

# PEOPLE POWERED CHANGE

# 12

*Twelve domains that people are uniquely  
able to change through handmade and  
homemade solutions.*

**Cormac Russell**  
**Nurture Development**

## INTRODUCTION

The question: ‘what is within the hands of people, and is within their power alone to change?’ is central to understanding what we mean by Big Society, Our Society and People Powered Change. Based on the work and research findings of the Asset Based Community Development Institute and others in and with communities throughout the world, I believe there are at least twelve domains that are uniquely within the competencies of people, and by implication, cannot happen without People Powered Change.

Our health, safety, care for the environment, safe food production and consumption, local economic development, raising our young people, ageing well in place/locale, building strong communities, civic action towards deeper democracy and a more just society, response to natural disaster and emergencies, co-producing knowledge and ultimately the capacity to change the world, all call on handmade and homemade solutions, all of which are uniquely within the domain of people powered change. “Restoring bonds among people can be a cost effective and practical point of leverage for solving some of most pressing social problems’. Cacioppo & Patrick (authors of Loneliness – Human nature and the need for social connection)

*‘Paradoxically we will achieve the change we seek, when we change the way we seek it; when we become more active doing only what we can with what we have to produce a sustaining and sustainable society, we will discover we have all we need to change the world.’*

*Cormac Russell*

# 1

## HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Epidemiologists are largely agreed that there are five main determinants of health and wellbeing. These include our personal behaviours, the extent of our social networks, our physical environment, our economic security, and access to professional healthcare. In other words, the extent to which we as people are positively connected to each other, our environment and local economic opportunities determines our respective health outcomes (how long we live and how often we are sick), more so than our level of access to professional healthcare, by a ratio of 9:1. [1]

Not surprising given that medical systems cannot produce relatedness, mutuality or love. It would be interesting therefore to know what ratio of the current health budget in Britain is invested in supporting people to use their power to grow healthier and support their friends and neighbours to do the same. By focusing on health, not disease, and supporting positive behaviours and human connectedness, more can be done to ensure positive health outcomes.

[1] *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, McKnight, J, & Block, P. (2010)

# 2

## **SAFETY & SECURITY**

Our research points to two major determinants of our local safety:

1. How many neighbors we know by name.
2. How often we are present and together with one another in the public areas outside our houses.

The empirical evidence may be counter intuitive, but nonetheless, increasing police presence, or the number of surveillance cameras, or the height of speed bumps for the most part does not lead to enhanced safety and security in the same way that a connected community can. Security is a feeling; as such, no government crime figures, no matter how positive, can rival in someone's imagination the spectre of a thief or attacker. Knowing that there are other people, nearby, vigilant and sympathetic towards us, is more reassuring than the distant and delayed reactions of professionals.

# 3

## THE ENVIRONMENT

While the energy savings of just one person turning off the lights, unplugging switches, or even switching from a petrol-guzzler to a more energy efficient motor may seem inconsequential, if millions of people take such action, then the cumulative positive impact would change the world. That action must be local and people powered, fueled by personal and sometimes by collective choices made by communities that have decided to aggregate their power to change the way they relate to their environment.

The village of Kamikatsu [2] is a fine example of the extent to which people can collectivise their responses to environmental challenges. They recycle everything. The immediate impetus for the villagers to move in that direction, was the state requirement to shut down incinerators – a problem you would think, but through people power they generated a local solution to a local problem and secured a big local buy-in. Closer to home, in January of this year, eight people in Wadebridge, Cornwall launched the WREN initiative – securing an agreement from energy companies to collectively create a community fund from the renewable energy the town sends back to the grid.

NESTA's Mass Localism report [3], as well as framing the case for local solutions to environmental challenges, offers some excellent examples of what is possible when people become more intentional and collective about their decisions around transport, heating and lighting their homes and communities, and how they manage their waste. The report also charts a pathway towards scaling local solutions for mass impact. These actions are critical to saving the planet. This does not exclude Government or big Business, since they have a major and equally critical role to play, but even if they were to fulfill this role completely, without people powered change, the planet would still be in peril.

[2] Japan's first zero waste village, see [www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/aug/.../recycling.japan..](http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/aug/.../recycling.japan..)

[3] [http://www.nesta.org.uk/home1/assets/features/mass\\_localism](http://www.nesta.org.uk/home1/assets/features/mass_localism)

# 4

## NURTURING THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Most enterprises start as innovations at the edge of mainstream society. They start small and local, in garden sheds, attics and at the kitchen table. They are fuelled by people power, and it is that same power that sustains entrepreneurs as they go from ideas stage to business development and implementation. Those small and medium enterprises are the heart blood of local economies and one of the most reliable sources of employment, especially in low income neighbourhoods.

People also have purchase and investment/saving power and can use these intentionally to ensure through what they buy and where they save that money circulates within the local economy in a way that benefits local people and sustains local businesses. Aside from the money economy there is the core economy which facilitates non-monetary exchange of goods, and services, and naturally clears the way for collaborative consumption and a shift from the mantra of ‘growth at any cost’ to one of ‘enough’. [4]

Martin Simon’s recent book ‘Your Money or Your Life: Time for Both’ [5], is an important reminder that every human being has something extremely valuable to contribute, and that all too often the money economy prohibits those contributions. Alternative currencies such as time credit, redress such imbalances. Timebanking provides a wonderful framework within which everyone can ‘give and take’, in a way that is mutually nourishing.

As a side bar to this discussion, larger businesses, NGOs, and governmental institutions that wish to make a marked and lasting difference to local economies and the people that depend on them could do so simply by ensuring that their procurement policies and sourcing arrangements for goods and services are ‘locally-facing’. Where the capacity to provide required goods and services does not exist locally, then such institutions could behave like good ‘resource-full’ neighbours, and support the growth in capacity of local enterprises capable of meeting their requirements.

[4] <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Enough-Breaking-free-world-more/dp/0340935901> (Naish, J, Enough, Breaking free of the World of More, 2008)

[5] [http://www.timebanking.org/documents/Publications/FS057-sampler\\_for\\_supporters.pdf](http://www.timebanking.org/documents/Publications/FS057-sampler_for_supporters.pdf)

# 5

## **MINDFUL FOOD CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION**

It is not possible to speak about nurturing local economies or local purchasing without referring to the local food movement. The local food movement endeavours to reunite producers and consumers, who are typically separated through a chain of processors/manufacturers, shippers and retailers. The rationale for redeveloping these relationships is to return the power (quality control over products and methods of production) back to the consumer and the producer respectively. The more complex and distant the food supply chain the more monetary relationships are involved. This makes food, or what some nutritionists dare to call ‘food-like substances’, less nutritious and more expensive. Local food chains reduce the time, distance and number of relationships in the supply of seasonal, cheaper and more nutritious food. By adding the element of relationship and ritual to food gathering and preparation there is the added bonus of making eating about celebration and connection and not simply a ‘fuel-stop’ in a hectic day.

Collaboration between local farmers and producers in the UK, to provide on-line farmers markets has meant that consumers who can not make it to the local farmers market can still buy locally. [6] Bringing people powered change to the relationship we have with the food we produce and consume has the potential to enhance outcomes in the areas of health, environment (mitigating the impacts of methods of food production, energy consumption and transportation) and local economic well being.

[6] [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/food\\_and\\_drink/real\\_food/article3483774.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/food_and_drink/real_food/article3483774.ece)

# 6

## **RAISING POWERFUL CONNECTED CHILDREN**

John McKnight and Peter Block argue that “we all say that it takes a village to raise a child. And yet, in modernized societies, this is rarely true. Instead, we pay systems to raise our children -- teachers, counselors, coaches, youth workers, probation officers, nutritionists, doctors, McDonald's and MTV. There is no "youth problem" here. There is a village problem of adults who have forgone their responsibility and capacity to join their neighbors in raising the young. Our children do not need school reform, they need neighbors who know their names and teach them to be citizens”.

In other words, children need their significant others and adults immediately around them to believe they have something of value to offer children as they grow. Professional interventions that promote a narrative that says to children, albeit unintentionally: ‘your parents and the adults around you are inadequate and incompetent when it comes to raising you, we are the experts in this area and we will help you grow up properly’, work in the opposite direction; by inflating their own capacities, they negate the power of communities to play a central role in raising powerful and connected children. Children do not grow powerful in institutions; their power grows the closer they are to the centre of family and community life.

Needless to say some children and families need professional support, but they also need the power of other people within their communities, since as the African proverbs reminds us: ‘it takes a village to raise a child’.

# 7

## **AGEING WELL IN PLACE/LOCALE**

Across the life course regardless of age, everyone needs to give and receive care. When I work in communities and speak to people on their door steps, the issue that people say they care about most is the well being of older people in their neighbourhoods. When I speak with older people, all too often they feel isolated and ‘useless’, and say that the issue that concerns them most is their safety. They are afraid, and they are alone; surrounded by a community with a reservoir of care and support waiting to be released.

I think that isolation and the feeling of being useless are killing a significant number of older people. The appropriate antidote for such conditions does not come in the form of services, but through care. Care is the freely given gift of the heart from one person to another; you can not manage it, nor can you buy it, it is not a service that you can package. The sort of care required, is the kind that sees older people both for their gifts and needs, in that order. This kind of care is only located among communities of people who recognise that a community that does not have a central place for older people has a place for no one.

More attention needs to be given to connecting people across the life course so that people power can be amplified by the wisdom and giftedness of older people, and so that in turn we can all expect to age well in place as part of a community of people powered change.

# 8

## **BUILDING COMMUNITIES**

A community is best defined as a group of people who, regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds, have been able to accept and transcend their differences, enabling them to communicate effectively and openly and to work together toward goals that they themselves have identified as being for their common good. While getting to such a place often requires skilled facilitation and organisation, nevertheless, communities grow from inside out, evolving from the place where ‘I’ live, to the community where ‘we’ grow.

Mike Green notes that ‘When people discover what they have, they find power. When people join together in new connections and relationships they build power. When people become more productive together, they exercise their power to address problems and realise dreams.’ [7] Where better to build people power than in community? Community Building and the nurturing of people powered change are interconnected endeavours.

[7] *When People Care Enough To Act*, Mike Green with Henry Moore & John O’Brien (2006) Inclusion Press

# 9

## **CIVIC ACTION FOR DEEPER DEMOCRACY & JUST SOCIETY**

Civic action for social, environmental and economic justice provides the rudder for keeping governments honest and on track, and democracy meaningful. Without civic action driven by people powered change the promise of democracy rings hollow and the act of casting one's vote becomes no more than handing your power over to another.

# 10

## RESPOND TO NATURAL DISASTERS

No where is people power more apparent than in the face of natural disasters; as human being when put to the pin of our collar we dig deep, pull together (self organise), and respond. One of the reasons people power becomes so apparent at such times is because natural disasters tend to strip away system supports, and inhibit institutional responses.

In the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami 12,259 people died, 2,858 were injured, and 15,315 people are currently reported missing, as well as over 125,000 buildings damaged or destroyed. The earthquake and tsunami caused extensive and severe structural damage, particularly to road and rail infrastructure. Around 4.4 million households in northeastern Japan were left without electricity and 1.5 million without water. What has also become clear in the days and weeks immediately following the earthquake and tsunami is the immense capacity of the Japanese people to ‘endure the seemingly unbearable’, what they explicitly and proudly refer to as ‘Gaman’. [8] Gaman, like yeast in baking, is the rising agent of people powered change, and it needs to be intentionally added if we are to ensure we are sufficiently resilient to do what only we can in times of great challenge.

Intimate local knowledge and flexible response are two of the more important features of people powered change; evident in all twelve domains, but nowhere more evident than in the face of climate change. During the recent bout of heavy snow fall a local network of residences from Newcastle shared with me how when going door to door to check on their older neighbours they paid special attention to their neighbours who had no ‘footprints in the snow’ on their driveways. Since of course that indicated to them that no one else was visiting. It’s that level of local intimate knowledge that only people power can generate.

[8] A Japanese term derived from Zen Buddhism, meaning fortitude in times of unbearable challenge.

# 11

## **CO-PRODUCING KNOWLEDGE & SHARING WISDOM**

Knowledge and wisdom are hatched in the nest of everyday life and more particularly in associational life, not in educational, commercial or professional institutions. What concepts such as collectivism, learning society, learning organisations, and the digital learning commons -with their shared ethos around open source learning and shared wisdom- all point towards, is the importance of collective intelligence.

Knowledge need no longer be bottle necked within institutions, or siloed into narrow disciplines, nor need it be thought of as the ‘solitary affair’. Despite the endeavours of many educational commercial and professional institutions to make it so, knowledge is not a commodity, and cannot be effectively packaged, or consumed as such. The production of knowledge is uniquely within the competencies of a community of people, who consensually come together to make sense of the world they share. While it may subsequently be curricularised and general access restricted, this does not change the fact that it was first co-produced by a community of citizens.

The pursuit of knowledge, calls on citizens to access their collective intelligence, and ‘hidden wealth’, to create the futures they want rather than settling for the futures they get, or are thought to seek. It is this collective or democratic intelligence that will and should ultimately define what is meant by Big Society.

W.B. Yeats said ‘Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire’. The more progressive of our educational systems, and other institutions- designed for a by-gone Industrial age- have come to realise that they cannot unilaterally light that fire. Instead they are reshaping themselves into learning organisations, where conversations are how actionable change is brought about, and the lines between learner and teacher, customer and expert are becoming ever more blurred.

## **CO-PRODUCING KNOWLEDGE & SHARING WISDOM**

Online social networking, and open source learning platforms, not to mention parent run schools [9] have prompted me to look again at the words of Socrates (469 BC–399 BC), ‘as for me, all I know is that I know nothing’. I now take these words to mean that no one individual or institution holds a monopoly on knowledge, since knowledge is symphonic, and only rings true when everyone is enabled to participate in its co-production. We are, I think, approaching a time when everyone will get to play and no-ones talents will be cast aside. People power, online and in real time, will determine the pace of this change.

[9] <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23874688-campaigners-and-parents-to-run-six-schools-in-london.do>

# 12

## CHANGING THE WORLD

The above, eleven domains of people powered change, all highlight the unique competencies of people to use personal and collective power to deepen care, wisdom, democracy, and justice, and to enhance safety, nutrition and health. If these are not done by people then systems no matter how well funded will not be able to provide an adequate substitute. There are many wonderful out of the ordinary examples of people powered change, all of which ought to be acknowledged and celebrated. However the extent and severity of the social fabric issues that we face, suggests that people powered change has not yet reached its tipping point.

“Change doesn’t happen because of how we invest our money. Change happens because of how we invest our human energy, and it always has since we came down from the trees. Everyone’s got a margin of discretionary energy – ten percent, twenty percent – that isn’t used up making their way in the world. That’s the energy that’s available for social change.” Daniel Taylor – Future Generations

Paradoxically we will achieve the change we seek, when we change the way we seek it; when we become more active doing only what we can with what we have to produce a sustaining and sustainable society, we will discover we have all we need to change the world.

# CONCLUSION

All twelve are uniquely within the domain of people powered change, and if people do not bring their power to bear on them, they will not happen. What nourishes people powered change is the intentional will to identify, connect and mobilise people's power, with people firmly in the driving seat of that three step process. For that process to be effective people powered change must be place based, relationship centred, strengths focused, citizen-led and have at its bedrock a commitment to equality and social justice.

The next piece in this series of three contributions to a reflection on People Powered Change, Big Society and Our Society, will consider the optimum process by which citizen-led action within these 12 domains can be nurtured, also highlighting what puts a 'drag' on people power. It will suggest that one of the main things that inhibits people powered change is that institutions have learned how to intervene in people's lives but not to support them to do what only they could do with people power. The challenge to such institutions is to ask:

1. Where are we replacing, controlling, overwhelming the power of people to be producers and co-producer?
2. How can we listen better to what people in citizen and community space think they can do, and what they think would be helpful from the outside?

Cormac Russell is the Managing Director of Nurture Development [www.nurturedevelopment.ie](http://www.nurturedevelopment.ie), and faculty member of the ABCD Institute, Northwestern University, Illinois.