based on self-management of local people for whom their culture is important. This group of activists has been working on a five year project to generate the material recovery of the community and to create the necessary tools for their material existence. Their approach is the circular economy focusing on the local environment by caring for its biodiversity on the one hand and bringing together people from different backgrounds and cultures in this endeavour on the other hand.

The sites in which the “papillons blancs” (white butterflies as the local activists call themselves) are intervening to build a new commons form part of a large area, including a green-blue corridor managed by an environmental agency which is connecting the public spaces of the neighbourhood. In cooperation with the university, the artist community, the local authority, the natural park agency, the citizen council, the cooperative society and a European network for participatory uses, the team carries out innovative soil remediation and water management, both a challenge due to the industrial legacy. The local activists are creating a garden with aromatic plants, reusing demolition materials, as well as experimenting with sourced organic materials and they are also building a green house and an art centre.

Spin offs of the Fab Labs Butterfly Effects are a library with documents and other types of evidence to help think about the needs of people in a circular economy, in particular of how to create new jobs and to transform volunteering into real jobs. They also comprise workshops on producing food from natural plants and cooperation with artists to share their project culture with them.

6 Ross Forbes

[Durham Miners Association]

A Beacon for Cultural and Social Capital: Redhills in Co Durham

He is working on the regeneration of both the physical structure of Redhills, the “workers palace of organised labour” which was opened in 1915 and its meaning for the local community then and at present. His work is embedded in John Tomaney’s action research on Sacriston and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite’s place history of Co Durham. The unions were illegal at the time when the miners built Redhills with their own money. Despite this, the miners delegated 118 members representing some 10 million miners from pits all over Co Durham and their closely knit local communities to the grand surroundings of Redhills, where their ‘parliament’ symbolised their quintessential democracy. Their aim was to get rid of the bond act of slavery which made them into chattels of the colliery owners. Their sense of mutuality and self-help was driven by the vagaries of coal mining, as well as their strong religious life. Their collective endeavour was to bring about social reform. Their high points were the libraries they created, amateur dramatics, music and other cultural activities.

During those times the very grand Redhills building was never open to the public. Yet, now the local communities want to renovate it with immersive participation. They want it to become a state of the arts centre for living culture, a building with flexible, multi-functional spaces, a place which tells stories, a place enabling to rediscover a sense of belonging. They set up a charity, managed to secure a £7.25 million heritage fund, and mobilised funds from trade unions and other funders. The aims of the regeneration project were to create a space for performance, education, learning and practice, a locus for cultural democracy and an engine to drive community networks and inspire regeneration. The renovation was driven by an intensive and interactive consultation process involving all parts of the communities and a lot of this preparatory work was done in ludic mode. The charity got local children and art students to gather information presented in pamphlets about the future of the building. For example, children dressed as monks when documenting the strong role of the church in the local mining communities and art students restored banners which each lodge had at the time and were taken on marches again as a recovered cultural ritual which should not be perceived as a threat. The regeneration of this exceptional grand building is bound to be a long term project, but the renovation process is carried out with the engagement of the local communities and produces practical results step by step.

Exchange with Participants

Evidence

A key issue of this exchange was the concept of evidence which was brought up again.⁶ Evidence as an adaptable concept, able to capture complex processes of connections across disciplines and fields of action requires more clarification, considering that the notion of evidence varied between the action research experiences presented. Nevertheless, it was applied as a collective concept at online workshops during lockdown, lasting a few days with up to 25 participants who did not know each other, as a means to assist them to cut through day to day (economic) challenges. The workshops guided the groups to look back at their heritage and how it informed about place at present and in the future. In one case, rethinking about hope together was strengthening connections and mutual support between the participants. This unintellectual approach of talking about what could help to fix problems deepened imagination processes and led to different talks about a future way of being, no longer trapped in a frustrating identity culture, away from preoccupations with wealth and rationality, more linked to the heart than the mind. It shifted attention to simple things, close to nature, a way of life which would not damage the planet and lead to greater togetherness in a new human commons.

Evidence based on immersive emotions and positive nostalgia was seen to constitute local social capital. In Sacriston, it motivated the will to reopen a building - the last thing standing as memory for miners - for a large community. Discussions about its regeneration were driven by people's emotions rather than verbalised consultation. Up to five generations came to look at the building and got the restoration moving.

Cultural communication

Another issue taken up again was the need for alternative forms of communication. It was stated that often formal consultations and legal processes underestimate the capacity of people, regardless of their background, to grasp the strategic nature of their problems and the need to solve them collectively in a wider geography. This is a far cry from trying to connect two million people with top down decision making. What matters are stories of individuals embedded in, not disconnected from the decision making process, as only they can lead to genuine change of mind of decision makers. History of place is more than material remains in museums, it is about people, lives and cultures which should get to the centre of planning. There is a great need to shift from technocratic processes to bringing more heart into urban change and planners should help to build that link.

The carnival dating from the 17th century in Dunkerque occupies a similar position as an essential ritual and its intangible aspects influence the way of thinking of activists for their self-creation festivals today. They play an essential bond across local communities and their curtailment during Covid created a cultural void.

⁶ The issues presented from the discussion between all event engagement participants are selected from my perspective as an outside participant in this exchange.

There seems to be a growing consciousness among researchers of the interplay between material and intangible aspects of local community experiments towards their betterment which take the form of libraries, actions and intellectual tasks, as well as social infrastructure and meanings of symbolic cultural events.

UCL EVERYDAY ECONOMY RESEARCH: FEEDBACK

This part of the report contains my reflections on content and process of the research and evaluates participants engagement in the two events. Engagement played a double role in the UCL everyday economy research: it was the focus of community research presented at the events and synthesised in the report, as well as the aim of the everyday economy events themselves. My reflections highlight the common findings of the everyday economy research achieved through engagement between academic researchers and local communities and appraise the event engagement achievements.

Reflections on Content

Changing world of work

The everyday economy research reflected societal changes which took place over the various timeframes studied in the different community engagement projects. How perception, definition and the role of work had been changing over time was a key issue. Traditional work (such as mining) had disappeared and the descendants of traditional workers were no longer living locally. This raises the question of local identity and feeling of belonging which underpins the approach to place regeneration across the projects.

The role of work tends to change both abruptly as well as gradually. An example of abrupt geopolitical change is the reunification of the two Germanies after the cold war when workers in traditional industries were aware that capitalist inward investment would not employ them all and they had to think of employing each other. Homeworking was more gradual but accelerated under the pandemic. When it became more common, opinions were voiced that work in pyjamas was not real work, but more recently, during Covid, public debates pointed to its adverse effects on productivity and mental health.⁷

Physical aspects

Homeworking has also physical repercussions which is likely to extend to the urban scale. Already homeworkers for whom commuting becomes less critical are seeking

⁷ e.g popular reflection on; Working from home? Here is why getting dressed is more important than you think, posted by Lauren Geall for Life (undated). <https://www.stylist.co.uk/life/working-from-home-tips-get-dressed-never-wear-pyjamas-stay-productive-psychology/368185>

more space indoors and outdoors by moving further out where homes are cheaper. This in turn impacts both on central locations and on the use of suburban localities and may significantly transform whole urban structures in the longer term.

The physical built environment is also important for community memory. This was illustrated by the efforts of a mining community to refurbish its “grand workers’ palace” and to form a community land trust which signifies the importance of buildings for local identity.

Capacity building

Capacity building was considered important in all the projects. How this can be achieved to the benefit of all is a challenge and remains still aspirational for many research teams. Nevertheless, some academic researchers took the initiative to train individuals in the community to become part of a technical and community research team, which enriched the engagement of academic researchers in turn by providing them with greater insight into local cultural depth of their projects. A number of local people were trained in social research methods and market research to assist in academic surveys and help facilitate local focus groups. Some local authorities were recruiting and training community researchers to their mutual advantage. A good way of improving knowledge exchange between academic researchers and local communities is to involve students in voluntary work to support communities. All these initiatives generated more community researchers, sometimes conceived as “community scientists” as termed by the Institute for Global Prosperity.

Long term

Crucially, the success of capacity building was considered to be dependent on a long term engagement strategy which starts with research and data collection, and moves on to other activities throughout the project, including data analysis, writing up, publication, and also design of urban interventions. Obtaining a deeper meaningful engagement means including the ethics of co-design from beginning to end and collaborating with community researchers on as many elements of the project as possible.

Reflections on Process

Silos

The long standing silo structure of society - in the academic world as well as in established local communities and their local institutions - has to be softened up by building bridges, or at least casting ropes across the chasms between these silos.

Traditionally, academics find themselves on one side and local communities on the other side of a socio-spatial, cultural-mental divide, besides other key stakeholders: local authorities, developers, land owners, NGOs, users and visitors of these areas, etc. They all have covert or overt, unconscious or conscious vested interests which are of course legitimate. For any fruitful cooperation between researchers and community

activists, as well as with other relevant stakeholders of everyday economy it is important to identify and recognise these vested interests, as well as exploring their mutual benefits or contradictions as a basis for further cooperation, such as in a concrete projects of community regeneration encompassing places and people.

Mutual benefits

The issue of mutual benefit of community research is important to include consciously in the research design. This means to be clear about what these benefits could be.

Benefits to academic researchers can be useful as academic curriculum extension, to attract funding for research and students in the field.⁸ Learning to communicate with, and adapt to unfamiliar parts of society and learning from their way of understanding urban development processes can create a niche of innovative expertise, marketable in the world of business.⁹

The benefits to the local communities include learning the language of other social cultures, thus to communicate effectively and be able to persuade perceived 'others': the local authority, developers, the business community. Local communities can learn from the academic way of thinking and managing information, thereby getting to value their own capacity and cultural worth. Cooperating with academic researchers can lead to career development for locals by accessing higher education courses. By learning to debate with unknown discussion partners, they can gain self-assurance and self-confidence and establish respect and status for the community.

Benefits of everyday economy research for planners and politicians are to obtain evidence based arguments approved by local communities to get their development strategies endorsed. By gaining greater insight from action research into the communities and their attachment to the areas they intend to regenerate, developers become better equipped to adjust their negotiations to encounter less objections.

Mutual understanding

For such cross-cultural cooperation to succeed means to recognise and value specific forms of knowledge and venture out from the comfort zone of respective specialist fields and activities. This may arguably require mutual recognition of 'symmetry of ignorance', meaning acknowledgement that all parties can learn and gain from each other.

A task of action research which is bringing together academics and local communities is to work on such communication issues without which no genuine ground for understanding can be established. In this process some form of cultural osmosis tends to take place. Each party assimilates consciously or unconsciously concepts, notions,

⁸ e.g. London Global University, UCL Public Engagement Unit.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmVjtxxBqig>

⁹ The UCL Bartlett School of Planning has been exploring these issues over some time. See for example: UCL Bartlett School of Planning approach to collaboration between academic research and community activism:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9GxwQ2tAwQ>

symbols, meanings of the language of the other, and by doing so transforms and internalises them. It could be argued that this process is necessary, albeit not sufficient to establish a common ground for co-working which requires mutual respect of each other's language and its specificities, what in effect constitutes the culture of each group of participants.

Traditional (reductionist) research approaches tend to aim at convergence, for example finding a common language between diverse protagonists. Reality of action research indicates that it may be more pertinent to take a different approach. It could be compared with language and translation required for mutual understanding. All the stakeholders involved would need to acknowledge and respect the reserved space inherent in each language for which there is no translation, and to seek some necessary transposition instead. It would mean to involve all 'languages', all modes of understanding and interpretation in the process of cooperation and building bridges to aim at consensus. Such a process could evolve into reciprocal understanding of diverse 'languages', thus into obtaining a more differentiated knowledge of cultures, their possibly immutable core and their soft aspects open to transformation through negotiation to reach mutual agreement.

Such an interactive approach to co-creation based on cultural equity would also address the ethical issue of legitimacy and value of the research for all parties. It would depend on both trust- and capacity-building, but also on consciousness of what type of benefits such research is bringing to all participants, its legacy for communities and its ability to broaden the learning process of researchers beyond the traditional academic confines.

Hard to reach

This leaves the issue of the 'hard to reach' in the participation process. Interchanges like the webinars on everyday economy research reflect a typical pattern of participation, usually ranging from a small number of very vocal and engaged contributors of discussions to more passive ones keeping to a single intervention or asking written questions and those who remain silent albeit present, but also those who are absent for different reasons. The existence of the 'hard to reach' is often recognised, but how to entice them to join in and express their needs and wishes remains a challenge of community research as well as during the implementation of solutions. This is an important issue for further research.

Notion of evidence

The notion of evidence also needs closer examination. How does evidence differ from perception, interpretation and how is such evidence conveyed and communicated? Evidence for academics can be conceptual (a priori theoretical assumptions), intellectual (verbalised), observational, analytical, from where they are imputing statements, drawing inferences and conclusions. For local communities, evidence can manifest itself as feelings, emotions, through body language, expressed in words, gestures, images, photos or memorabilia. Other users of everyday economy research may see the usefulness of evidence as proof to confirm their arguments.

Reflections on Events Engagement

Test bed

The two webinar events on the everyday economy research presented a fertile evidence base to explore and test some of the assumptions and reflections on what amounts to genuine inter-cultural engagement as a basis of equitable and mutually beneficial community research. Adding to content during the participatory exchange highlighted in the summaries of the discussions can be construed as evidence of engagement.

Event context

The community research projects presented had benefited from direct human contact which stimulated engagement and produced innovative findings of common interest. In contrast, the everyday economy research events were deprived of face to face interaction. The events were well publicised among researchers and communities and other interested parties, open and easily accessible to all. However, the need to hold the events online was a major impediment. The pandemic brought to bear the uniqueness of face to face human interaction, essential for community research event engagement. While digital communication enables participation in larger numbers from wider afield, it cannot replace the conducive nature of meeting in the round in a common space, with body language, eye contact and conviviality. This hindrance has to be taken into account when assessing the everyday economy research events engagement.

Event characteristics

The size of these events was always expected to be finite, engaging mostly the academic researchers and the community activists who shared their everyday economy community research, together with the wider research community and other agencies involved in community development and place making. This type of events tends to attract only part of a potential audience as individuals have other obligations and priorities. It was thus predictable that the research teams and the community activists directly involved in the everyday research would be most vocal and engaged in the discussions.

A common feature of such events is their structure, usually consisting of presentations with a discussion scheduled at the end, often curtailed by time constraints. The two everyday economy research events deliberately avoided this imbalance, allocated generous time to the exchange between all participants and encouraged them explicitly to take active part. The first event which explored academic concerns about community research followed a more traditional approach of six uninterrupted presentations and a discussion at the end. The fact that three out of the six studies were carried out on the same mining community but from different academic disciplines created a fertile ground for dynamic debate engagement. The second event with community focused presentations was divided into two parts of three presentations, each with ensuing

participant exchanges. This favoured engagement and more active participation, also because the community activist presenters were skilled in stimulating exchange.

Another formal characteristic of such research events is that participation of the wider audience is usually framed in terms of questions and answers. This confines outside participants to strictly addressing the presentations without an opportunity to contribute their own experiences and knowledge and this may limit wider engagement.

Engagement conditions

Group and individual behaviour at face to face engagement events is framed by an engagement typology which may differ online. Engagement tends to divide into a small number of participants who dominate the discussion, online possibly due to the host; those who prepare and make a specific comment linked to their own expertise, online posted on chats; those who wish to learn but not to intervene and those present but not heavily engaged, both not verifiable online. This leaves those who are absent. They divide into those who encounter too much hindrance to attend, due to lack of technological equipment or know-how to access online, and those who are not willing to participate. The latter must not be confused with 'hard to reach' and their right to absence is not always recognised in community research.

Engagement at the everyday economy events

Considering all these aspects, the two events were able to generate engagement, not least because it was also the subject matter of the community research itself. Engagement reached far beyond clarification of details and comparison of material aspects. Starting from place and spatial belonging, event engagement moved to ethnographic approach, place based community aspirations, self-determination of cultural heritage and ventured into conceptual thought about evidence, mutual understanding, capacity building, reciprocity and equity. This defies the academic research hierarchy perpetuated by conventional wisdom of superiority of theory and abstraction over practical, action-, outreach- and community research.

Event engagement transcends communication modes. Linked to individual characteristics it also depends on specific features of an event. Particularly conducive environments and contexts can enhance engagement at such events, but there exist also specific techniques to encourage comprehensive audience participation. Exploring both these aspects forms part of research on everyday economy. A useful next step would be to publish all these community research experiences on the Everyday Economy website and to share them with a wider constituency to obtain responses, further contributions and to mobilise continuous engagement.

A further, rather conceptual process of better mutual understanding as basis for successful common action and engagement could take the form of a concrete place-based project. This could become a next step of conscious reciprocal engagement, focusing on the nature of cooperation between academics and local communities to their mutual benefit which would make the respective vested interests explicit and

establish which ones and how they could be satisfied through closer cooperation, interaction, understanding, consensus building and agreement.

In conclusion, the richness and diversity of the community activist experiments presented during these two events, together with the excursions of academics into testing paradigms and theories in the field show how much can still be discovered and harnessed as lessons for continuous interaction between academic and community research to their mutual benefit.

Judith Ryser, London, August 2021

For further information: Everyday Economy Research website:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/everyday-economy/news/2021/jun/everyday-economy-research-launch-event> - <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/everyday-economy/>