Temporal Belongings
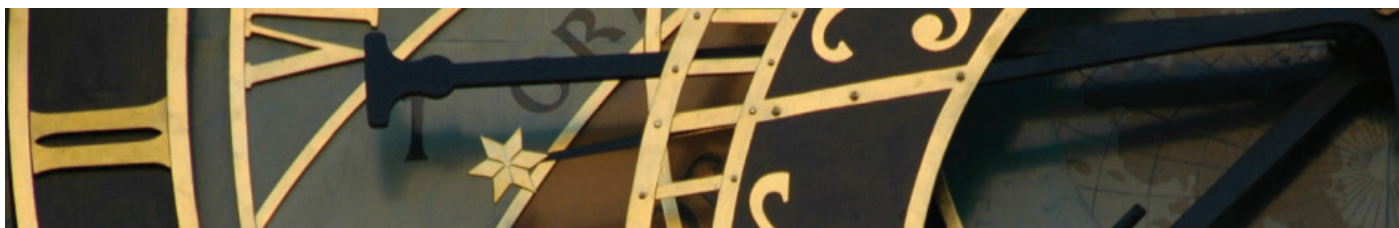
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Bio

Alison Gilchrist has worked for many years in community development: as a practitioner, trainer, manager, advisor, writer and researcher. She currently operates an an independent consultant, with special interests in community networking and equalities practices. Further details are available from www.alisongilchrist.co.uk

This interview took place in January 2013 and has been edited for length and clarity.

Communities and time

MB: Shall we begin with a bit of an overview of what kind of work you've been doing with communities?

AG: Well, in the past I have been a neighbourhood-based community development worker, which involved working very closely with residents, local authorities and voluntary organisations to develop project services. Then I moved more into training and then into policy development as well, working for the Community Development Foundation.[1] Currently I'm supporting four Big Local areas, two from Wave One and two from Wave Two.[2] So they're at different stages of development in terms of timescales, which has raised some quite interesting questions around how you work with time, particularly around helping them to develop their plans and their visions for the future.

MB: And so just generally, what kinds of issues to do with time have you noticed coming up in your work?

AG: One issue is around deadlines that are imposed externally by funders. This includes issues around time-limited projects, where they are prepared to fund you for three years or one year and so forth, and have expectations around what can be achieved within that time. Then there are also the deadlines for getting funding applications in. I have very many memories of rushing to the post at five o'clock or even cycling down to the council house to get funding applications in. I'm also very aware of issues around slow burn. Often the seeds of an idea are sown but don't come to fruition for two, three, four, five years and that needs to be considered in relation to funding timescales.

MB: Could you tell me a bit more about what you mean by the idea of 'slow burn'?

AG: So, for example, where an idea has been mooted – at a meeting or a conversation on the street – and then either people are too busy, or the situation isn't right, or funding isn't available and it takes a while for people and resources to coalesce into a collective critical mass that could then turn that idea into reality.

MB: Are you concerned, then, that this kind of process isn't being taken into account by funders, for example?

AG: Yes, it's definitely not being taken into account. Outcomes are predicted in advance and then outputs are expected by certain milestones. All these kinds of terms, like 'outcomes' and 'outputs' are very much focused on determining the time of community work, and they don't really allow for understanding how a complex range of causes might come together to produce unexpected impacts. Of course sometimes things don't come together and there is no impact, but sometimes they will and what results from this won't be what you predicted or it won't appear in the ways that you might expect. So I think the length of time that can be needed for things to develop and then manifest themselves in people's lives and communities is not sufficiently understood by people who don't work in the 'mess' that is a community.

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MB: That's really interesting, because your work reimagines community development from within a complexity model, rather than a more traditional linear model.[3] It seemed to me that part of what is going on in that work is an argument for understanding community in reference to a different philosophy of time. So rather than seeing communities as static entities that need to be supported (or pushed) along the line of progress, they are already dynamic and changing and as a result working with communities is much more complex than the traditional static model might suggest.

AG: Yes and there are two aspects of that. One is around the idea of nonlinear change and how to how to identify the conditions that allow this type of change to happen. So you can get gradual and incremental change in one dimension of life, but then suddenly things will move into a 'step-change situation' where things are buzzing, people are becoming involved or funding is suddenly available.[4] While this will seem like it

[1] The CDF is the leading UK organisation in community development and engagement. Find out more at http://cdf.org.uk/

[2] Big Local operates in 150 communities across England. It is funded by an endowment from Big Lottery Foundation and managed by Local Trust. Areas have 10-12 years to use £1million to make their areas even better places to live. Find out more at http://www.localtrust.org.uk/big-local/

[3] See, for example, Gilchrist, A. (2009) *The Well-Connected Community*. Bristol: Policy Press

[4] A step change refers to a sudden transformation induced by

has come out of nowhere, we still need to be aware of the idea of slow burn that I mentioned before and that the conditions necessary for this to occur are accrued much more slowly. The second aspect is thinking about community from a framework of space-time, where time is the fourth dimension. That is, community is not only about space, the physical environment, or the geography, but also about the way that the people who enter into that space (whether because they work there, live there or visit there) also stretch out across time. Their lives and influence can stretch into time – into the future, but what also needs to be considered is where that future might come from in terms of the past.

Taking this fourth dimension of communities into account is really important for understanding exactly what you are referring to when you talk about 'the community'. Certainly some of the communities I've worked with do seem quite static in terms of the population. For example, you have young families and then grown up children moving next door to their mums. So the population could be said to be pretty stable. But then there are other communities who might be equally deprived in terms of the indicators, but who have a very mobile population in terms of turnover because they are inner city areas that are often the first point of landing for new communities coming in. So these communities are not only quite dynamic in terms of their turnover, but also in terms of diversity. Still, conditions often stay the same in terms of the indices of deprivation: you see the same old areas turning up at the top of the index. On the face of it you might think nothing has changed. People might think: "all these interventions, all the money that has been poured in hasn't actually made much difference."

So partly there's something to be said for interventions at least keeping things from going backwards, but there's also an issue around develop a better understanding of what's actually happening in individual's lives. The opportunities available to these individuals, or individual households might change, they might move out and possibly another family might move in with the same health and education challenges that the original family experienced. So while community development is focused on building capacity, on supporting, encouraging, and enabling real people, there are issues in using a static model of community on which to base judgements about the success of a programme, because those specific people that represent 'the community' at the end of the project might not be the same ones who were there at the start of the project.

MB: That's fascinating. So in moving from the people you are actually working with on the ground to looking at the statistical measures of a community there can be an appearance of being static when actually it's much

incremental changes. For example when water turns to steam after being gradually heated up [AG].

more dynamic, which seems to mean that from the outside it is easy to overlook the changes that might have happened in a community?

AG: One of the things I've been particularly interested in in my research on social networks are the changes that can happen, but which aren't terribly visible to external measurement. For example, social capital might be developing within communities; connections might be getting better or getting more inclusive or stronger. In theory, that, in itself, should have knock-on effects in terms of health, education and wellbeing, etc. But social capital is not about the people as individuals, or about the environmental conditions, it is about something more intangible. For me, that is the really interesting thing to track over time, to understand how it changes, but because we don't yet have clear evidence for how networks support strong communities the jury is still out.

Bridging multiple times

MB: So partly what comes out of thinking about communities as dynamic is that it is important not to assume that 'community' refers to a homogenous group of people. So, for example, people are going to have different pasts and different memories about that past, as well as different futures, which suggests that a community always has multiple times and rhythms. One of the things I picked up on in your book was where you talked about the community development worker as being responsible in some ways for this networking, for being the bridge that links different groups. You wrote about the way this involves bridging the boundaries between different languages and different ways of understanding.[5] I was wondering if you could elaborate on this a bit more, in particular, whether part of this boundary work involves created bridges between the different senses of time that there might be in a community?

AG: Absolutely. I've got two very recent examples actually. The first is from last night. I was at a Big Local meeting in one of my Wave One areas. One of the things I love about Big Local is their ethos of allowing communities to go at their own pace. This means that there aren't any deadlines, or any timed milestones and there is lots of encouragement not to hurry, to 'get it right', rather than 'get it done'. One part of the funding available from Big Local is called 'Getting People Involved' which is to help communities in the early stages of visioning and involving people. So at the moment the person on the steering group is being chivvied by somebody at Big Local to get the report in, to show what they've done with the money and what the outcomes have been. And I was able to say at that meeting, "but hang on a minute, don't let them hassle you because that goes against the philosophy of Big Local and we haven't finished as a group. You've still

5 See, for example, *The Well-Connected Community* p12

got things you want to do. You haven't spent all the money. So just go back to them and say this, and say, if necessary, 'and Alison said!'" So while I'm not going to speak directly to Big Local, unless they want me to, because that's not my role, I was able to reassure the community members that what they are doing is fine.

MB: Isn't it interesting how difficult it is to 'do' time differently. Even if a core philosophy of your organisation is partly to do time differently, you can still get caught up with how time is done more conventionally.

AG: Yes absolutely, and there are expectations in the Big Local programme about when certain stages would be finished and therefore how the Big Local reps' contracts and assignments were constructed. And as far as I know they are all way over [anticipated] time because communities have just taken longer to go through the various steps of the pathway. But I think it's really interesting that the downside of that flexibility is that the first two waves are actually frustrated at the slow pace of things. They feel they've now been going for nigh-on two years, and are very frustrated about how long the whole process is taking. They just want to get their hands on the money and start delivering their plans. Different areas do have a different sense of it, but they do want to get on now and have concrete things on the ground.

MB: That's part of it as well though isn't it? If you are not using a linear model of social change, then this experience of intense, pent-up time – of time that doesn't seem to be flowing in quite the right way – is the kind of energy you draw on to make the shift to your next stage?

AG: Hmm, yes. Though it might seem that people have lost a sense of momentum, but in fact at last night's meeting we were able to move on quite quickly, partly by me offering some suggestions about what kinds of things they could be doing next.

MB: Interesting. Did you say you had two examples of needing to bridge between different experiences or understandings of time?

AG: Well yes, so in that example there were three different times that needed to be bridged. Big Local's vision of the time of community development, and then the community's own time, which is where some people are feeling frustrated because they can't seem to get on. Finally there's Big Local 'admin time' if you like. But so the other example was following a research sandpit meeting where I found myself as part of two little consortia both of which wanted to find community partners to involve in their bids by October (i.e. within three months). I was helping to facilitate this, but nothing happened over the summer because academics usually take their holidays or are away from their desks

over the summer (another example of a different kind of time). And then suddenly in September they were asking me to find communities who wanted to be involved with very little time for me to contact them. I went to a few different groups initially, but the deadline for the submission of the application wasn't aligned with their cycle of meetings and they couldn't commit until they'd had their management committee meeting. Fortuitously, when I approached another organisation their newsletter was going out just that week and so we were able to use that to get in contact with people who might be interested.

So there was a quite a bit of scuffling around really, with academics wanting communities to make a decision and sign up and commit themselves, and communities also wanting to be involved because there was potentially some money available. I felt caught in the middle, trying, on the one hand, to be very understanding of communities' timescales, because I know they tend to have monthly cycles of management committees, but I also knew that if they weren't able to respond to this offer by a particular time then they wouldn't be considered.

More generally, when I was looking at the draft bids, I remember commenting on assumptions that were being made about how fast communities could do certain things. For example, even within communities there is a mismatch between paid time and volunteer time. So while a community worker is being paid for their work, for most community members it is their hobby or sometimes not even their hobby because it can be a real necessity. But even then they are fitting their community work around family and work commitments and all the rest. These kinds of tensions will affect how fast things can go.

Project time

MB: That sounds like a good example of some of the problems that arise from 'project time', which has been a strong thread running through discussions we've been involved in previously. The set structure of beginning, middle and end can be quite helpful, because it focuses your attention on getting certain things done within a set time period. But one thing it misses out is the idea of 'pre-work,' which we've also talked about before, and which also comes up in your book. That is, all the hidden work that goes on prior to the start of a project that enables it to happen.

AG: Like building the relationships and the trust and affirmation.

MB: Yes. It seems to me that often this kind of work is not credited as proper work, or is not a 'proper' part of the project in a way, even though, as you've just mentioned in relation to the research project, it can take

up a lot of time and energy. So there is a lot of work that goes into allowing a change to happen (e.g. for a project to start), but this doesn't get included in the project time(line). I find it interesting, because I wonder if there are some hidden assumptions about time affecting when and how work appears as 'work'. It raises questions around what is seen as the legitimate way to move through time and how to define the point where a transformation is thought to occur.

AG: Yes, and a lot of that kind of pre-work you are talking about involves just having conversations with people. These can simply be about building relationships, about finding out about somebody, and them sussing you out as a community worker, or as a fellow resident. It's the work involved in building trust, or building a sense of mutuality, a sense that you've got common interests and that you could work together. That's the foundation on which other things happen. One analogy, which I discussed in *The Well-Connected Community*, is the role of yeast in making bread. You need a catalyst in there working away, but in a sense our current models see the starting point of a project at around the point where the bread goes into the oven. Maybe the analogy only goes so far, but it is a good one to think through.

Again, when I was preparing for this interview, I was thinking back to when I was working as a community worker in the inner city area in Bristol, where we were developing a community centre. Our work took place over a period of two years, between the old community centre being knocked down and the new one opening. We didn't know exactly how long our work there was going to continue, but we knew it was going to be a while. That was a very open time, quite a precious time, where we could do work with parts of the community that we hadn't had much contact with up to then. Basically because when you are building-based things tend to happen in that building. So we were deliberately going out to visit new groups, as part of producing and distributing a local newsletter. This meant we were much more out and about in the community, doing outreach and tackling some of the equality and diversity issues that arose in that neighbourhood.

Those two years gave us the chance to have conversations about what kinds of things people would like to see happening in the new community centre once it opened. We were then also able to pilot some of those suggestions, to explore how things worked in other areas and think about funding opportunities. In this period, there were actually quite a lot of ideas that didn't come to fruition, but what I think was built up was a sense that the community centre was open to all. People felt that they could have ideas and that things could happen. It helped to break with the reputation of the old community centre, which had been quite closed and white-dominated.

So this two year period felt like a more flexible kind of time somehow. Perhaps a bit like that period between Christmas and New Year, when nothing is really happening and so actually you can get on with quite a lot of little mini-tasks, reading, clearing out mentally and physically and things like that. You also have time to think ahead and to plan for the rest of your life. In one sense those kinds of periods are dead time, but from a different perspective they are also a very fruitful time.

MB: So the kind of time you are describing there seems very different to the normal project time where you might be more directed towards pre-set aims or goals?

AG: Yes, it was more open and more flexible, less driven by deadlines for funding because we were just exploring a lot of ideas, and reaching out and having lots of conversations with a new set of people really. So although there were existing activities that we did continue with while the community centre was closed, mostly it was about developing new things for the future. So it was a time of development and reflection and consultation.

MB: And it seems that the kind of time you are talking about is quite different to that driving the types of community consultation that have been criticised for being motivated by pre-set future goals and side-lining the contributions of community members.

AG: We're talking about the late 1980s before consultation got such a bad name. But also this wasn't local authority consulting. It was led by a local community association who were all local people saying, "We're building this new building, what would you like to see happen in it? It's yours, you might like this." It was consultation in the sense that we were asking for views, but simultaneously it was very much about engagement, outreach and empowerment, if I dare use the word.

The feeling of time

MB: This links really nicely with my next question about the feeling of time. I wonder perhaps whether this question might be a bit less clear than some of the others, particularly when trying to get a handle on how it might relate to community work. I suppose one dominant idea about time is that it can be understood as a steady flow, where there is a sense that every 'now' is the same as every other. But I'm really interested in the kind of issues you were just talking about where time actually doesn't feel like a steady flow. Instead time stretches out, or it crunches up, it can be slower or faster. In particular, I was wondering if you had any comments about the relationship between how time might feel and the feeling of community. In your example, it seemed that there was more opportunity to

connect in different and interesting ways because time felt so open?

AG: Yes and it also allowed us to be a bit more reflective and responsive to things that were just happening. So we were able to make connections that we might not have noticed before. To talk about this on a more personal level, the example of the type of time you have between Christmas and New Year seems to be a good one here again. During the recent holidays, I sat around at home, I read, I went through the files on my laptop, I talked to a few people and I thought about what I wanted to do with my life, all those kind of big questions, as well as deleting around 9,000 old emails.

Even that simple process of deleting emails ended up being a review of the past and of what was going to happen in the future, what I needed and what I didn't and which contacts I wanted to take forward and which were done and dusted. That felt nice, it was quite relaxed and I had time to read at my leisure and not feel under pressure, but come January 4th when all hell lets loose work-wise, I'm back to just living off lists of things I have to do by certain times. Part of me wishes that I'd just done more work between Christmas and New Year and so I start to wonder why I didn't get on with things. For example I have some writing to do which needs to be done by February 1st. Before Christmas that feels like it is miles away. There's something about the turn of the year…

MB: Well, I wonder, because if you are not thinking about time as an external unchanging flow, but as something that gets made in the relationships between people (and between people and other beings/objects/processes) then what happens at Christmas is that time changes because the kinds of relationships you have with people also change. For example, you can see your family and close friends, but it's a bit uncouth to be talking to people outside of this circle about work. So your field of relations becomes smaller. Perhaps that is why it feels more relaxed and then on the 4th of January you are allowed to talk to everyone again.

AG: The real world appears again, yes.

MB: It's as if all those relations and links are ones you can't use at Christmas because they're not sort of 'switched on' because it's not the right time for them. And the community centre example that you were just talking about feels a bit similar? Because even though many of the past relationships were being brought in, it was also an unsettling of these networks of relationships. There wasn't a clear move to try to maintain a continuity with what used to be. So that period of activity involved a break with the past, without a clear vision yet of what the future was going to be. And so perhaps there wasn't that extended framework of obligations, relationships and links that can make time

feel more pressured. Perhaps it felt more open because new relationships had to be made.

AG: Exactly that, yes. And it wasn't by any means a vacuum, there was a lot being incubated during that period. It was also full of conflict and tensions because we were trying to change things, so that when the new centre emerged it would be fundamentally different. We were seeing through quite major political changes and they didn't come easily. We used that period to address different forms of discrimination and prejudice in ways that weren't always comfortable for all of us.

MB: But that gap in time allowed an opportunity to address them?

AG: Yes.

MB: As well as a gap in space, because the building wasn't actually there.

AG: Yes, we literally didn't have a building. So we were just out on the streets and on other people's territory much more and that was very liberating. It was exciting, but it was also quite stressful because we were juggling keeping some of the other groups going with doing a lot of fundraising. In fact the fundraising work was an important part of the process of changing how people related to the new building.

MB: And one implication of all this, building on your approach to networking as a fundamental part of community work, is perhaps the downside of feeling pulled in multiple different directions and never quite knowing where you are, because you've got so many different rhythms and flows and timelines to follow. The different people you are interacting with have different ideas of what's going to be happening in their future…

AG: …and they have different priorities. And they have deadlines and yes, exactly, you're juggling those different things. I wrote about that, in the *Short Guide to Community Development* I think.[6] As part of dealing with this, I used to produce short work reports for the community association on a monthly or bimonthly basis, because I thought it was really important for everyone to have a complete overview of what I was working on. Otherwise you might get one of the groups I worked with wondering what I was doing since I might not see them from one week to the next. So the reports were a way of trying to manage those kinds of responses from people, as well as being accountable to them.

So in various places I have written about the importance of reflective practice. Writing up an evaluation is one of those important aspects of practice that I don't think is being done sufficiently or regularly by community

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[6] Alison Gilchrist and Taylor, Marilyn (2011) *The Short Guide to Community Development* Bristol: Policy Press

workers. Partly because we're under such time pressures, but one of the consequences is that we are not able to take forward lessons and collective memories.

MB: And by doing those evaluations can you then make those multiple and conflicting processes more visible? And perhaps show just how many networks a community worker needs to engage in, as well as the processes involved and how to handle them?

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AG: Yes and also to keep an eye out for creative serendipity. In a sense serendipity is seen as being a bit like fate, it is external to us and not under our control, but I think you can actually be a bit strategic around creating the right conditions for serendipity to happen. In a sense that's what *The Well-Connected Community* is about. It's asking how might you try to synchronise people's time a bit so they are more likely to bump into each other and have a conversation. Sometimes you can do that by manipulating space, but sometimes it's about time. A good example would be when the new community centre opened and I fought tooth and nail to make sure that the well-established pensioners group, which was mainly white, met on the same day as the Asian social club so that in the fullness of time there were opportunities for them to do joint activities. And I remember that was quite a battle to make that happen in terms of the booking timetable. But that was about trying to align people in time and synchronise those who might have shared interests.

Pasts and futures

MB: So let's turn to the role of past and future in working with communities. Doing 'futures work', and imagining new futures seems to be such an important part of community development work doesn't it? There have also been important criticisms around tendencies to ignore the past, for example by failing to connect current projects with past ones, or by not bringing the histories of communities into present interventions. On the other hand too close an association with the past can have a negative effect on how local communities are perceived more widely, hence the emphasis on supporting more future-looking orientations...

AG: Yes, and in fact again talking about Big Local, there's been a strong emphasis on visioning and on exploring what people's areas might look or feel like in ten years' time. For example, asking: What's good about

it? What do you want to preserve? What do you want to change? And really encouraging people to have that kind of long term perspective, since the programme itself involves at least ten years of investment towards making things happen. And certainly in my experience communities have found that incredibly hard to do. They were much more focused on what can be achieved in the next two or three years, rather than thinking really big and bold and ambitiously about a very different future for their communities (which are mostly in the top 100 areas of deprivation).

So actually the idea of working with the programme for ten years has had mixed reactions. Certainly in one of the communities there were older people saying, "Well, we can't afford to wait ten years, we want things to be happening now. We're 60." So they've seen that ten year framework as quite oppressive and unrealistic. We've also been doing work with children and younger people and actually they also find it quite hard to use that framework. We're asking a nine year old to imagine their community when they are 19, for example. The children have instead come up with what they personally want to do, rather than how the community might be different.

So I think that fantastic idea of supporting people in developing a ten year vision has actually proved much more challenging than Big Local had expected. And yet the converse of that is that in some areas the weight of the past has almost been insurmountable. The particular community I'm thinking of has been badly let down in the past and has been 'consulted to death,' to coin a phrase. And so they are quite cynical about promises and outside interventions and are very defensive about what they want and what they can achieve without outside help. It's almost like they battened down the hatches really. They've been really hard to work with and that's to do with their immediate past and the disappointments that they've had.

MB: And so perhaps that example shows that the idea that the future is something that just happens automatically is too simplistic. In some ways this thinking into the future is only available to certain people or certain groups who have had certain kinds of past experiences. I wonder whether you think that part of what might be going on there is a lack of recognition that communities have multiple times, multiple pasts and multiple futures, which means that they aren't all starting in the same place (or time)? For example, could you have multiple visions of the future?

AG: The Big Local guidance definitely talks about visions, in the plural, and about gathering lots of different visions of the future and then using them to create objectives, aims and goals and then breaking those down further into action planning.

MB: I suppose they all still have to be coherent in relation to each other?

AG: Exactly.

MB: Would than mean there ultimately has to be one plan?

AG: There has to be an agreed vision. In fact, it's been called a community profile which is an agreed statement of where the community is now and where it wants to be in ten years' time. And then that's the baseline, for developing actions and services and projects over the next ten years.

MB: Do you think there's a tension there? As you were saying the children involved were relating to the future in quite different ways to how an older person might. And just previously we were talking about the way that within a community people will move out and new people will come in and they won't have gone through that visioning process, and so will the future contained within the community profile be their future vision? I suppose the question is how do you incorporate new people along the way?

AG: Yes, well Big Local is very clear that these visions are not set in stone and that they are negotiable and the action plan is flexible. So there is a recognition that things will change over time. It's really just a framework from which to start work from now on in.

MB: And so even with all those difficulties do you think it's still something that's worth doing, developing that long term shared vision?

AG: Yes, I do actually, partly because it builds a sense of people being in it together. For example, there have been quite interesting dialogues about these different futures, where older people were saying, "Well this has to be about how young people and children can benefit." They're saying, "It's too late for us now," which isn't true, but their focus is on their children and grandchildren's futures, which is nice in a way. So I do agree in principle that it's a very good thing to have as a philosophy in the programme. I think making it a reality in terms of how people talk to each other, how people generate ideas, how people make decisions and negotiate with one another is much, much harder. And I think these difficulties have been underestimated. I don't think people have been ignorant of the complexity of it, I think that some of us haven't understood just what that kind of visioning means in practice in terms of how you get people talking and negotiating and discussing.

MB: Still I wonder if there is a tension there around how time could be understood. Approaching the future as something that you can plan for and then achieve is usually more linked to a linear model, while from a complexity framework those kinds of assumptions about our ability to shape the future make less sense. There's been some discussion of this in the Transition Network recently, in their Theory of Change workshops.[7] The Transition approach is very much based on complexity models, with mottos like 'let it go where it wants to,' but then there are also planning tools like Energy Descent Action Plans which ideally contain a clear shared vision of where you want your community to be in the future. So I have been really interested in that tension between wanting to plan, but also knowing that things are complex and unpredictable. It seems like both are needed, but how might they work together and how do they pull apart from each other?

AG: Well yes, it has all taken much longer than expected, because there is a very explicit model that Big Local has devised which is called the Big Local Pathway which is a linear diagram that, when I started, I used to take around with me on a big sheet of paper and jokingly say, "These are the steps you have to work through and when you've got to that step, the Plan, you can have your money."

MB: Well perhaps there is again a parallel with the Transition movement, which was originally explained in terms of 12 steps for starting up a new initiative, but now it has moved to using a pattern language model[8] which instead has a variety of patterns or 'ingredients' that you take as needed to 'cook up' your own local approach. But sorry, I interrupted you because you were talking about the Big Local timeline…

AG: Yes, so there is this timeline, but what we've found is that sometimes people have been going around in circles, sometimes they have been moving forward, while other times it feels like they've been caught in a bit of a whirlpool and are not making progress. But then it can also be like they shoot down a waterfall into the next section of the process. Sorry, I'm dragging out the metaphor a bit here, but sometimes it feels like they've hit a rock and actually that the whole thing has been in danger of shattering. And that's not been about hitting deadlines, I think it's been about frustration with what people would call bureaucratic hoops to jump through.

MB: I wonder if inherent to having a timeline is bringing ideas of progress into the picture, and how fast or slow you are going in relation to it. Because there's a timeline you end up judging yourself against.

[7] The Transition Network provides support for Transition Town initiatives that create grassroots responses to climate change and resource depletion. See www.transitionnetwork.org for more information. Write ups of their Theory of Change workshops are available here: http://www.transitionresearchnetwork.org/toc-workhops-in-lewes-and-brixton.html

[8] This approach is based on that developed by Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa and Murray Silverstein in their book *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*

AG: Yes, and people have asked me how the other areas are doing, and I've said to them that it's not a race, you just go at your own pace. And actually another of the tensions is that one of my roles as a Big Local rep is to keep the process open and inclusive and to look out for opportunities to involve new people and bring in new ideas. And that process has sometimes been resisted very strongly, because people are worried that if new participants come into the process, which they've already been working on for two years, then they'll have to start all over again. There can be the idea that if people wanted to get involved they should have got involved earlier on. So there's a tension in there I think between involving new people and then having to go a few steps back or leaving new people out and keeping momentum and forward progress.

But again that's about people being on different timescales because the people who are in the steering group have been working really hard for a long time, but for the people who are just kind of watching from the side lines, they can't see anything happening and so they don't have a sense of time going past. Instead they see it as very static, as if nothing is happening, and because of this they feel they can take their time in terms of getting involved as and when the money appears. There's a sense that there will be a stage at which it's worthwhile to get involved, but they haven't reached it yet. There's some resentment around that from the people who have been involved in the process from the beginning. Some people feel that they've done all the work over this time and it's not fair if other residents come in at a later stage.

Finding the right moment

MB: Perhaps that links with the distinction made between the time of kairos and of chronos. Kairos points towards that idea of a 'right moment' for action, and if you miss it the opportunity will have passed, but we also have the idea that every moment is one in which we can act to start something or join something (for example the Nike slogan 'just do it'). But perhaps when you are talking about working with communities the time of action is more aligned with the idea of kairos and actually any moment isn't just as good as any other, because to be involved you have to have been part of the process.

AG: And people can become gatekeepers because they have gone through the process. They have invested their time, their unpaid time. And it's one of the reasons why the issue of paid and unpaid contributions to a project is so significant.

MB: Yes, and so perhaps the ones waiting for the money are waiting for what they perceive to be the 'right moment,' but the people already involved will understand that moment very differently.

AG: And I was asked quite explicitly at yesterday's meeting to give my opinion of when the first money would be spent in the area. I felt put on the spot a bit because it depends on how fast they do the action planning. So I said, "Well maybe the summer," because I think they were asking for some hope as well, but that was a guess. I don't know whether that's a realistic timescale or not. They have to have their partnership approved and then the action plan approved. And at the moment there isn't an action plan. It could actually take another year or they could really get on and get it done by commissioning someone else to do it on their behalf, and in which case it wouldn't take much.

Success and failure

MB: That's interesting because it connects time up with issues of power as well. For example who has the power to set the pace and whose schedules are supported and whose aren't. Time isn't a neutral medium but different 'times' will benefit some people and not others. The examples you've been talking about quite nicely show that there can be dominant temporalities which support different groups. We saw this in the example of the community centre as well, where rebuilding the space also rebuilt the future since it wasn't being structured around more dominant groups.

But so I wanted to turn to the question of success and failure and how these might be entwined with different approaches to time. Because if time is also partly about change, and more importantly recognising change, then it becomes closely linked with how we define success. I noticed that some of your examples you talked about people claiming that nothing seemed to be happening. I've experienced that myself with some of my volunteer work where you know you are doing a lot, but everyone else is saying "You guys really need to do more, because it doesn't look like you're doing anything."

So I'm really interested in the idea of 'never-appearing work,' which takes up a lot of time and effort but never appears to others as 'work.' It never looks like it has been successful, because it doesn't appear in any model of what success is supposed to look like. It's as if there is a particular method of working where you appear to others to be moving through time, to be progressing, and if you aren't working in that way then you seem stuck or as if you're not doing very much. But I didn't know if you relate to that kind of idea?

AG: Well, one thing I thought about was how constricting the PRINCE project management framework can be and that's what a lot of people have been trained to use.[9] I've never done it, but my understanding is that it's very much about achieving particular outputs and milestones. I don't even know what the jargon is, but it

[9] PRINCE (more recently PRINCE2) is a method of project management. It is an acronym for Projects in Controlled Environments.

includes this idea that a project is linear and you progress and then you complete at some well-defined stage. It doesn't really allow that flexibility for things to emerge, or for you to be able to take advantage of fortuitous circumstances or happenings or connections. I think it's very, very stifling and that's partly why I've never had any training in it, because I don't believe in it. I'm not that familiar with it, but I think that kind of approach is quite damaging in terms of how you understand your role within a project.

MB: Perhaps PRINCE is there to help you feel like you can manage chaos, though it kind of pretends that things aren't actually as complex as what they are. But then there is that need for a balance between complexity and more linear models of managing change.

AG: Exactly. Yes, which is why a key argument in my book is that the experience of being 'on the edge of chaos' is actually a good place to be, it's a good way of operating, though it's really unfortunate that there's not another term for it.

MB: Do you mind just explaining what you mean by 'being on the edge of chaos' then?

WHEN YOU ARE WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES THERE IS A ZONE THAT ISN'T VERY ORDERED OR STRUCTURED, BUT IT ISN'T CHAOTIC EITHER. IT'S A PLACE THAT IS SOMEWHERE ON THE SPECTRUM BETWEEN CHAOS AND ORDER, AND IT'S THE ZONE WHERE THINGS HAPPEN.

AG: It's the idea that when you are working with communities there is a zone that isn't very ordered or structured, but it isn't chaotic either. It's a place that is somewhere on the spectrum between chaos and order, and it's the zone where things happen. I have heard it called the 'chaordic' zone, but I don't think that term works either. It's a zone where things aren't happening randomly, but neither are they predictable. You're not in control, but you do have a vague sense of the direction you want to be moving in and if you are skilled and a little bit strategic you can make really interesting things happen that weren't originally planned. I think it's a lovely concept, but it's not very well understood.

MB: And so if the PRINCE model makes certain assumptions about what success would look like, what do you think it might look like when you are using that 'edge of chaos' model?

AG: Well I think it's a difference between outcomes and outputs. I think the 'edge of chaos' model lends itself more to focusing on outcomes, which are usually more broadly defined in terms of things like 'improved health.' But to get a sense of your success in achieving these things, retrospective follow-up becomes really important.

Evaluation shouldn't happen immediately after the end of the project, because outcomes might not emerge for several years and you might have to look more carefully to find them. Whereas the linear project management model is looking much more at defined outputs that you specify in advance. And that's why I think it is stifling, because unless you are ticking those off, it looks like you've not succeeded in doing what the funders or the managers or whoever are expecting you to do. Fundamentally, I don't think that's a good way of working with communities because there's an inherent and very valuable 'messiness' to communities that, when it works well, is actually what makes it so exciting to do this kind of work.

MB: So there can still be a sense of having succeeded or having achieved something, but perhaps in a different way?

AG: Yes. You wouldn't have been able to tell in advance exactly what those things would be. An example of that would be that there might be a sense of vibrancy and cohesion in a community. People sometimes call it community spirit, but it's very intangible. I think you can develop that using community development and a networking approach. But you wouldn't be able to say the indictors of a vibrant, strong, resilient community are that there are say, three toddler groups and a couple of older people's clubs and five youth clubs running and a festival that happens every year. You couldn't say that because it would very much depend on what people are interested in and who was around and what connections they were making and also what was happening in the external environment as well in terms of funding regimes. So if there was money for health, you might get a health group emerging. If there was money for arts, you might get a drama group emerging. But you wouldn't know what these were or what was going to happen until you were actually immersed in the community. You wouldn't know in advance what the outputs were going to be. Instead you'd know the 'symptoms,' if you like, of a strong, well-functioning, resilient, dynamic, vibrant community. It would manifest in their being lots of different things happening that were fairly inclusive. And even not everything would have to look completely inclusive; rather the population would be active, confident and connected. Does that make sense?

MB: Yes, definitely. It seems like it is partly about building capacity, so the way you would recognise success would be whether people had the capacity to take up opportunities, or make new opportunities to do the things they wanted to do. So the measure of success

wouldn't be that a specific opportunity have been taken up, but that in a more general sense there was capacity to be able to act because they were networked enough to know who they needed to get in touch with to get things done. In a grant application I made recently it felt very much like that, I would need to add a particular element to the project and I seemed to just be able to find the right people and as the project developed it seemed to turn into something that had a life of its own. It felt very much like the 'edge of chaos' zone that you describe.

AG: That's what I mean by the kind of sudden nonlinear 'step change' you can see when you focus on building networks. You put together the foundational conditions of 'well-connectedness,' so that when the time comes you can access the information, the advice, resources, and the energy that you or the community needs to make something happen and to move it forward.

Critical temporalities

MB: Yes. And so the aim would be to have that capacity more generally dispersed across the population, rather than just having a few people that have this capacity. Yes, it's really interesting. But so to move onto my final question, I wanted to ask you how important it is in community development work to actively try to challenge or transform the kinds of assumptions about time that people might be making. We were talking about that a bit already with the example of Big Local trying to do the time of community development differently (no deadlines, a ten year framework) and the kinds of things that actually made that quite difficult to do. So I guess I was interested in any reflections you might have on that, particularly since your work around the idea of complexity seems to be trying to bring a different model of time to bear on the field of community development. How do you bring this different sense of time into your work, particularly when it could be so easily to fall back into the dominant mode of thinking in terms of more common models of project management like PRINCE?

AG: Well, I think I'm much more confident now about asserting my views in my practice about the need to take time to do things properly, but I can also articulate it better as well. And I have a sense, I don't know if it's true, that my areas are some of the 'slowest' and that's partly because I am quite deliberately not pushing them. I'm allowing the process to unfold according to their interests and energy, but the fact that these two wave one areas are now expressing frustration with their pace is making me wonder whether I should have done things differently. Maybe I should have been more proactive or more directive. I'm not sure.

MB: Well I don't know. Is that assuming that you could have already known that to begin with?

AG: No, but there are lessons to learn, aren't there? Especially with wave two and three areas which are now coming on stream.

MB: I don't know. For myself, I notice that when I'm going to do things, I might take my time about it, and then a kind of anxiety or energy will build up and I'll feel really pressed to just get on with it, and then I go and do it. And maybe that's actually a valid way of doing things, of harnessing your energy in different ways, rather than always having a clear, steady build up. Sometimes you can sort of sit on something and then all of a sudden you are ready and you just get on with it.

AG: Yes, well interesting you should say that actually because next week I'm going to being running a workshop in Helsinki on working with communities to develop community tourism projects. And I only got the background reading in early January, so I couldn't have done anything before that, but even then somehow I kind of left it. And then just last week I thought, "oh gosh it's getting close I've got to get my reading done." And so I literally sat down and read through all of these six fairly long action plans and then set to on Sunday afternoon thinking "right, I've got to get the workshop plan done by this afternoon because I need to send it to the person who's organising it for them to comment on." And I literally felt like I had no idea what I was going to do and then suddenly it started emerging and crystallising into a conceptual framework which I was then able to translate into a workshop plan that would cover the different things that I thought the parties would want to look at. But I suppose I had been mulling over the themes and issues and noticing which ones were appearing across the different areas. So when I actually came down to write the action plan it didn't take me as long as I thought, even though initially I did think "I have no idea what I'm going to write."

MB: Yes and I guess I was wondering how that experience might translate into a group setting? Does that process of procrastination, and that kind of subconscious mulling process translate to the process communities go through when they are working on something? I guess I have had experiences where you're spending time talking about things with a group of people and then all of a sudden you will all just click and you'll get loads of things done.

AG: Yes, I have had that experience too. I remember when I was quite involved in anti-racist campaigning, in the 1990s, and we were a large active group but we hadn't really gelled around any particular activities. I remember at one meeting people were throwing around ideas of what we could do and I suggested doing a festival that could bring it all together. It was initially going to be one day and it ended up mushrooming into a whole month. I wrote about it in my Ph.D. thesis, but not in *The Well-Connected Community*

because that chapter was not included in the book. But this experience was really interesting because with the suggestion of a festival there was that sense that suddenly there was a 'crystallisation', that is the only way I can think of describing it. There was something that everyone could very quickly sign up to, with a very clear value base. There was also a clear sense that we would be doing visible campaigning that would be a vehicle for involving a whole range of people, which was what we particularly wanted. We didn't want to just stay as a small group of activists; we wanted to bring in the whole city somehow in order to do something. So there was a moment in our meeting when that shared understanding emerged and then it got honed up over the next month or so, but with an exhilarating sense of momentum. The whole process was incredibly hard work and I was doing it as a volunteer. We basically had six months and no resources to put it all together. Actually it was a very exciting six months, but I was exhausted by the end of it.

MB: Yes, that feeling of community spirit, you might call it, can be a very intoxicating feeling but it's also something that can't last for very long. Often, though, that can represent people's idea of what an ideal community should be, when in reality that kind of community can only exist intermittently. It can't exist in a permanent way or a static way.

AG: Well, yes, there can be real issues around burn out, and people just putting too much in and not thinking about succession strategies either.

MB: Yes, and I guess I was thinking of that feeling of synchronisation, of everyone coming together and working together in a rhythm that feels in synch, or in time. And how that seems to be associated with community, while the de-synchronisation that happens afterwards can feel like the end of a community. I wonder if that has to be the case... But so just to wrap up, was there anything else that you wanted to mention that we hadn't discussed so far?

Place and time

AG: Well I suppose there was something you mentioned about different spaces producing different kinds of time. And certainly my experience of moving between rural Cumbria and various cities, and the sense of slowing down I get when I'm actually outside on the mountains. There's a sense of freedom there and then spending time in cities (I've been coming to Manchester or London and Bristol recently), I find myself walking faster and not making eye contact. I think there's something about horizons and sky that changes how you feel time. I suppose this is related to your question about how time feels, and what kind of time can help you feel more connected. My sense is that I'm able to be a much nicer person, because I've got time for people.

MB: Is that because there are less of them around?

AG: I don't know what it is. I think it may be just that my workload is genuinely reduced from what it was and certainly my travel time has been reduced. It just feels as though I've undergone a kind of character change and reverted to an earlier self when I was more generous and kind and less stressed. But for me this change in sense of time is not captured only in terms of changes in work commitments, but also something about the physical environment. In fact, just last week I was in Manchester and normally in the organisation I work with there we have meetings in a room which is quite oppressive because it doesn't have outside windows. But because it was an away day we were meeting in a different room, just down the corridor, but it had windows to the outside world and it just felt very different. Although later there was a lot of noise coming from the road works outside and that felt like it ate away at my sense of time. I remember feeling quite frantic at one stage with the noise. Sorry to raise that right at the end but that's another interesting thing for me, how your physical environment encroaches on your sense of time and space.

MB: And how that then in turn impacts on your capacity to relate to other people.

AG: Yes. And of course when you're working with communities that's absolutely crucial. Yes – and just to link that back to our discussion of burn out – when the aforementioned community centre opened, I was so burnt out at that stage that I remember hiding under my desk because I couldn't bear to talk to anyone any more. I was just too tired, which meant that at the grand opening ceremony I wasn't really present. I had nothing left to give. I also remember somebody asked me to do something and I just burst into tears because my time was running on such a massive deficit.

MB: And that seems really important in relation to the aim of developing a well-connected community. If you only have a few central nodes in that, then it's not going to be sustainable, because clearly doing the kind of bridging work needed is very time intensive.

AG: Yes, being nice to everyone, and introducing people to each other and being sensitive takes time, yes.

MB: And moving between different worlds, different ways of talking and different horizons.

AG: Yes and equipping yourself to know about those different worlds as well.

MB: Yes, well ok. We better finish up there. Thank you so much for talking with me.

AG: Thanks, it's always a pleasure.

Temporal Belongings

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**

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