

# Citizen organising: reweaving the fabric of civil society?

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Our experience has confirmed for us that the threads that once connected the individual to the family, the family to their community and the community to the wider society are fraying and in danger of breaking altogether... We who lead and organise with the Citizen Organising Foundation (COF) aim to 'reweave the fabric of civil society'. To do this effectively and for the long term, we believe we must develop the art of politics at a neighbourhood level. We do this by teaching the tools of leadership, compromise, negotiation, public discourse and power - in action.

COF Position Paper

This paper will evaluate the practice of broad-based citizen organising in London and Birmingham, through the Citizen Organising Foundation. It will measure it against COF's own stated aim of 'reweaving the fabric of civil society'.

## 1. The 'crisis' in public life

The concerns that COF's work seeks to address are the measurable decline in engagement in both local civil society (such as churches, trades unions and residents' associations) and national politics. The recent general election highlighted many of the issues in this latter area:

- An increasing public disengagement with electoral politics, and with conventional political parties - manifest in low voter turnout, and a record low share of the vote for the majority party in the House of Commons,
- The use of fear of difference (in terms both of security and immigration policies) as a campaigning tactic,
- A 17% vote for the British National Party in the Barking constituency in East London.

Apathy, poverty and racism are issues upon which the leaders of all the mainstream political parties express concern. All three issues relate to the distribution of *power*. There is a great deal of activity aimed at "empowering" citizens in Britain's poorest neighbourhoods (often those with the highest concentration of Black and Asian residents).

Alongside questions of *power* lies a concern about the lack of shared *values* around which Britain citizens can unite. Disengagement from mainstream politics and the appeal of extremist political parties flow in part from the feeling that the contemporary state lacks a moral narrative that can inspire and motivate its citizens. As Alistair MacIntyre has written

The modern nation-state .... present[s] itself on the one hand as a bureaucratic supplier of goods and services, which is always about to, but never actually does, give its clients value for money, and on the other as a repository for sacred values, which from time to time invites one to lay down one's life on its behalf... It is like being asked to die for the telephone company.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A. MacIntyre, 'A Partial Response to My Critics', in J. Horton and S. Mendus (eds) *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Notre Dame: 1994), 303.

## 2. The strategy of citizen organizing

In its aspiration to “reweave the fabric of civil society”, citizen organizing offers a strategy to address both the *powerlessness* of marginalised communities and the lack of a sense of shared *values*. COF now organizes in the UK’s two largest cities, London and Birmingham. These are also cities with a great diversity of faiths and cultures. Its broad-based organisations in each city are alliances of dues paying institutions - including mosques, Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal and Free churches, Buddhist and Sikh Temples, schools, trades unions, student unions and community centres. As we shall see later, the diversity of the alliance’s membership is one of the primary attractions of organising for those who engage in it.

### 2a. Origins

COF was founded in the 1980s, drawing heavily on the experience of the Industrial Areas Foundation in the United States. Its ultimate genesis is thus from Saul Alinsky, who began organising some of Chicago’s poorest neighbourhoods in the 1930s. As Jay MacLeod writes

Alinsky’s breakthrough was to reverse the logic of paternalistic reform by wresting control away from the professional do-gooders and handing it over to the people they were supposed to help. Alinsky transformed community activism from the liberal, elite-led endeavour it had become around 1900 into something he hoped would be more hard-headed and democratic.<sup>3</sup>

The language used by Alinsky is hard-headed and pragmatic: his aim was to help the poor organise in a way that changed the balance of power. In his own words

Only a fool would step into a community dominated by materialistic standards and self-interest and begin to preach ideals.<sup>4</sup>

The technique of organising was to bring together the (often divided) communities living in a particular neighbourhood, on the basis of their shared ‘self-interest’. While the campaigns were on specific, winnable issues, the wider aim was to build a local alliance with an ongoing set of relationships of trust and commitment - where each successful campaign not only brought a tangible result (such as improved social housing, or higher wages) but developed grassroots leadership and the alliance’s power.

Characteristics of Alinsky-style organising include

- *Relationships* - At the heart of his approach is the ‘one-to-one’ meeting, where the organiser or grassroots leader seeks to build relationships within his or her community, and with those who exercise power over it.
- *Financial Independence* - The expenses of the organisation, including the organisers’ pay, was raised as much as possible from dues paid by the membership - never by state funding.
- *Research* – ‘Problems’, once identified, need to be turned into tangible demands that can be won. The local alliance therefore learns to identify changes that can be won, and those (councillors, MPs, business leaders, hospital executives) with the power to deliver them (usually called the ‘targets’ of the alliance’s action. It also needs to be sure that it has sufficient power to persuade the targets to accede to its demands.
- *Tension* - A key tenet of Alinsky’s approach is that power is never handed over without a struggle. Dramatic tactics might be used to apply moral or practical pressure to the

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<sup>3</sup> J. MacLeod, *Community Organising: A Practical and Theological Evaluation* (London: 1988), 1.

<sup>4</sup> S. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: 1969), 12.

'target' of an action. They would be legal and peaceful - but seek to embarrass the 'target' - often into living up to his or her own rhetoric. An example of the dramatic use of tension is the proposed 'tie-up' of a bank

All banks want money and advertise for new... accounts... [But] opening a savings account is more than a routine matter. First, you sit down with one of the multiple vice-presidents or employees and begin to fill out forms and respond to questions for at least thirty minutes. If a thousand or more people all moved in, each with \$5 or \$10 to open up a savings account, the bank's floor functions would be paralysed... The bank is in a difficult position... [its] public image would be destroyed if some thousand would-be depositors were arrested or forcibly evicted from the premises.<sup>5</sup>

(A more modest variant on this theme was used by COF as part of its 'Living Wage' campaign to persuade several banks to improve the pay and conditions of the contract cleaners in their offices at Canary Wharf).

- *Assemblies* - The power of the local broad-based alliance was that it had organised people, and organised money. Regular assemblies would bring thousands of members together, to hold the 'targets' of an action to account. This was participatory democracy in action - grassroots leaders calling elected officials and business and governmental managers to account on issues of local concern. Often, a deal would be brokered in advance of the assembly - but it would be the knowledge that he or she would be faced by thousands of organised local residents that would focus the mind of the 'target'.
- *Leadership Development* - A leader, in the terms of community organising, is someone who develops the leadership of those around them (through one-to-ones) and becomes confident in speaking out in public life (e.g. at assemblies). Organising constantly sought to identify and develop new leaders, and each corporate action would be followed by *evaluation* - so that lessons were learnt, and action was focused and effective.

By Alinsky's death in 1972, it was clear that, despite many striking successes, IAF was going to have to rethink its strategy. The decision was taken to turn to religious congregations, as they were often the only value-based institutions remaining in the inner cities. Indeed, America's black churches had already proved their organised power through the civil rights movement. They were to become the main building blocks of IAF's broad-based organisations in many American cities.

The activities of congregations of faith, with their focus on nurturing spiritual and moral values, provided a complement (and, one might argue, a corrective) to the focus on power in Alinsky's teaching. It is clear that a strong set of values is implicit in his approach - but, like many of those who unmask the power dynamics hiding behind moral rhetoric, Alinsky used moral exhortation sparingly.

MacLeod suggests that the engagement of faith congregations in IAF has led to a fuller articulation of the values on which it is based:

The key word in church or broad-based organising is values. People are still organised around issues based on self-interest, but church-based organisations are also built upon the values, visions, beliefs and commitments which stem from religious traditions. Even old-school organisers are coming to appreciate that churches work better from their own values and vision than from self-interest. Self-interest has yielded to the values of justice, concern for the poor, the dignity of the person, participation and respect for diversity as a motivation for involvement.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: 1971), 162.

<sup>6</sup> J. MacLeod, *op. cit.*, 4.

## 2b. Organising in the UK

Organising, in being transferred across the Atlantic, has retained the six hallmarks identified above as distinctive of Alinsky's approach. However, like IAF, the Citizen Organising Foundation has built its alliance around congregations of faith. Christian churches, and in particular Roman Catholic churches, remain the largest single grouping within its London and Birmingham affiliates.

When a congregation joins London or Birmingham Citizens the first activity which it engages in is *renewing its own relationships*. A programme begins which includes housegroups, discussions after worship, and - centrally - 'one-to-one' relational meetings. Members of the congregation are identified who have the skills and enthusiasm to lead this process, and training is provided by London Citizens' paid staff.

Building a 'relational culture' is seen both as an end in itself, and as a way of finding out what a community needs. The specific issues that will be acted on arise from the concerns identified by local people. As well as having conversations within a congregation or branch, discussion then takes place *across organisations*. Sometimes this takes the form of 'Community Dialogues', where members of different organisations will come together to share their concerns about their common neighbourhood. They seek to identify both possible solutions, and the political or economic leaders who could (if persuaded) deliver the necessary changes.

In the last eight years in London (initially in East London, and now in the South and West of the city), actions have been concerned with the state of local hospitals; emissions from a pet food factory and the closure of local banks. Three actions dominated London Citizens' activities in 2004.

The first action in 2004 centred on the elections for Mayor of London. London Citizens mobilised its members for a 1800-person assembly in May in central London. At this event, the candidates for Mayor had to respond to direct and focused questions about the organisation's 'People's Manifesto'. This was a list of quite specific proposals (on areas such as Living Wage; affordable housing and safer neighbourhoods) which had come out of tens of thousands of conversations within member institutions - and then an internal Assembly in February 2004, where local leaders decided on which issues to focus.

All the leading candidates for Mayor agreed to the key demands. This included a commitment to bring a 'Living Wage' of £6.70 per hour to all those employed by the Greater London Authority and its associated institutions - and their subcontractors. Commitments around affordable housing mean London Citizens is now working with City Hall to pioneer community land trusts, giving people a long-term stake in their neighbourhoods.

The second campaign concerned London's 2012 Olympic bid. London Citizens were deeply sceptical of the bid process - experience over several months leading to a suspicion that the aim was to 'tick the box' of community support, whilst key decisions were made elsewhere. East and South Londoners have experience of large-scale projects such as Canary Wharf and the Millennium Dome attracting huge Government funding, without the promised local benefit. Consequently, London Citizens evolved a set of 'People's Guarantees' to ensure the aspirations of the 2012 bid were grounded in reality. These were pledges such as a Living Wage for all who worked on the Olympics and their preparations; a local labour clause with training opportunities; and the earmarking of much Olympic accommodation for social housing after the Games.

By July 2004, the communities in London Citizens had had no direct answers on the 'People's Guarantees'. They were aware that the only stage at which local people had real power was when they could give or withhold support for an Olympic bid. At a consultation event in

central London, a team of London Citizens leaders confronted 2012 Bid leader Lord Coe face to face. University of East London student Ali Babatunde spoke on behalf of the group. He made clear that community support would depend on concrete commitments. In November, the outcome of these negotiations was the public signing of an agreement by Lord Coe, Mayor Livingstone and Gregory Nichols (a sixth-former at St Bonaventure's, Forest Gate - a Catholic school in membership of London Citizens).

The agreement addressed the key issues of a 'Living Wage', affordable housing and local training, which London Citizens had raised. London Citizens' case had been that the bid's prospects with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) could only be strengthened by the extent to which it was shaped and owned by local people. London 2012, though initially resistant, now appears to accept the force of this analysis. When the IOC visited East London, the group of four community leaders they met were three Borough Council Leaders - and Gregory Nichols.

The third campaign, in South London, concerns the way clients are treated at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate office at Lunar House in Croydon. Again, this action has emerged from the 'one-to-ones' going on in member communities, and the action is currently at the 'research' stage. A 'People's Enquiry' has been set up, with a group of independent commissioners (public figures from the worlds of faith, academia and law) who will make recommendations in the autumn. Currently, testimonials from across London Citizens' membership are being fed into this process through public hearings and confidential forms.

The process is similar to a previous campaign at a local hospital in Newham - where the failure of the hospital to engage with The East London Communities Organisation (London Citizens' eastern affiliate) led local leaders to asking their Bishops to chair an enquiry even without the hospital's consent. The publicity generated by the process, including a 300-strong local Assembly - led the hospital to implement the key demands of the campaign for better cleaning, catering and signposting.

### **3. Evaluating the impact of organising**

Citizen organising certainly has a record of success in uniting communities to win tangible policy changes from politicians and businesses. With COF's annual budget running to only £400,000, an impressive amount is being achieved on relatively slender resources. (While the proportions differ in its early years, a fully-fledged citizen organisation will have 20-25% of its budget raised through dues paid by member institutions. The rest comes from charitable foundations - with no funding from the state.)

COF's organisations bring into common action a diverse alliance - for a very specific purpose. 'Wedge issues' (e.g. sexual ethics) on which a broad-based consensus cannot be achieved are not engaged with. A Catholic parish, as well as being in London Citizens, might be involved with the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children. A student union, also in London Citizens, might be campaigning in a diametrically opposite way. The broad-based organisation focuses only on the issues around which consensus might be reached. - it does not provide a forum for debating and resolving any of the more divisive issues. However, citizen organising can also be a catalyst for a wider cultural, and theological exchange. On the slender resources COF has, it is up to the individual member communities to take advantage of these opportunities. (E.g. one Anglican parish began joint Baptismal preparation with the local Catholic church, and also invited the Buddhist Centre to give talks on techniques of meditation.)

Citizen organising also roots political engagement in the neighbourhood - and so is more

effective in organisations with a strong geographical base. In a society where more interaction is taking place in networks which are not neighbourhood based, some would consider this a significant limitation on its potential.

### 3a. Fieldwork

In February 2005, fieldwork was carried out among members of Telco (The East London Communities Organisation) and the South London Citizens Organisation - both parts of London Citizens. The methodology that was followed consisted in focus discussion groups after Church services, and semi-structured interviews with members of the Citizens Organisation. The discussions evolved around three key questions: 1) What is the motivation to join the community organisation?; 2) What is the major benefit of the existence of community organisation; and 3) Why joining a community organisation and not a traditional political body? In addition, Telco's Spring Assembly in Stratford was attended and observed.

When asked about their motivation to join the Citizens Organisation, the most overwhelming response was the possibility of doing things *together*, and making changes in the local community:

It's your community, you are here, you can make changes, otherwise, who else is going to make the changes needed? [...] My motivation to join South London Citizens Organisation is to make changes. But for this, you need to get together. [...] We can do things when we are together, when there's unity. As an individual, you cannot do much, but together you can do things. And people know local needs. (focus group, parish of St Matthew's, Brixton)

The importance of the community, of this sense of 'being and doing together' is crucial at each stage of the work of broad-based community organising. It is not the individual who is trying to make changes on behalf of his or her community, but the whole community who participates in the changes. These words of a woman who is a member of Telco through her parish, best describe the functioning of broad-based community organising: "First, we acknowledge the problems of the local community together. Second, we address these problems together. And third, we take actions together to solve the problems. We take actions united around a common cause." Another churchgoer described her involvement with Telco as a way of "promoting justice for the underprivileged, and doing this with people of my own Church and others, *as a community*." Or as another member put it

The greatest benefit of London Citizens Organisation is that people who would otherwise not come together have come together. Different churches come together (Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Muslim, atheist, communist) and work together for the common good. What we would miss the most if this didn't exist is meeting people from different cultures and working together with other people." (focus group, parish of St Matthew's, Brixton)

This would echo the results of previous research by the University of London, in two East End neighbourhoods. Respondents expressed a high degree of interest in meeting across boundaries - but there was a perceived lack of opportunities to do so.

Respondents argued that the transient nature of a large fraction of the local population made it difficult to build personal relationships as had been done in the past. They were also concerned about the impact of crime, neglect of the area, poverty and the implications of regeneration and rising house prices. However, strong pockets of institutional commitment, involvement and activity survive despite the problems of the locality. People welcomed the ethnic and cultural diversity of the area, and expressed a real willingness to build bridges across different communities in civil society. It was argued that doing this through collective dialogue and action would help to widen a sense of collective purpose and commitment to each other and

the area.<sup>7</sup>

The fieldwork here bears this out: when such interaction is facilitated, through ‘one-to-ones’, Community Dialogues and political action on issues of common concern, it is taken up enthusiastically.

The local population is united by geography, and as such, people have a common stake in the locality and in the quality of the environment and services provided... This research would suggest that there is a real willingness to act on this front.<sup>8</sup>

Local people recognise significant changes in their neighbourhood which have been brought about through citizen organising. But this is not the main achievement: “That Telco makes people economically better off is very small. One of the biggest achievements of Telco is that people have a sense that they can make a difference rather than letting things happen for them. (Roman Catholic priest, East London).

People have become ‘actors’ and not simply ‘beneficiaries’ of actions that are being made for them. In other words, they are given *power*. This sense of empowerment was underlined by the members themselves when asked about why they had joined the citizens organisation: “It is about empowering and enabling people who are not usually involved in saying things. People become disillusioned, disenfranchised, and they aren’t citizens anymore. They need to be empowered.” (focus group, St Matthew’s, Brixton); “If Telco didn’t exist, it would strip people of their voices. [...] We are a big voice when we speak together. [...] We can express what we need as a community, safe environment, affordable housing.” (focus group, St Margaret, Canning Town)

### **3b. Constraints on organising**

Whilst the fieldwork indicates the level of enthusiasm for organising in the Christian congregations interviewed, and the particular enthusiasm for ‘meeting across boundaries’, London Citizens has not yet achieved the same level of participation amongst other faiths. In this section, we will consider the particular example Islam: owing to the strength of the Muslim community in East London, where organising is most established.

Within the British Muslim community there is a strong sense of working for social justice as exemplified by religious teachings such as: “*O believers, stand up for justice, as witnesses unto God.*”<sup>9</sup> There is a growing number of Muslim organisations that are instituted to work for reform of civil society, for social and political change.<sup>10</sup> It is not the case that such initiatives operate only in isolation for British Muslims also seem very keen to be involved in dialogue and collective action with other faith groups as can be seen by their presence in local interfaith groups across the country as well as in major national initiatives such as the Interfaith Network UK or the Derby Multi-faith Centre. Despite these examples the participation of Muslim organisations in COF is lower than one would expect.

In order to answer why, it may be pertinent to consider the following points. Many British Muslims still retain vivid memories of migration and are currently only into the second and third generations. In this context it is often felt that the basic infrastructure needs of Muslims are not

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<sup>7</sup> J. Wills et al., *Report on the state of civil society in Plaistow and Canning Town* (Queen Mary, University of London, 2002), 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Qur’an, 5:8.

<sup>10</sup> See for example: D. Hussain, “Councillors and Caliphs: Muslim Political Participation in Britain” in M. Seddon et al., *British Muslims between Assimilation and Segregation*, (Leicester: 2004).

adequately met – be that in terms of Islamic education for the young, availability of places of worship, recreational facilities for youth or challenging discrimination and Islamophobia. One factor, then, in explaining the limits of Muslim engagement is that its current preoccupation with basic needs leaves less energy and time available inter-faith activity of the kind COF is pioneering.

A second factor is more complex and subtle. Much of the language used by citizen organising and its methods are designed to challenge centralised power. The idea is that power should be widely dissipated and that as citizens, we all have the right to power and to hold those who do wield power in our name to account. Yet the Muslim community is currently under a severe spotlight in terms of its political allegiances and activism. It is a community that is trying to show how British it is and how mainstream it is, rather than declare its radical credentials. Terms such as ‘radical’ prove the case at hand – one can quite legitimately be a radical feminist, or a radical socialist, such labels even bringing a sense of kudos! But a ‘radical’ Muslim is worrying! The actions and assemblies of broad based organising require a confidence and a willingness to ‘rock the boat’ that the Muslim communities do not yet possess. Perhaps a third reason is that there is much ethnic, racial and religious diversity among Muslims despite the common bond of faith that ties them together. In this context one important difference relates to the perception of the state and power, and the degree of democratic experience. Those who have become accustomed to living under authoritarian regimes may not be well versed in the art of organising within civil society. In some places even a basic right of association may have been absent.

A fourth factor is the culture and faith of the paid organiser. The experience of COF has tended to be that organisations are stronger in the communities from which the organiser comes. Young Citizens (the forerunner of Birmingham Citizens) found it more difficult to recruit churches than mosques - but at that time had only one organiser, who was a Muslim. London Citizens, at the same time, was more dominated by Christian congregations - and in particular Catholic congregations. The majority of its organisers then came out of the Catholic community. Meeting across boundaries is thus likely to be more effective when there are a number of organisers in a city, and there is cultural diversity within the staff team.

It must be stressed that there is not a homogenous picture of Christian engagement being greater than that of Islam. Some Christian denominations have been more receptive to organising than others. The greater relative success of organising in Catholicism than, say, Anglicanism may also be related to specific features of the faith - particularly as it is manifest in poorer areas. Catholicism has a strong tradition of civic political engagement in the UK which (unlike that of Anglicans) tends to be based on numerical strength and mobilisation rather than establishment connections.<sup>11</sup> A very *public* form of political engagement may then play to the demographics of Catholicism, as well as to a clear body of teaching on the importance of the common good, and the dangers of the unfettered market.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> There is a further discussion of the issues facing Anglicans in R Furbey, P Else, R Farnell, P Lawless, S Lund, and B Wishart “Breaking with tradition? The Church of England and community organizing” in *Community Development Journal* 32: 141 – 150; and in A. Ritchie “From the Fathers to the Churches: Broad-based organising and inner-city ministry” in *Third Millennium* 5: 55-60.

<sup>12</sup> See for example the very well received document *The Common Good and the Catholic Church’s Social Teaching* issued for the general elections of 1996 by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales.



## **4. Conclusion**

This paper began with a twofold analysis of the crisis in civil society today: a feeling of powerlessness by citizens (the ones with the least power often being those from ethnic minorities) and the lack of a shared moral vision.

The evidence offered by the study of London Citizens' 2004 campaigns, and by the testimony of those involved in its work, is that citizen organizing does provide a way for local citizens to become more powerful. The fact that the alliance is built upon value-based organisations gives it an opportunity to address the feeling that politics lacks a moral vision. COF presents a framework within which value-based communities in some of the poorest, and most diverse communities can stop simply being on the receiving end of formation by the market, but can become active participants in its future.

As we indicated, organising is a very clear and focused process - in order to achieve a great deal, it leaves out a great deal else. So it is not without its limitations, and engagement across faiths and denominations remains uneven. But among those who work for social justice, and for greater engagement across 'boundaries' of culture and community, we are in no doubt that organising makes a distinctive and valuable contribution.