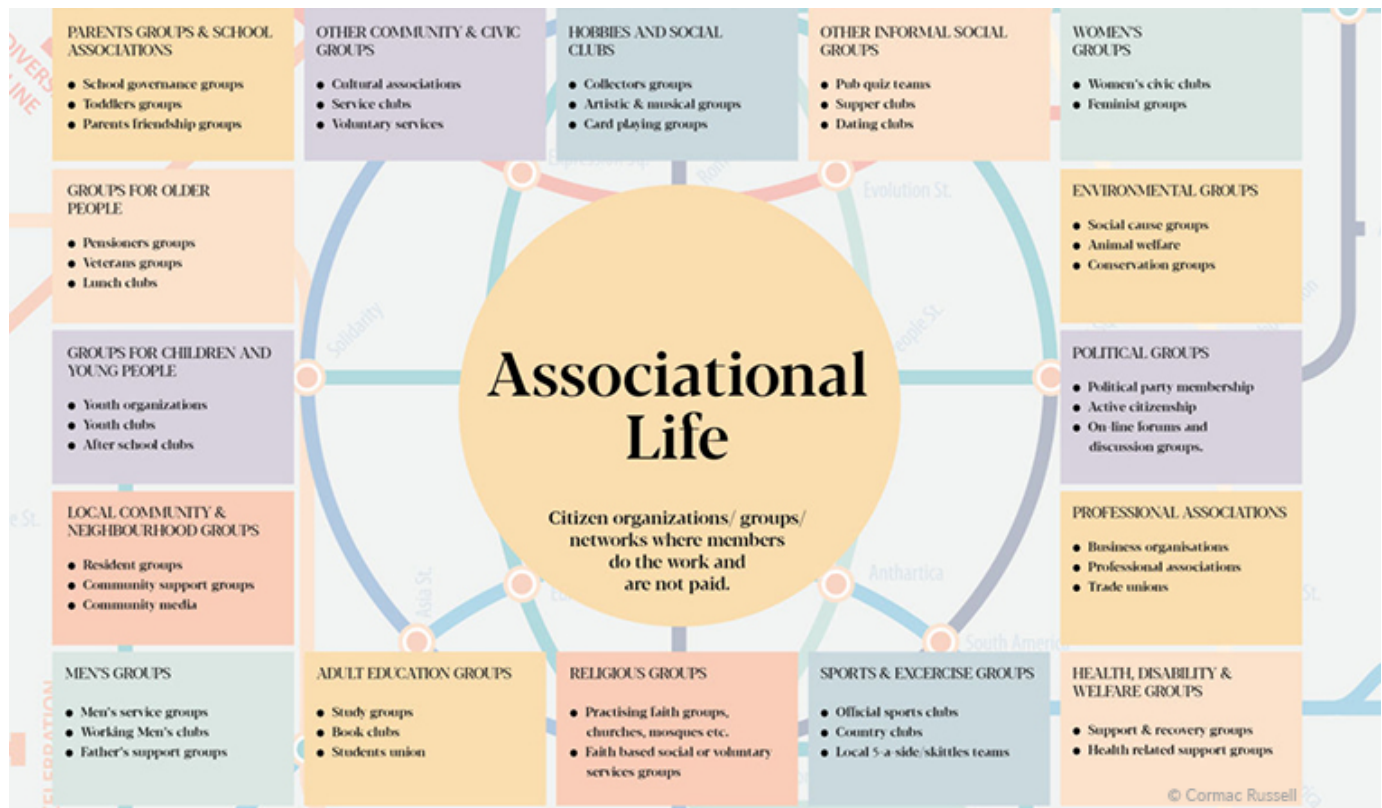


## Taking the Road Less Travelled – COVID-19 Response & Renewal That Builds Communities From Inside Out



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Tuesday, June 9, 2020 -- Russell and Hanratty

*“Hence the poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order” — Gustavo Gutiérrez*

We are at a crossroads in our shared lives and lifestyles, revealed by COVID-19.

We can do what is often done in these situations; simply be reactive in our actions during this pandemic, or we can take “the road less travelled” and be generative now and as we transition towards our preferred futures.

We can opt to accept the childish “we are at war” narratives, or we can be the adults in the room by organising our lives and our communities for the renewal of a cooperative ethos and towards a culture of care and social and economic justice.

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have precipitated, and further revealed, the value of local resident-led action in communities. It has raised questions about how best to coordinate preparedness/response to, and renewal efforts as we transition through this pandemic. And in this lies a dilemma for state institutions; if, on the one hand, they overreach, they risk damaging that local associational inventiveness of which we have recently seen an up-surge, while on the other-hand if they step too far back, they risk abandoning those most vulnerable to the direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19.

As with every dilemma (which by definition, is being caught on the horns of two opposing choices) the best way out is to introduce a third option that reduces the intensity of the risk (as opposed to the vain attempts to avoid or remove risk) and moves things forward by integrating seeming opposites.

Reviewing the current “third options” being pursued around the world by state institutions has led us to categorise them as follows:

- The state starts a mass recruitment drive for volunteers, centralises them and then attempts to mobilise them with a view to extending state capacity and reach, to respond on the ground;
- The state works through large national Not for Profit organisations to distribute aid/relief to those categorised as “most vulnerable/needy/hungry” etc., and builds emergency response capacity on the ground; or
- The state works through civil society groups (Not for Profits, local community groups, Mutual Aid groups, and businesses) to distribute aid/relief to the “most vulnerable” to the impacts of COVID-19, thereby building response capacity on the ground — not just for emergency relief, but also for the times that lie beyond the current expressions of this unfolding pandemic.

While we acknowledge, the second option is preferable to the first, we believe the third is the most sustainable, both in terms of immediate crisis response and future community renewal.

If we understand that we are engaged in a process of community resurgence, this means we are advancing effective emergency preparedness and response efforts, while at the same time progressing renewal efforts to ensure that as we transition through COVID-19, we can respond to what emerges throughout this pandemic, sustaining and developing more democratic and equitable communities, heralding a healthier society.

Considered in these terms, state bodies can creatively work through Not for Profits, not as a proxy for mutual aid groups and local associations, but with the understanding that in the process of cascading resources and supports to local communities, such institutions are a means towards that end — an end which calls forth a culture of care in every local place — and not an end in themselves.

It is far better, we believe, to understand the “why” of the effort — reaching, supporting and animating local communities to save lives and build long-term resilience and renewal — rather than the “who”. In that light it becomes clear that the principle that form follows function, is as true in mobilising sustainable and sustaining civic responses to a public health crisis, as it is in architecture.

Once we understand Not for Profits institutions in terms of their purpose, we see they perform very different functions and assume distinct ‘form’ to that of resident-led associations (see Table 1.1 below comparing Associations & Not for Profits). We (the authors) make these observations not to demean the role of the state or large Not for Profits; but to decentre their roles so that we can appropriately re-centre the role of local citizens and their associations in line with established democratic principles such as subsidiarity. The principle of subsidiarity asserts that a central authority should perform only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level.

For example, there is a very big difference to what a Health Foundation and a weight watchers club offers to the health agenda. However, the danger in the current context is that the former is considered more important and impactful than the latter, or, at least, a better proxy for quantifying healthy communities. This is a short

sighted and, arguably, counterproductive assumption especially in the face of COVID-19, yet it is not hard to come up with several high-profile examples of organisations doing just this.

While the Health Foundation or its equivalent in a given country, and a more localised Not for Profits institutions, have essential roles to play, also of great importance, albeit for different reasons, are the weight watchers groups, not to mention the informal walking groups, that exist in most local communities (albeit presently in abeyance in terms of their usual activities), and who are currently reaching out to their members, offering moral support and practical help, as well as we imagine, doing things such as leading an exercise regime taken together online from their homes.

These hyper specific, hyper local groups are below the radar; almost invisible to state bodies and large Not for Profit institutions, but they should not be invisible to effective, localised small Not for Profits institutions. It is these hyper local institutions that both enjoy the trust of local citizens while also possessing the organisational capacity to act as a fiscal agent and to advance community building principles, that ensure citizens remain in the driving seat of change, while also being a trust conduit to external resource when required.

We believe the challenge for state bodies is to quickly find those localised entities such as small Not for Profits institutions that are rooted in and committed to specific places; who understand those working in hyper local communities/citizen space, in a way that does not overwhelm, demean, replace or displace these groups, but instead discovers, connects and mobilises them, to reach people and places they as institutions (albeit small and local) cannot.

One of the key revelations of COVID-19 is that in a crisis, it is communities with the most equity and associational life that fair best.

A helpful concept here is that of the “embedded intermediaries”, those organisations that fill the gaps left behind by the state and markets. In their present responses, governments must understand the gaps they are trying to fill, and their short, medium and long-term aspirations in doing so. They must also understand their limits in this regard; there is much that they and allied institutions simply cannot do, because they have neither form nor function for the task. To reach such understanding, we must become clearer about the hidden capacities of local associations and small local organisations, asking clearly: what is it that small locally rooted organisations can do to support hyper-local street-based responses of citizens and their informal and formal associations?

Those governments that have one eye on crisis response (short and medium term thinking), and the other on renewal (a long-term goal), will take care to support all facets of civil society, starting with associational life, and — like a matryoshka/Russian doll — working outwards from small localized associations, embedded intermediaries, small Not for Profit institutions, local businesses, and then, and only then, larger institutions who can take on functions that cannot be taken on locally. All that said, we acknowledge in practice there are many large Not

for Profits that have organised in disaggregated localised ways, with branches and networks that reach deeply into the heartland of citizen space. And some, though not all, practice the principle of subsidiarity, and refuse to centralize decision making and resources.

What we are describing here is the supplementary role that institutions can play, while respective local, state and federal governments form a dome of protection around communities to enable innovation and self-governance to be maintained and, importantly, flourish, thereby ensuring no larger entity, political, commercial or civic, does that which a small entity can do for itself with appropriate support.

One of the key revelations of COVID-19 is that in a crisis, it is communities with the most equity and associational life that fair best. It is also clear based on our studies of other public health crises that the only credible responses are those that are community-driven, with institutions in a support role. But these supports must be furthered backed up by policies that promote social and economic equity. Therefore, with an eye towards future renewal, it will be important that investments are made to restore and enhance interdependence at the hyper-local level, for those spaces where associational life is thin. Of course, such investments do not stop with the funding of community-led responses as discussed here, they must also include a far-reaching New Settlement to rival the Marshall Plan and the New Deal; the introduction of Universal Citizen Income, and adequate resourcing of healthcare, social care and housing in localised hyper democratic formats.

Yet the only way we can ensure that states can democratically negotiate such novel social contracts, which enjoy deep civic and collective ownership, is to ensure that dialogues that shape those settlements commence where people live their lives, which is to say, we must therefore see the neighbourhood or its equivalent as the primary unit of response and renewal. In ensuring such participation at the most local levels, we believe that Asset-Based Community Development and Community (ABCD) approaches have an essential role in supporting preparedness and emergency response efforts, as well as in reseed associational life going forward.

As we've noted in previous posts, there is no roadmap for where to go next from this crossroads, at which we stand, but authentic community practice enhances the collective judgements of those who work at hyper-local level, providing a shared

compass for navigating towards economic and community renewal. As Myles Horton and Paulo Friere have counselled us: “we make the road by walking”. So, we equally believe, that now is not the time to abandon ABCD principles; now is the time to accelerate them, as together we start our journey on the “road less travelled”, a road that is hyper local, and citizen-led, where the neighbourhood is the primary unit of democratic renewal and emergency response.

### **Understanding the differences between Community Associations and Not for Profits**

| <b>Community Associations</b> | <b>Large Not for Profits</b> |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
|                               |                              |

Exist by consent of members, is diverse and rich in relationships and informality (Consensual, focused on trust & responsiveness)

Activities are undertaken “by” citizens, based locally, on knowledge of, or passion about, a subject/issue and understanding of each other’s abilities to solve a problem or create a new opportunity/possibility

Roles are undertaken without pay, sometimes with the support of a salaried/stipend person, e.g. pastor. But the members make the decisions, solve the problem and act.

Influence, power, tasks and roles are spread amongst members, creating widespread ownership and on-going viability and agility: hyper flexible & hyper responsive.

Curates safe spaces in which local thinking, opinions, values & enterprise can flourish, and future institutions are seeded when required.

They seek and solve locally defined problems and solutions; locally undertaken actions to achieve goals

Local people own the problem and/or possibility... they own the

A legal organisation governed by rules and processes, the few rule the many (Hierarchical; focused on quality control)

Activities are undertaken “to or for” people, based on large scale technical subjects/issues, requiring specialist knowledge by expert/credentialed professionals, albeit often with consultation.

Roles are undertaken for pay, and typically under supervision of a salaried manager, of which in larger NFPs there are more than one (ensuring quality)

Led by outside actors (relative to a specific community) — managers, specialists & practitioners — makes virtue of not personalising issues/problems; programme applications are general not individualised/not particular to one place.

Bound by tradition (custom & practice), with, an often outdated, set ways of working, and rules and regulations to observe and follow. The prime directive: advance & sustain the institution.

Problems and solutions defined by the outsider actors with paid workers undertaking actions to achieve goal.

Solutions are often mass produced



*This blog was originally posted to the [Nurture Development website](#) and appears here with permission.*