

# Temporal Belongings



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## Time and community a background paper

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## Introduction

In many ways communities are like families, continually changing and yet somehow retaining a certain set of identities over time. Those of us who work with communities recognise these processes; people arriving, gaining entry, negotiating roles, taking on responsibilities, falling out with one another, sometimes leaving, developing new skills, reconfiguring sets of relationships and generally responding to opportunities and threats as they arise in the social environment (or are imposed from the outside world of politics and economics).

Communities can be envisaged as complex living systems that adapt to changing circumstances with groups and organisations evolving over time through selection, mergers and unfortunately extinctions. As in the natural realm, this takes place at different rates for different sections of the population, partially dependent on the rate and quality of the interactions, and the responsiveness of key players.

## Marking time

The passage of time is an under-appreciated aspect of community processes but when you stop and think about it, time provides key markers of progress and of development, as well as creating pressures and expectations. Policy makers and funders invest in areas in the hope that communities will mature over the years, acquiring qualities of cohesion, sustainability and resilience, alongside skills and confidence to influence decision-making and drive improvements.

They may have an ambitious 'vision' of the future, usually couched in terms of outcomes to be achieved by the end of the 'project'. Practitioners and activists often face time in the form of specific dates by which proposals need to be submitted, reports completed or milestones reached. These notional deadlines are usually set externally, leaving little scope for communities to proceed at a pace that feels right for them, and this can result in many a missed opportunity, some sections of the community losing out and poor attention to community development principles of empowerment and equality.

## Pace and power pressures

Programme managers often start with a 'timeframe' for their work with communities, setting out a linear sequence of stages or tasks, sometimes called a 'pathway' or 'timeline'. They rarely consider how this model of progress towards specific goals imposes a power dynamic and may restrict the choices and contributions that communities are able to make. Time can be regarded as a finite resource that needs to be stretched or apportioned, and this way of thinking inevitably shapes objectives and may limit the range of people who can be involved in designing and delivering the 'projects', excluding those that would 'take more time' to engage and properly empower. Even the word 'project' conveys a sense of a time-limited intervention, rather than the nurturing of unfolding processes, with aims that may emerge only through iterations of parallel conversations and experimentation as more people come 'on board' or new ideas and resources appear.

Those with most power or the holders of resources are often in a position, like the conductor of an orchestra, to dictate the tempo; setting priorities, performance criteria, against which progress will be evaluated. All across the country communities are being set up to fail because they are not being allowed the time to develop at a more 'natural' pace that enables them to develop inclusive ways of working, resolve conflicts, overcome bureaucratic obstacles, deal with the unexpected and rise to challenges. There is much talk of capacity building and 'strengthening communities' but this takes time, a long time in many cases.

## Time for accounting

Pressure is often, however, created by arbitrary accounting frameworks: – money has to be spent by the end of the financial year or limited funding is provided for projects that have to be completed within a certain time period, say three years. The political cycles of central and local government elections similarly distort practice and constrain thinking, with politicians looking for demonstrable impact within their terms of office to show that their initiatives have 'made a difference' and 'improved lives'. Everyone is chasing after success and the pace of change is forced into unnecessary and sometimes unrealistic timescales. This can be a frustrating experience for all concerned, but more worryingly, it fails to acknowledge the different rates of flow that occur within communities.

## Whose time is it anyway?

It is well-known that different cultures have different attitudes to time, and different experiences of the flow of time. Neither punctuality nor patience are universal values. Age is also a factor, reflecting generational differences in attitudes to change. Gender roles may create variable perceptions of the passage of time, as identities alter with new roles and responsibilities, such as parenthood. People have more or less time for community activities at different stages in their lives, but may also have greater motivation to be involved in collective action at times when they are most busy, for example with young children needing after-school care or holiday play schemes.

It is said that 'time flies', but its flow through communities often seems variable, affected by local conditions and personal situations or lifestyles. Even within households, individual family members may be operating on different timescales – the rhythm of day to day or weekly routines, while longer term aspirations and worries drive other activities, such as work commitments, construction projects or financial investments. The same can be seen in communities, especially where there are high levels of diversity – time flows are rarely aligned between the different 'players', resulting in hidden tensions, impatience, token gestures, fragile decisions and fraught meetings. Calendar and clock time is used to co-ordinate the contributions of various stakeholders but this regulated time may not be a universal reflection of how community members perceive the way time flows through their lives, with its unpredictable eddies, pools and torrents.

## Times past

It is said, time marches on, whereas work with communities often neglects what has gone before and yet previous history crucially affects what is happening now – intra-community divisions, presumptions about leadership, inter-personal networks of connection and interaction, attitudes to potential private and public sector partners, the perceptions of different facilities, territories and assets, as well as what people believe to be potential or possible.

The immediate timeframe tends to start 'now', frequently failing to deal with feelings of anger, hurt, disappointment from past experiences that leave a cloud of cynicism and helplessness blocking off wider horizons and deterring the kinds of active citizenship needed to make a difference. This 'future solutions' model of working with communities means that slow burn developments are insufficiently reinforced and the long-term factors for success are rarely incorporated into strategies for change.

A different approach would be more relaxed, but more aware of time, as a factor in community development. Time can be seen as a 'container' of activities, an incubator that enables things to unfurl or grow, protected from outside forces. We use the phrase "give it time", in the expectation that immediate difficulties will resolve or diminish simply as a result of time passing. The recent interest in 'pop-up' or 'meanwhile' projects represents an interesting new development. This approach is about identifying temporary uses of facilities, such as empty shops or workspaces, for community initiatives, such as a drop-in resource centre or youth activities. They have proved viable and popular ways of demonstrating need and piloting particularly innovative ways of working with local people. They allow momentum to be maintained, keeping things ticking over, until the 'proper', i.e. more permanent, premises or funding become available.

## Time for connecting

Yet development is not a straightforward linear process; change can happen in leaps and bounds through sudden shifts in consciousness or an influx of resources. Serendipitous encounters can lead to new connections being made, catalysing conversations and the rapid opening up of possibilities which didn't seem to exist before. Synchronicity, the flowing together of different happenings, can generate hope and synergy, as well as creating a critical mass of people and resources that are able to realise ambitions or push through a major shift in power relations. Information technologies, especially social media, have made it possible for interactions to occur asynchronously. Conversations can happen on-line between people separated by awkward time differences, as well as by vast distances. This enables connections to be made and debates to develop between people who may never be present in the same (physical) space at the same time.

## Changing times, timing changes

Communities are themselves complex systems, connected through a myriad of diverse interactions and relations. In turn, they exist within sets of overlapping systems, comprising other communities, government bureaucracies, the business world and the

multitudinous voluntary organisations that make up civil society, locally, nationally and internationally. It is not surprising that discovering how things change is far from an exact science. There are no clear chains of cause and effect, so it would be foolhardy to predict specific changes over time. Instead rough forecasts can be made, acknowledging that many dimensions of life are interacting on different levels and over different timescales.

Working with communities involves spotting trends, seizing moments, meeting the occasional deadline, dealing with the past, shaping and creating present opportunities, but nearly always keeping some forward momentum. For communities and the people who work with them, time is simultaneously a pressure, a measure and a resource. Indeed, the unpaid time of community volunteers is often explicitly counted as 'matched contribution' alongside funding.

## The impact of time

Mostly we see the passage of time as an inevitable tide against which interventions and community-led initiatives are carried out. Conventionally, this is taken for granted and we rarely consider or challenge different dimensions of time. Like money, we seek to 'spend', 'manage', 'borrow' or 'save' time. In order to work with communities, we need to understand its manifold complexities and subtle influence on how communities, their groups and organisations (as well as all the individuals involved) develop, evolve and sometimes die. This research project will gather evidence and views about time and communities, examining some of the aspects of time briefly touched on in the paper. The workshop on October 17<sup>th</sup> will bring together a range of community members, practitioners, funders, academics and policymakers to reflect on how different types of interventions (research, community development, capacity building, project management, etc.) make assumptions about the way time impacts on work with communities.

The day will be spent considering three key themes, through a series of 'lightning' presentations, focused around:

Pace – scheduling approaches and activities, the flow of time

Interventions – flexibility, dealing with dynamic complexity

Demonstrating progress/value – measuring change, evaluating processes, celebrating 'success', finishing and failing

This will allow us to identify some of the problems before looking at ways of responding to these issues and exploring alternative ways of working with communities that are respectful and achieve meaningful results.

For further information visit: <http://www.temporalbelongings.org/temporal-conflicts.html>

# Temporal Belongings

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The Temporal Belongings research network supports the development of a more coordinated understanding of the interconnections between time and community. We provide opportunities to share research and practical experience and to develop new collaborations. We also produce resources that will support the development of this research area. To find out more about our activities go to: [www.temporalbelongings.org](http://www.temporalbelongings.org)