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The Ownership of Assets by Place-Based Community Organisations: Political Rationales, Geographies of Social Impact and Future Research Agendas

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This article calls for a more nuanced understanding of the links between the motivations, trajectories and policy environments of community asset organisations and the geographies of their social impact. While potential for the ownership of physical assets by place-based community organisations can be found in new localism powers in all four jurisdictions of the UK, there may be differences in policy articulation and implementation that enable or limit the social benefits community asset organisations are thought to deliver. Furthermore, community assets are premised on their intrinsic tie and value to place, with social cohesion, communal mobilisation and identification of mutual interest thought to be at their heart. This article reviews research in this field set in relation to recent policy developments, and identifies an important need to better understand how the personal and social geographies of impact are delivered in, and influenced by, different spatial contexts and political frameworks.

Keywords: Third sector, voluntary sector, civil society, localism, self-help.

Introduction

Central to political narratives in recent years has been the desire of governments in all four jurisdictions of the United Kingdom to strengthen the role of individuals and communities in meeting their own social welfare needs. This reflects shifts in neo-liberal governance marked by the state's continued retreat from the direct provision of public goods, welfare and services, and its devolution of autonomy and responsibility for these needs to active and empowered citizens and communities (Rose, 2000; Fyfe, 2005). The concept of community has been popular in the design of social policy in many advanced economies, although these processes are far from new. In particular, there has been an increased emphasis placed on individual and communal self-help in many fields in which the state's role has been reduced or reframed, including housing, health and welfare provision. A range of policy initiatives across the UK have promoted community empowerment and control in these fields for a number of years (see, for example, Jacobs and Manzi, 2012), but a noticeable trend in recent years has been the promotion of, and expressed political support for, the ownership of assets such as land and buildings by place-based community organisations. Localist policy agendas have increased and accelerated the opportunities for communities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern

Ireland to assume ownership and control of these assets, premised on the apparent ability of community organisations to better meet and reflect local needs, create social value and strengthen local democracy and citizen participation in communal life. This article reviews recent policy developments and research on the emergent field of community asset ownership and, as it assumes strategic importance for governments, calls for a more nuanced understanding of how different policy environments, trajectories and local contexts may deliver the array of social benefits expected of asset-owning community organisations.

The characteristics and heterogeneity of community assets

The term 'community assets' is used in this article to refer to physical assets such as land and buildings that may be controlled, managed and owned by place-based community organisations, as opposed to the use of the term in other literatures to refer to a broader set of assets, including social capital and cultural assets of community members (see, for example, Morris and Gilchrist, 2011). It is clear that, much like the broader third sector in which it is situated, community asset ownership is a diverse phenomenon with no overriding model of formation, delivery or management. Community asset organisations can range from small voluntary-run groups that mange a single asset previously gifted to a community, to multi-purpose organisations that may own multiple assets, are more entrepreneurial and less reliant on the contributions of volunteers, and whose operations require more capital-intensive management and varied methods of income generation. The type of assets owned and managed by communities can range from village halls and community centres to housing, pubs and shops (Aiken *et al.*, 2011). Notwithstanding the diversity of community asset organisations, we can identify commonalities in that they are usually intrinsically tied to a specific geographical area, that they will have objectives relating to a social purpose and the enhancement of well-being for their defined beneficiaries, and will typically operate on an economic model that reinvests profits or surpluses to meet their objectives rather than distributing them to individuals for private gain. They are also likely to involve members and local people in democratic governance structures, and will be independent organisations accountable to a defined community or group of beneficiaries, although this independence may also be subject to external regulation or audit (if, for example, they have charitable status) (see Thake, 2006; Bailey, 2011). It is, however, difficult to quantify the size and scale of community asset ownership in the UK, as asset-owning organisations are represented by numerous national organisations in the four jurisdictions, and measured by various data sources reporting on different strands and niche areas of the third sector. Nevertheless, it is clear that these organisations own assets of significant value; for instance the group of development trusts in England alone owns assets of a combined total value of £660m (Locality, 2011), while the notion that asset ownership has much to offer the future design and delivery of social policy has obvious political traction.

Policy developments for community assets across the UK

Community asset agendas can be located in the broader reconfiguration of the respective roles of the state and communities, with responsibility for the delivery of public goods and social welfare devolved to the latter through agendas of community empowerment and

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shifts in governance (Rose, 2000; Fyfe, 2005). These processes are part of what has been termed the 'hollowing out' of the state, as the scope for public intervention and provision is limited, with alternative models of welfare and service delivery promoted (Skelcher, 2000). Under New Labour the hollowing out of the state led to a greater emphasis on hybrid partnerships involving marketised solutions, public innovation, privatisation and greater engagement of civil society in meeting social needs neglected by traditional public and private sectors (Danson and Whittam, 2011). The popularisation of civil society was premised on its ability to resolve societal issues beyond the reach or interest of the state and the market, and to create innovative and socially just methods of meeting social needs, as well as its democratising potential through the engagement of citizens in the delivery and maintenance of social welfare (Morison, 2000; Fyfe, 2005; Phills *et al.*, 2008).

Support for active citizenship and community empowerment frames the scale of community as a new territory for government via the devolution of welfare responsibilities, as well as a means of achieving policy objectives through the realisation of active individual and communal responsibilities, affiliations and shared bonds (Rose, 1996). There is therefore a large emphasis not only on the ability of civil society to design solutions to particular social needs, but also on its potential to strengthen social cohesion through the self-governance, self-organisation and mobilisation of citizens around presumed common interests (Fyfe, 2005). While communities are clearly of strategic importance to the state, it should also be noted that the mobilisation and self-organisation of communities is not confined to top-down encouragement and to filling gaps in provision. They can equally be conceptualised as spaces of resistance to privatised forces and conventional methods of managing civic space, as well as to top-down methods of government led and controlled by the state (see Haughton (1998) and Aiken (2012) on the Transition Towns movement).

The role and importance of civil society is epitomised in contemporary policy developments in the UK that have favoured an expansion in the scale of community asset ownership. In England, this has been reflected in debates around the Coalition government's 'big society' agenda, which has three core and interlinked components of: empowering communities to shape their neighbourhoods; the opening up of public services to actors in the private sector and civil society; and the promotion of social action premised on active citizenship and volunteering (Cabinet Office, 2010; Buser, 2013). A fundamental component of the 'big society' is the idea of localism as a political guide that instigates a 'radical shift of power' (DCLG, 2011a) from the centralised state, cast as exerting authoritarian control over local action, to active citizens in their communities.

This casts neighbourhoods as the building blocks of localism and as sites of opportunity where civic action and enterprise can be unlocked to create new solutions to local problems. As we highlight in the following sections, while similar emphasis on community management and ownership of assets and services exists in the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, these shifts have subtle differences in the direction of policy (see, for example, Thorlby, 2011; McKee, 2012). Developments in England may be viewed sceptically due to their association with economic austerity and the dismantling of public provision. Furthermore, the 'big society' agenda has faced difficulties in establishing legitimacy. Macmillan (2013: 5) describes its 'troubled history' since its launch in 2010, referencing various examinations of the project that critique it for lacking a coherent definition and vision and for an unclear strategy for implementation that failed to engage key partners in the voluntary sector (ACEVO, 2011; Civil Exchange, 2012).

However, in recent years there have been policy continuities in the UK that emphasise the role of communities, particularly regarding asset ownership. In England, this has been clear since the publication of the Quirk Review (2007), which recommended the direct transfer of public assets into community ownership. This eventually influenced the creation of a specialised Asset Transfer Unit to facilitate the dispersal of assets from the public sector to community organisations, while specialised funding streams from sources such as the Big Lottery Fund and ethical banks such as Triodos and Charity Bank aimed to support ownership agendas. The advent of the 'big society' and the Coalition Government's commitment to localism therefore continued the previous efforts of New Labour in mobilising communities, as reflected by the recent introduction of legislative community rights, including a 'community right to buy' public assets of community value (DCLG, 2011b), and support for greater replication of asset-owning bodies such as community land trusts (Moore and McKee, 2012).

These developments were partly influenced by experience in Scotland, where a history of community land ownership has, in the last decade, been supported and promoted by the Scottish Government. This was delivered through the introduction of legislative rights for community land trusts to buy land, with a dedicated Land Fund that worked hand in hand with the legislation by providing community groups with funding for land purchase (Skerratt, 2011). This is complemented by the longevity of community-led governance, empowerment and ownership models in the composition of Scotland's housing sector (McKee, 2010, 2011, 2012). Support for community asset-based approaches to public service reform and neighbourhood renewal is also evident, often premised on the transfer of assets from public to community ownership and the influence of community planning approaches in designing targeted community services (Christie Commission, 2011; Scottish Government, 2012). There are also dedicated funding streams, such as the Big Lottery's 'Growing Community Assets' programme and the Scottish Government's 'People and Communities Fund', that aim to diffuse asset ownership across different fields and sectors of public life.

Community asset ownership in Wales and Northern Ireland is less pronounced relative to developments in England and Scotland, but in recent years policy agendas have mirrored asset transfer initiatives elsewhere in the UK, as well as providing support for social enterprise, innovation and co-operative housing approaches (see Thorlby, 2011, for an overview of country-specific programmes).

It is clear that community assets have significant political traction, with support premised on the presumed ability of communities to self-govern, self-organise, and to manage and own assets in such a way that is more responsive to, reflective of and dictated by local needs and priorities. Community asset ownership may also be attractive to governments as they seek to manage the delivery of public services and welfare in the context of fiscal austerity measures (Crowley, 2012). While in this respect community asset ownership may be mutually advantageous to communities seeking to own assets and to governments reconfiguring their welfare regimes, there may be crucial differences in the way community assets are owned, managed and experienced given the heterogeneity of the sector. Furthermore, the context for policy divergence between the nations of the UK as a consequence of devolution, combined with differential abilities and capacities within and between communities encouraged to meet their own social needs, suggests that there may be different geographies of impact within different spatial contexts and political frameworks.

Rationales and contexts for the acquisition of assets

From the perspective of communities involved in the acquisition and development of community assets, their mobilisation is often premised on reconstructing responsibility for local issues, moving from a passive role to one that actively shapes processes of local development and provision. This can be framed as a place-based response to the failure of the state or market to provide particular goods and services, as well as to issues of resilience and economic insecurity. As Haughton (1998: 875, original emphasis) notes, community-led economic development often places an emphasis on 'building a stronger, more *localized* economy by building community-owned alternatives to the mainstream market', with these alternatives usually designed to meet specified local needs as well as to capture resultant economic benefits (such as income) for the benefit of their defined beneficiaries. This commitment to the generation and retention of local wealth is also premised on its ability to tackle local conditions and poverty of place in areas suffering from disinvestment and poor services and resources (Arradon and Wyler, 2008). Similar rationales can be found internationally, where academic commentary has supported the growth of local economies that allow citizens to gain and retain control over economic capital through forms of ownership that are rooted in place and that spread financial rewards more broadly and equitably (DeFilippis, 2001; Imbroscio, 2013).

In the UK, this retention of income by community asset owners is also tied up in more pragmatic rationales related to funding constraints, as the acquisition of assets by community organisations is often inextricably linked to organisational and financial sustainability, particularly in an era where grant funding from the state may be cut (Thake, 2006). Community assets are therefore seen as advantageous for ensuring the financial independence of community organisations, as independent revenue streams can contribute to the longer-term sustainability of projects and provide a base for asset owners to maintain and increase community impact (Crowley *et al.*, 2012).

These economic rationales are essentially aimed at promoting and strengthening the independence of community organisations by divorcing their sustainability from dependence on grant income. Community asset transfer policies are often premised on similar rationales, notably in Wales where asset transfer has an explicit aim of reducing the grant dependency of third sector organisations and of instigating a shift in the balance of public and third sector community services to 'enterprising organisations that actively involve and benefit the communities they serve' (CM International, 2011: 1). This reflects a broader reframing of how civil society is supported and financed with an increased focus on entrepreneurial approaches underpinned by alternative funding models involving loan finance, risk capital and social enterprise (Pharoah, 2012). Several initiatives support this, notably the increased role of social investment lenders exemplified by the launch of a dedicated *Big Society Capital* scheme launched in England that has so far supported community-led rental housing and renewable energy schemes, each of which hold the potential to simultaneously meet local needs and generate income for community organisations.

However, the importance of social investment in England has been undermined by cuts to public spending as a consequence of recent austerity measures, as the third sector has traditionally received substantial funding from public sources. Indeed, rather than encouraging a greater role for civil society as envisioned by the promotion of 'big society' and localism, several commentators have observed that cuts to local government, a strong source of support for community organisations and to various third sector infrastructure bodies and specialised funding streams, are likely to significantly weaken civil society's potential contribution to the provision of public goods (Wells *et al.*, 2011a; Alcock, 2012a; Jacobs and Manzi, 2012). While asset ownership may be one route to achieving financial sustainability and independence for community organisations, research has also identified strategic tensions as community asset owners reconcile entrepreneurial acquisition of assets and identification of new funds with their commitment to place-based community concerns and social objectives (Aiken *et al.*, 2011: 55).

These cuts are especially important to note as they are likely to have an effect on the size, scope and impact of community asset ownership, particularly as public funding is withdrawn. Research has shown that civil society organisations in more deprived neighbourhoods receive a higher proportion of public funding (Clifford *et al.*, 2012), meaning that issues of equity between places and their relative access to resources in an era of austerity are likely to be crucial to understanding how localist agendas manifest themselves (Wells *et al.*, 2011a).

Asset transfer has become a popular mechanism for supporting an expansion in community asset ownership across the UK, although its emergence has in recent years been paralleled by declines in capital and revenue support required for both the transfer and subsequent management of assets. As such, while independent programme evaluations of these initiatives identify the potential for greater empowerment and financial sustainability of community asset organisations (SQW Consultancy, 2012; Murtagh *et al.*, 2012), they also warn of the potential for public asset transfer to be motivated by cost reductions and efficiencies, as well as for the disposal of poorly maintained and unprofitable assets to communities (Aiken *et al.*, 2011; SQW Consultancy, 2011; Carnegie UK Trust, 2012; Murtagh *et al.*, 2012). This is particularly important as community organisations that fill gaps in provision where it is not profitable for others to do so, are, by definition, operating in risky environments, which can threaten their survival and ability to generate surpluses (Aiken *et al.*, 2011; Bailey, 2011).

Similar criticisms have been made of the implementation of localist agendas in England. Localism and civic enterprise are mobilised not just for their potential progressive nature, but also feature in political narratives that construct the state as antagonistic to local action and as requiring a dismantling of the public sector to create a space for community enterprise to thrive (Featherstone *et al.*, 2012). Yet this rhetoric appears to be a uniquely English phenomenon, as elsewhere in the UK the promotion of civil society and state support are not seen as mutually exclusive (Alcock, 2012a). While little has been written on the particularities and narratives of the Welsh and Northern Irish context, in Scotland the link between public resource cuts and civil society promotion has been rejected both by sceptical practitioners who highlight the tensions between the two (see McKee, 2012), and in policy terms, with Scotland seemingly embarking on a different trajectory that promotes community action and empowerment in a context of continued attachment to collective provision of public goods (Danson and Whittam, 2011). The perception that the promotion of civic action and enterprise is a veil for public sector cuts in England, rather than a positive promotion of civil society, has been well documented, given both the extent of these cuts and their impact on the very organisations that localist agendas claim to support (Kisby, 2010; New Economics Foundation, 2012; Wells *et al.*, 2011a).

This suggests there is likely to be variance in the scope, scale and extent of community asset ownership as a means of accomplishing public service reform within and between different parts of the UK. This is particularly the case given the considerable evidence provided by analysis of distinct sub-sectors of asset ownership that highlight the important role of local and national governments in actively intervening and constructing an environment for community assets to be funded and acquired. This is evident in research on community ownership of land and affordable housing in England and Scotland, where there has been key investment in infrastructure bodies and provision of dedicated funding streams (Skerratt, 2011; Moore and McKee, 2012; Moore and Mullins, 2013), although there has been little comparative empirical research conducted on the relationship between community asset owners and different institutional and policy spaces in the context of devolution. Given the apparent divergence in policy trajectories in different countries, as well as geographical differences that may emerge within each jurisdiction of the UK as power is devolved and localist reforms are effected, there is a clear need to understand the different spatial contexts in which community asset ownership operates, particularly given the potential for different rationales, histories and trajectories in the acquisition and ownership of assets. Of particular interest and importance is the relationship between community asset owners and civil society with national and local governments, as well as the configuration of their respective institutional and policy spaces in the context of devolution (Alcock, 2012b).

Existing evidence on the benefits and impact of community assets

Community asset agendas are supported for their delivery of many presumed benefits, though issues of impact and success may be contested between actors with different perceptions of how this should be understood. For instance, success for policymakers may be defined and focused on specific outcomes with issues of quality and value for money at their heart, while for community organisations and their beneficiaries it may relate more to the delivery of tailored services and provision and the creation of independent governance structures that accord key roles to local people.

With community organisations becoming more involved in the delivery of public services, the way in which their work is assessed has been influenced by concepts of ‘value for money’, cost–benefit analysis and social return on investment, in which costs and benefits are quantified and compared (Arvidson *et al.*, 2013). These methodologies have been popular in looking at the scope and impact of social investment in community assets and the broader third sector (see, for example, Wells *et al.*, 2011b), in addition to complementary quantitative approaches to the assessment of impact. For instance, Satsangi and Murray’s (2011: 6) recent study of community-owned social housing concluded that ‘collective ownership is associated with measureable benefits to life quality’, based on a comparative study between residents of community-owned housing and those residing in other tenures in similar locations and with similar demographics. Other research often focuses on quantification of the economic impact of these organisations, including descriptive analysis of surpluses they generate and how these may be distributed for social benefit, and the value and efficiency of their assets (Bailey, 2011; Plunkett Foundation, 2012).

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While this methodological focus is useful for funders in quantifying the impact of their investment, it is also problematic given its difficulties in capturing less tangible benefits that cannot be easily measured, such as wellbeing, confidence, and the empowerment and independence of volunteers and beneficiaries (see Arvidson *et al*., 2013: 10, for further discussion of strengths and limitations).

Qualitative case study research has attempted to capture some of these more intangible benefits. This has identified how increases in participation and engagement in volunteering are often linked to feelings of increased community pride, identity and strengthening of local democratic decision-making over the use of assets (Cabras, 2011; Wells *et al*., 2012). Satsangi's work on community land ownership in Scotland has highlighted how the collective ownership of land, housing and amenities led not just to the improvement of the physical environment and local provision, but created a 'pluralistic structure that allows for full member participation in decision-making' (Satsangi, 2007: 43) which allowed local people to control and direct their local area. These intangible outcomes were also identified by organisational and beneficiary perspectives in Aiken *et al*.'s (2011) broad review of community assets. However, this case study literature has often been bounded in nature and favoured organisational perspectives rather than exploring the interconnections and tensions between organisations, users, beneficiaries and strategic perspectives. There is a growing acknowledgement of and support for the importance of a community asset base in allowing place-based organisations the scope to develop local projects they deem important and to tailor solutions to identified local needs in a way that private and public sectors cannot (McKee, 2012; SQW Consultancy, 2012). However, much of this research is focused either on programme evaluations within particular national contexts and tied to analysis of particular outcomes or on bounded case studies, making it difficult to comprehensively tease out geographical differences in the operation and social impact of community asset owners within and between the devolved policy contexts of the UK.

Understanding community assets: an agenda for research

Understanding geographical differences and the particularities of place is important for three key reasons. First, localist policy agendas make a string of underlying assumptions that place a strong emphasis on spatial context and characteristics. Communities are assumed to be able to create a cohesive sense of place through asset ownership and other forms of engagement and empowerment, as well as the ability and capacity to mobilise collectively around presumed common interests in the first place. Yet while there are successful examples of community asset ownership and self-organisation, these abilities are differentially distributed within and between communities, as not all have the same skills, capabilities and resources to create structures and make decisions that will positively benefit their area (see, for example, Skerratt and Hall, 2011; Jacobs and Manzi, 2012). This is especially important given the direction of policy travel in England, where there is a narrative not only of communities filling gaps in provision and localising decision-making and economic benefits from assets, but also of the potential for active civic participation to resolve disadvantage and social inequalities (Buser, 2013). The extent to which these benefits are realised is likely to be contingent on specific aspects of space and place. Therefore, the social impact of community assets needs to be understood both as something created and shaped by community action in association with other

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partners, and as something that is directly touched and experienced by lay people in the locality (also see the argument of Muñoz (2010) on social enterprise research). There has, however, been little academic insight into who the beneficiaries of community assets are, the way in which they experience and engage with community assets, and the different qualitative personal and social geographies of impact that arise from asset ownership.

Much of the rhetoric around new localism powers is grounded in a utopian vision of mutualism, social ethos and responsibility (Blond, 2010), but fails to acknowledge the problems state retrenchment poses for disadvantaged communities and community organisations, nor does it engage critically with issues of power, justice and empowerment. While community assets are promoted as a potential solution to poverty of place within a broader identification of 'the local' as the appropriate scale for policy solutions, there are important social and economic structural issues that are likely to hinder this. In particular, the targeting of resource cuts suggests that the state's role is not an enabling one and is more laissez-faire in responsibilising individual localities for the remedy of local problems (see Featherstone *et al.*'s (2012) critique of localism and austerity).

Second, as documented above, the assessment of the benefits of community asset ownership is often restricted to quantifiable measurements, with qualitative issues of wellbeing, self-esteem, confidence, inclusion and empowerment of both the owners of community assets and their presumed beneficiaries only explored in small-scale case study literature. For example, while Cabras' study of community ownership of pubs in rural areas of England identified a number of tangible and intangible benefits related to social engagement and economic development, he concluded by observing the 'significant paucity of research on this theme' (2011: 2432) across different sectors and in different areas.

In particular, there is a knowledge gap in terms of how we understand the links between individual impacts of community assets as represented through the voice of beneficiaries alongside the organisations themselves, and the geographical differences between urban and rural locations, affluent and deprived neighbourhoods, community asset owners of different sizes and types and other place-specific characteristics. Related to this, issues relating to representation and accountability at community level warrant greater attention: how do asset owners go about consulting, engaging and representing the interests and priorities of the place-based communities they seek to represent and benefit? Here, comparison between rural and urban areas across the UK may be a frame for future research, given the varying definitions of 'community' that may be evident in locations of different population density and size. Thus far academic literature has failed to unpick the differences in the constitution and governance of community asset owners in different places and spaces, as well as the variance between the scope and scale of the local benefits they seek to provide.

Finally, it is apparent that despite the observations of Alcock (2012b) that third sector policies in the UK have tended to converge even in the context of devolution; these 'new policy spaces' may in fact create different political trajectories in terms of where and how the contribution of communities is conceived. It seems likely that the experiences, benefits and impacts of community asset owners will not vary simply between neighbourhoods, but also within and between the different jurisdictions of the UK, something which is rarely appreciated in existing research on community assets. While the mobilisation of communities to shape, deliver, manage and own local assets is evident in all four administrations, the way in which these policies that appear similar on face value, such as the community right to buy and asset transfer initiatives, actually play out may differ due to the different articulations of policy.

Much commentary on community assets and localist agendas has focused on the context of England and Scotland (Danson and Whittam, 2011), but there has been little critical insight and research into the development of these initiatives in Wales and Northern Ireland, with a distinct lack of comparative UK research. These issues are especially important given that some of the underlying drivers of these initiatives make many romantic assumptions on the ability of communities to mobilise around shared interests, to articulate and meet their own needs and importantly to fill gaps in provision where the state may have withdrawn or the market may have neglected. There may therefore be scope for research methodologies that place a primacy on identifying and theorising the intangible benefits of community asset ownership upon people and place, strengthening understandings of differences between community asset organisations of varied types, sizes, geographies and motivations. This preoccupation with geographical difference is important, as communities and places do not exist as isolated islands with finite boundaries, and are instead located within and shaped by their interactions with broader social, economic and political frameworks that structure society. These will ultimately impinge on the extent to which community asset ownership can produce benefits for their defined beneficiaries.

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