

April 2020: **BRIEFING 1**

# Rapid research COVID-19

## How will communities respond to and recover from this crisis?

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**SYNOPSIS:** This research briefing connects communities currently responding to COVID-19 to others who have faced major crises such as epidemics, floods, fires, earthquakes, wars and terrorist incidents. It provides a language to describe how communities forge new bonds and find common purpose, and identifies factors that may shape how well they fare during the urgent period of crisis and, later, in the slow business of recovery.

## Key points

- Community responses to a significant and destabilising macro-event like COVID-19 are an essential form of civil repair.
- The idea that a community can withstand shocks if it is 'resilient' does not recognise how communities are nested within wider power structures that largely shape their fate.
- The extent of existing social networks may be more important to measure than 'social capital', which is a slippery and disputed term.
- Another key factor is shared social identity and a sense of being 'in it together' leading to the quick formation of new groups, as in 2015-16 floods in York. However, this bond may wane over time and as recovery experiences vary and social differences re-emerge.
- Three key questions for the forthcoming research are identified, including 'How might the emergence of new COVID-19 support networks be strengthened and sustained as the crisis unfolds?'

This briefing is the first in a new series seeking to understand how communities across England respond to COVID-19 and how they recover. Further briefings will be published through 2020 and 2021 to share early findings and learn from others exploring similar questions.

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# Initial reflections from the literature on disasters

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## Real time learning

In a matter of weeks, the global political response to the COVID-19 pandemic has upended settled assumptions about how economies and societies are organised. Established ways of living, caring, travelling and working have been massively disrupted as lockdowns have become the main public health response to reduce the spread of the disease and prevent health systems being overwhelmed.

The crisis raises a host of new research questions, including the ways in which communities are variously able to respond to new and immediate needs at local level: how do communities react to, cope with and recover from a major crisis that impacts almost everybody, albeit in different ways?

This is the **first in a series of short briefings designed to share insights from [a new research project](#)** which is exploring how local communities are responding as the COVID-19 situation unfolds. The study commenced in April 2020 and will run through to June 2021. It is undertaken by a team of researchers coordinated by the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham.

The study aims to provide real time insight into the consequences of COVID-19 and associated policy and practical responses to it, both from reviewing literature and engagement with communities on the ground. It seeks to examine how communities react to, cope with and recover from major crises, how this compares with community reactions to other crises, and what support communities need both to make an effective response to COVID-19 and to recover effectively from its impact.

These questions are being addressed through a combination of qualitative case studies of community responses, in 25 different areas of England (20 communities in the Big Local programme, and 5 additional communities not in the programme), accompanied by a literature review and ongoing monitoring of latest community developments in response to COVID-19. To date the study has set out the plan for the case studies, begun to establish contact with selected areas, and started reviewing literature.

This briefing provides a starting point for the study by providing some initial reflections from the literature on responses to disasters. Further briefings in this series will cover emerging findings and insights from the case studies, as well as ongoing reflections from the literature. The briefings should be regarded as providing ongoing, provisional insights for reflection and discussion, rather than definitive findings, conclusions or recommendations. They sit alongside the weekly Local Trust [COVID-19 mailing for Big Local areas](#) and the weekly roundup of [insight and opinion on a post-COVID society](#). The study will be reporting formally in Autumn 2020 and Spring 2021.

# Engaging with existing literature

The literature review strand of the project explores community reactions to major crises such as epidemics, floods, fires, earthquakes, wars and terrorist incidents. This is intended both to inform the research with communities as it proceeds and share broader insights about communities responding to crises. As such it is flexibly organised, moving broadly between a series of overlapping 'blocks' of relevant literature, such as 'disaster research', spontaneous volunteering, community resilience, mutual aid and self-help, and volunteering in emergency and public services. Here we consider some conceptual frameworks that can help make sense of what is happening in communities.

## A bigger picture

Drawing on a theoretical framework developed by two US-based sociologists (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012), TSRC framed the impact on the broad third sector of the 2008 global financial crisis and subsequent implementation of austerity measures as an '**unsettlement**' (Macmillan et al, 2013). In this framework an external shock, arising from developments in one field (in that case, sub-prime mortgages in the financial sector), cascades through other fields (including politics, different public services and the third sector), likened to '*a stone thrown in a still pond sending out ripples outward to all proximate fields*' (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 19).

In a similar vein, the COVID-19 pandemic would be regarded as a significant '**macroevent**' which **destabilises and creates a sense of generalised crisis in all fields across whole societies**, as with, for example, war, regime change and the climate emergency (ibid, 101). Thinking of COVID-19 as an 'unsettlement' or exogenous shock in this way is perhaps less important than considering what happens next. People playing their roles in different overlapping fields – politics, public services, the third sector, and communities – are forced rapidly to make sense of what's changing, and to develop ways of responding, coping, adjusting and ultimately restoring a semblance of order.

All this involves negotiating different interests, priorities, values, decisions, political judgements, collective action and different ways of articulating new ways forward, within and between fields. In these times of crisis civil society may be engaged in various forms of '**civil repair**' to mend otherwise torn social fabrics and broken solidarities (Alexander, 2016). Community responses to COVID-19 become, in this perspective, an essential form of civil repair. The questions then focus on how this works in practice, encountering what challenges, and with what results.

## 'Community resilience'

A starting point for learning about community responses to COVID-19 maybe to consider the kinds of definitions involved in research on previous disasters. The main term in use is the positive idea of '**community resilience**', seen in one definition as '***the capability of a community to anticipate risk, limit impact, and recover rapidly through survival, adaptation, evolution, and growth in the face of turbulent change***' (White et al, 2015: 200-201). The underpinning idea is the ability of a community to withstand, adapt to or 'bounce back' from adversity or significant disturbance (Norris et al, 2008).

The aim would seem to be to return to pre-existing conditions, but recognising crises as catalysts for change has led to **the more optimistic idea that communities might 'bounce forward'**, to encapsulate both the idea of 'moving on' after a crisis, and agency within communities, '*with the potential of assisting disaster victims and service providers to adopt positive behaviour changes prior to and after the disaster*' (Manyena et al, 2011: 417).

Considerable research efforts have subsequently been undertaken to unpack and measure key components of community resilience. The combined assumptions that communities are geographically bounded, distinctive and singular 'containers', and that resilience is the product of a set of internal characteristics of communities themselves, are open to question. The risk familiar from much critical community development thinking is that communities are not seen as nested within wider economic and political power structures, and are held responsible for their resilience, and thus their own fate.

## Social capital and social networks

It appears that **the main conceptual framing device underpinning much research on community resilience and responses to disaster remains *social capital***. Broadly this is an attempt to draw attention to community and social dimensions of response and recovery, rather than a sole focus on physical infrastructure and reconstruction. It draws strength from the wave of research and policy interest in social capital following Putnam's study of the role of networks, norms and trust which facilitate cooperation for mutual advance (Putnam, 2000).

Social capital is seen as a valuable but often latent resource which can be mobilised in adversity. In essence, **the argument is that community responses to crisis involve mobilising existing and newly formed networks amongst friends, neighbours and wider community members**, and that responses are stronger in communities characterised by higher levels of trust, alongside the existence of common codes and norms (Aldrich and Meyer, 2015). Social networks can be more or less densely and extensively connected sets of social relationships, which simultaneously bring people together and through which flow resources such as information, financial and in-kind aid, practical and emotional support, power and influence. The role of networks in channelling these resources may enable us to appreciate the resourcefulness of communities and, in the absence of much literature, is something that will be explored further in this study.

Research on social capital has, however, been heavily criticised. It has been bedevilled by lack of agreement on the meaning of the core concept, vagueness and confusion in how it is understood, elasticity in how it is used, and deep challenges in how it is operationalised, measured and analysed (Wilkin et al, 2019). Overstretched claims can sometimes be made for the power of social capital, as a panacea for all manner of community ills. It is unclear to what extent it is amenable to policy and practical intervention to create it, or to generate more of it.

In consequence, some researchers have downplayed the theoretical legacy of social capital and have focused instead on more concrete and measurable matters, such as ***social networks***. For example, Misra et al (2017) explored the form and density of community networks over time in a small rural community in West Bengal following cyclone-related flooding in 2009. The study usefully enabled residents to identify different phases through which the community responded to the disaster, involving two 'response' phases (the extreme event itself, the day of the disaster; and the immediate community response, over the next 7 days) and two 'recovery' phases (relief, lasting around a month; and rehabilitation, over the next 12 months).

Whilst **COVID-19 is not a singular catastrophic event in the same way, the idea of broad stages in response and recovery remains relevant**, although they are likely to overlap and be messier than any stage-model might suggest. The West Bengal study found that in earlier phases of the disaster most of the community response (search and rescue) involved endogenous networks within the community, which rapidly thickened in the crisis, whilst as time passed the networks broadened and facilitated the flow of external support (ibid, p.295).

Although the initial focus in this case was on close-knit networks, Cope et al (2018) note **the importance of geographically dispersed networks**, especially when local communities are overwhelmed by a disaster. Analysis of a survey of 928 coastal Louisiana residents in 2013-14 suggested that people were more likely to feel that were prepared for and had adequate resources to cope with crises where they had stronger support resources from friends and family that were more than two hours away. The broader implication for community responses to COVID-19 is not to assume that coping resources are only available within local communities, although 'stay at home' restrictions raise the significance of local resources and networks.

## Social identity and group membership

A contrasting focus in research on community responses to disaster, pursued by social psychologists, has been on **social identity and group membership**. The argument is that while social capital can help provide a good account of the importance of pre-existing community networks in responses to disaster, it is unable to explain how new groups form and continue in crisis situations. This has immediate relevance and lessons for **the rapid emergence and contribution of very local COVID-19 mutual aid support groups** and addresses the question of if and how they might be sustained.

Ntontis et al (2020) studied group formation and social identity amongst residents affected by the 2015-16 floods in York. The particular focus was on how **a common fate based on a shared experience (in this case flooding) brings and holds people together, and mobilises support**, asking what factors support the emergence of groups and community spirit, and what factors affect the extent to which that community spirit endures over time? Based on interviews with 19 residents some 15 months after the floods, the authors found that a common fate created a shared social identity and led to an increased sense of togetherness – people were 'all in this together', which could be reinforced insofar as they felt abandoned by institutional authorities. Stronger bonds between people could be maintained over the months following the disaster by **recognising that they had endured a shared experience, through commemorating the experience, and through ongoing practical and emotional social support**. Shared identity can, however, decline as people's experiences and fortunes diverge over time, and there is less of a common fate. **Pre-existing status and socio-economic inequalities begin to resurface** in a recovery period, and people's identities fragment as the shared 'flood victim' identity wanes.

## Implications for COVID-19 community responses, and questions for reflection

The review of literature continues, and the discussion in this briefing is merely a taster of some key concepts and findings from relevant research. It is worth thinking about the similarities and differences between the research presented here and the current situation. The study here focuses on community responses in England, and thus lessons from research in other contexts will always have limited application. Likewise, research on disasters often focuses on definable communities most affected by singular catastrophic events. COVID-19 is affecting all communities (albeit probably in different ways) and is proving to be a prolonged crisis without immediate end. However, interesting findings from other contexts can be useful in stimulating further ideas. **Three questions for further reflection** seem to arise from the research discussed in this briefing:

- How should we think about how different communities are responding to COVID-19? Is it a case of demonstrating and building community resilience, or is it highlighting something

- else, such as resourcefulness, or collaborative connections with other stakeholders and public authorities?
- How important is the variable density of existing community networks and strength of social infrastructure?
  - How might the emergence of new COVID-19 support networks be strengthened and sustained as the crisis unfolds?

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## About this research

Local Trust commissioned in-depth research in communities across England into how they respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

They are places where:

- residents have been supported over the long term to build civic capacity, and make decisions about resource allocation through the Big Local programme
- residents have received other funding and support through the Creative Civic Change programme.
- areas categorised as 'left-behind' because communities have fewer places to meet, lack digital and physical connectivity, and there is a less active and engaged community.

The research, which also includes extensive desk research and interviews across England is undertaken by a coalition of organisations led by the Third Sector Research Centre. The findings will provide insight into the impact of unexpected demands or crisis on local communities, and the factors that shape their resilience, response and recovery.

This briefing was written by Rob Macmillan, with support from Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson and Angela Ellis Paine from the TSRC research team.

## About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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