

HARD TIMES 4

ACTION-RESEARCH AS A COMMUNITY TOOL

“This process allowed people to talk and when one person speaks the others can speak.”¹



This is the fourth in a series of *In-Briefs* presenting the latest findings from the Communities in Action (CiA) Programme, a unique community-led research project with eight working class communities across Northern Ireland.

Since July 2012, local people have been documenting their experiences of the recession, cost of living increases and changes to the Social Security system in the run up to anticipated Welfare Reform legislation.

This *In-Brief* describes the action research process and the impact on groups taking part. Others in the series address emerging themes.



Hard Times 1 looks at how families are coping in the face of recession, cost of living increases and changes to the Social Security system.

Hard Times 2 focusses on the impact of these factors on people's financial situation, their family life and their physical and mental health.

Hard Times 3 reports on the specific pressures faced by young people and their hopes for the future.

The Partners

To date between 60 and 80 people have joined a series of community discussions facilitated by eight smaller community groups² from across Northern Ireland. Focus group members and community activists are the cornerstone of the Communities in Action Programme.

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland had a long track record in supporting local communities to tackle poverty and disadvantage, build cohesion and work to overcome

disadvantage. Communities in Action is part of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland's Social Justice Approach to Community Development Programme that is supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies. BBC Children in Need is committed to supporting disadvantaged children and young people to feel happy, safe and secure and to be able to reach their potential.

"For BBC Children in Need, the Communities in Action Programme offers an opportunity for young people to speak directly about how their lives are affected by social policy and in particular

by Welfare Reform. Over a three year period the projects help young people to make the connection between their reality and the political process, with the support of wider research and academic analysis. The engagement with other projects encourages sharing initiatives to promote change and coping strategies to overcome common constraints." (Paddy Sloan, National Head (Northern Ireland), BBC Children in Need)

The support of PSE UK team members was a key factor contributing to the success of the project. One of the aims of PSE UK (a major research collaboration among six universities, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council) is to make poverty research methods and findings accessible to the wider public.

"Communities in Action is an important action research project, especially in these austere times, and one the Open University and PSE engagement team is very proud to have supported. For us this collaboration has been an opportunity to make research a more meaningful and empowering tool for communities

"For me I thought that everyone involved in the partnership became like colleagues and we all had different skills to offer."

themselves. We have learned a great deal from our community partners, which can be used to inform engagement work in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the future. (Gabi Kent, PSE Community Engagement Lead)

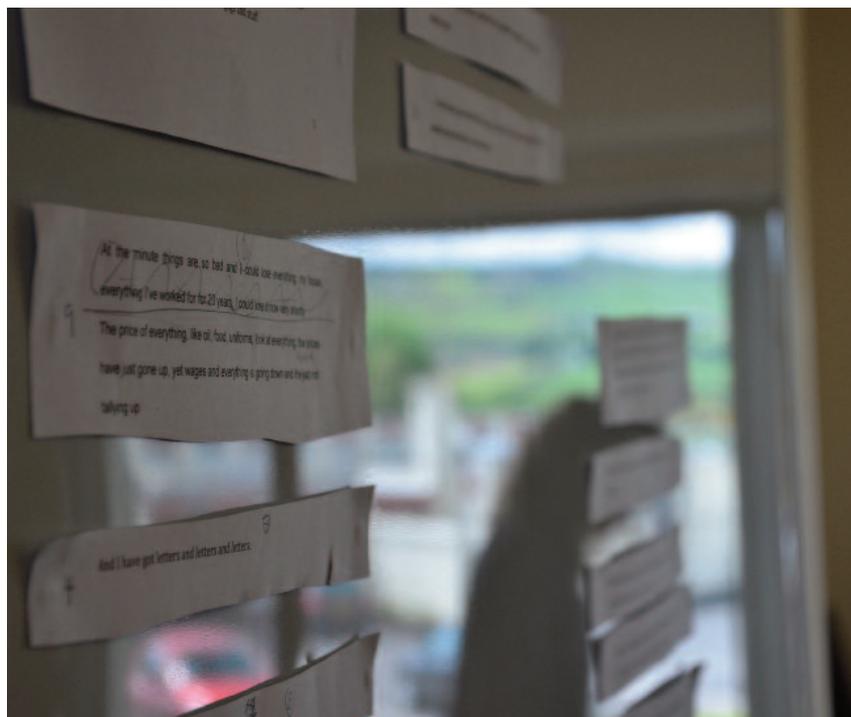
The Process

Communities in Action brings together different sets of experiences, skills, and expectations with a common goal - to identify the 'bread and butter issues' facing communities today, to raise awareness of these issues and to empower residents to develop initiatives that build local resilience:

"In particular, sitting down with the other groups was beneficial... we got to see what others were doing."

Community practitioners, CFNI and PSE team members from Queen's University and the Open University worked together to develop a process that community practitioners would lead and run and to provide training, resources and support to enable this to happen. This included community conversations or focus groups, community produced films and Communities in Action *In-Briefs* to share these findings and stories locally and nationally.

Between July 2012 and Feb 2014, twenty-seven community conversations took place, for the most part facilitated by local community volunteers or workers. Many groups have now completed three rounds of focus groups with a high proportion of returning participants, so it has been possible to record people's experiences over time.



Prompt questions were used as the basis for discussion and the sessions were recorded and transcribed for analysis:

Focus Group One provided baseline information on how individuals and families were coping.

Focus Group Two used a question set designed to link to the PSE Necessities of Life survey.

Focus Group Three explored money worries and debt, as well as allowing for an update on how people are coping.

While the focus groups set about gathering the lived experience of 'hard times' for individuals and families, the partnership with the PSE project enabled groups to set these experiences within the context of wider UK research that is both qualitative and quantitative. You can visit the Communities in Action webpages on the PSE website <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/community/community-collaboration>

"To present a real story with real people has a wider impact. It opens up doors."



Gathering young people's views

The importance of listening to the experiences of children and young people was recognised and the research process was amended to ensure their views were captured. Prompt questions for discussions with young people in Strabane and Ardoyne were amended in consultation with local youth leaders to maximise youth engagement with the Programme.

In addition, creative projects were devised to empower young people to express their thoughts and to document their stories. With support from BBC Children in Need, The Villages Together have been developing initiatives bringing together young people from scattered rural communities. In 2013 a group of school-age young women participated in a week-long photography project looking at 'girl culture'. At the start of 2014 ten young people aged 15-17 joined up for 'The Times of Our Lives', a project giving voice to young people's experiences of life in rural areas that aims to develop youth leadership skills.

BBC Children in Need also made possible a project for children from Springhill Park in Strabane. The Derry Playhouse delivered a series of workshops using Theatre of Witness techniques leading to a play that the young people devised and performed to parents at the local community centre.

Gathering information through community conversations

In 2012, community activists set up research groups in their local areas. Some groups bring people with a similar background together, such as mothers or young people, while others are mixed groups and include parents, young people and senior citizens. The community researchers meet regularly in their local area to hold community conversations, to document their findings, and to plan actions based on this information.

While there was some initial apprehension, once trust in the project was established participants in the community conversations began to appreciate the mutual support that the focus groups could offer:

"People who would have just sat in the house are now saying 'What can we do?' – They are gaining skills and confidence."

"[People] found out that everyone is in the same boat and they are not on their own ...they are finding they have a lot in common."

Sharing Experiences

The project partners came together regularly to exchange information, share findings and to prioritise topics for future focus groups.

Some groups chose to highlight their findings using photos and short films. Focus group participants also learned how to produce the films themselves using accessible new technology such as iPads.

Initial findings were presented at Stormont in January 2013 (See the *In-Brief 'Scraping by from week to week'* at <http://www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Communities-in-Action->).

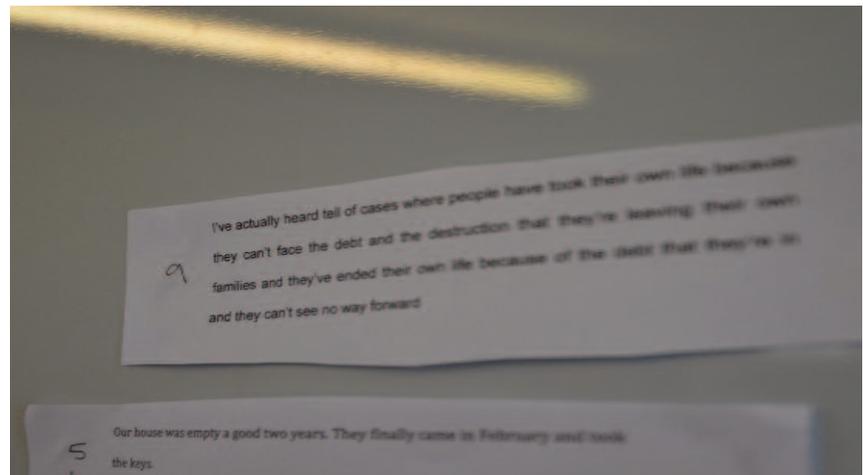
Community groups also published their findings and short films on the PSE website, connecting local to national research.

Turning community research into action

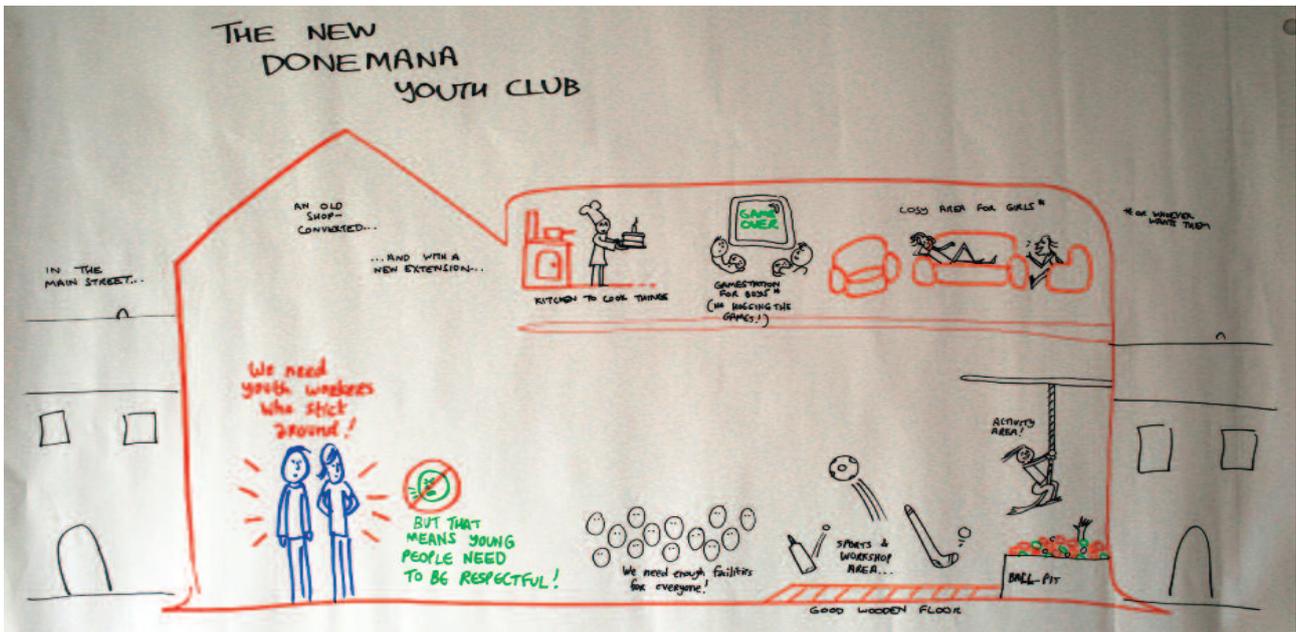
"We are finding out more about people's needs and what is going on. So we can see things we can do to help..."

Community groups have developed a number of initiatives to begin to address some of the issues they have identified through their focus group discussions:

- Developing local partnerships with benefits advisors to ensure residents have access to accurate advice and support to deal with individual benefits issues via advice clinics;
- Producing community newsletters with updates on current and proposed changes



"It has been great to be part of a cross community project. For many in the group it is the first time they have done it."



to the Social Security system and signposting people to where they can get further help;

- Setting up and promoting local oil buying clubs that benefit from collective purchasing power (in partnership with Bryson Energy);
- Facilitating a free oil and gas boiler servicing scheme for older residents to increase fuel efficiency (with support from the UK Community Foundations' Surviving Winter campaign);
- Building links with therapeutic counsellors to provide support to individuals living with high levels of stress and anxiety.

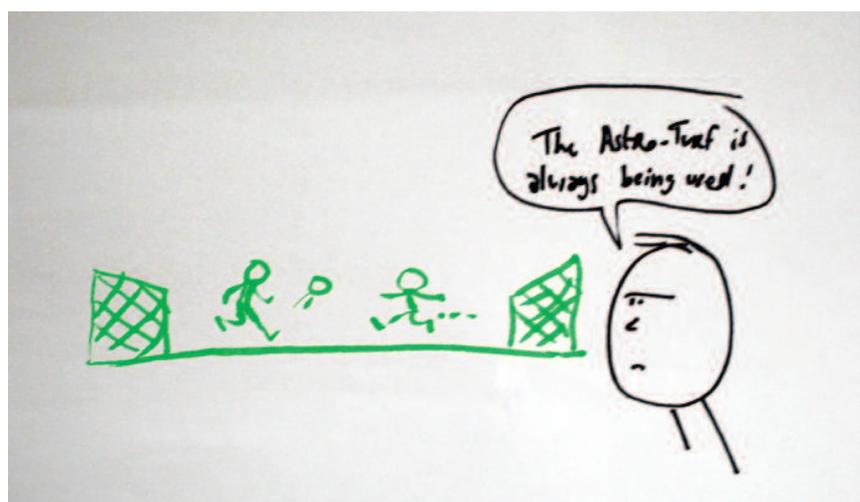
Focus group members have also seized the opportunity to get trained up in areas as diverse as:

- Benefits advice
- Cooking on a budget
- Health awareness
- Affordable credit
- Youth empowerment training.

Listen up!

The Communities in Action Programme will continue to keep a finger on the pulse of how these communities are faring and to support innovative community-led initiatives. The community groups themselves, having garnered people's stories and gathered the evidence, are articulating a clear message:

“The hope is that our voices will be heard.”



¹ Unless specified otherwise, all quotes are taken from interviews by Gabi Kent (Open University/ PSE) with community group practitioners in 2012 and 2013 for the PSE Final report on Community Engagement¹

² See back cover for details of communities taking part.





About Communities in Action

To date, between 60 and 80 local people have joined a series of community conversations facilitated by the following community groups, under the Communities in Action Programme:

- Cregagh Community Association, Belfast
- Donegall Pass Community Forum, Belfast
- Doury Road Development Group, Ballymena
- Fountain Street Community Development Association and Springhill Park Community Development Association, Strabane.
- Grace Women's Development, Ardoyne, Belfast
- Lettershandoney District Development Group, Co. Derry/L'derry
- Taghnevan Community Development Association, Lurgan
- The Villages Together encompassing the villages of Donemana, Bready, Magheramason, Artigarvan, Ballylaw, Ballymagorry and Newbuildings.

Communities in Action is a unique community led action-research project developed by Community Foundation Northern Ireland (CFNI) working in collaboration with BBC Children In Need. Communities in Action is part of CFNI's Social Justice Approach to Community Development Programme that is supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies. Queen's University Belfast and the Open University supported the development of the research process as part of their community engagement remit for a major academic research project on poverty and social exclusion in the UK (PSE UK).

For further information on Communities in Action go to:
<http://www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Communities-in-Action->

Community portraits and short films made by Communities in Action groups with support from the Open University can be viewed at:
<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/community/northern-ireland/communities-action>

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