

# It's the Culture, Stupid

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Aneurin Bevan once said, "*We shall have to say 'No' more and more, because only by saying 'No' more and more to many things can you say 'Yes' to the most valuable things.*" In the debate about re-valuing work we may need to bear this advice in mind.

## **The old agencies**

A century ago a host of community institutions such as chapels and welfare halls flourished on a mixed economy of paid workers – minister or manager – plus voluntary management by those giving their time to the institution. These old agencies had active congregations and memberships with lively programmes of events, talks and outings. Underlying these relationships was an unconscious understanding that said, in effect, "*this is the work of God*" or "*the work of socialism*". This fired peoples' imaginations over several generations to better their conditions, which ultimately led to the welfare state, the NHS and our present debate about work. People willingly gave their time to maintain their own culture because nobody else was going to do it for them.

## **The new agencies**

Contrast this picture with now. Instead of active, thriving community centres, congregations and welfare halls we have professional agencies delivering health, education, social and environmental 'services' to passive 'consumers'. 'Service users' are often asked to give their time to governance of these agencies by sitting alongside salaried workers on management boards. Where once people might have said, "*I'm doing this because I enjoy it*" you may hear people saying, "*Why should I do this without getting paid?*" or "*I'm doing this for nothing.*"

Without idealising the participatory past or caricaturing the present as one in which people are only out for what they can get, we may wonder where has that *energy* gone which drove those old community institutions? Why has the professionalisation of care, learning and community development led to the *passivity* that is so apparent in community life today? Can this gigantic culture shift only be put down to the usual suspects: the welfare state, mass consumerism, modern work patterns, changes in gender roles, the erosion of faith in institutions?

## **Just Rewards or Fair Exchange?**

New Start's 'Just Rewards' campaign and the National Community Forum's 'Create' proposal have started a debate about the work that needs doing in communities. They name the civic work that needs to be done and then propose different ways of valuing those who do it, either by direct payment in money or by a reform of the benefits earnings disregard. These are important proposals that need serious attention.

What they both assume, however, is that the only currency available for measuring human effort is *money*. We wish to set alongside this the complementary currency of *time* and describe how communities in South Wales have been using this new currency to raise the value of participation in community activities.

The community of Blaengarw is a small, isolated, former mining village. Several years ago a Development Trust was formed to manage the old welfare hall. We asked them, “*How do you thank your volunteers?*” It was the usual story of the Christmas lunch and expenses. Then we asked the volunteers how they felt about a new deal in which each participant would get an hour of service in return for every hour they gave. They thought that was a good idea - not only a ‘just reward’ but also a fair exchange.

### **Time Banking – a New Mutual**

This is time banking, a new form of mutualism in which people who live in communities hear a new message which goes, “*If you do something for your community, your community will do something for you.*” One hour of service equals one hour of service or rewards in return. This is a new agreement for exchange that offers people real rewards for the work they do for their community.

The usual story of community development goes a bit like this. Someone identifies a need or an issue to be dealt with. Needs are assessed then the state or the voluntary sector recruits an army of paid helpers to meet the need. The need seems to grow as people discover the service. Some learn to have more needs in order to get more attention and support. Agencies end up rationing support. None of this is sustainable. These new agencies and institutions do not habitually create relationships of mutuality or give and take with those whom they serve. They provide one-way traffic. People are often keen to give something back and simply lack a mechanism to do so. People will volunteer in the NHS, for instance, if they have received good care for themselves or their family.

Turning the community development and regeneration agendas from passive to active means agencies becoming serious about saying to residents, “*We want you to work with us, we want to work together because we know the service will be better.*” This requires professionals to give the contributions of service users and active citizens the status of work. We believe this process of re-valuing work is more powerful when backed by the new currency of time. Some people describe the offer of time currency to volunteers as some sort of bribe. This is insulting and patronising. You might regard payment of a salary as a ‘bribe’ to get someone to attend a place of work but normally it is regarded as the ‘just reward’ for giving your time, energy and labour to an employer. So it should be with those who give their efforts to improving, developing or delivering a service. This gives them a new status as co-producers of healthy, active communities engaged in civic work that is recognised and rewarded. Civic work may include everything from taking part in litter picks through to lobbying MPs. Whatever activities sustain the culture and life of community may be named as work and rewarded.

### **The costs of doing nothing**

Another question we may ask about all forms of public service provision is “*What are the costs of doing nothing?*” For instance, one police officer noticed how anti-social behaviour on the streets increased when the funding for two key youth workers was removed. These youth workers had successfully engaged local young people by offering them rewards such as trips and driving lessons in exchange for their participation in community projects. Relationships between those young people involved and older generations noticeably improved. Why don’t the police authorities have a budget head to

employ youth workers when they know they will get savings elsewhere in the policing and criminal justice systems?

One group on the Perthcelyn estate wanted to know how to deal with social isolation. Their first thought was to campaign for more social workers and mental health professionals. Then they remembered - we can help each other. In exchange for helping out in the community house people went on trips, got to know each other better and felt less isolated.

In the Rhymney time bank one participant said, "*I didn't realise how many other groups there were in this community.*" The time bank grows healthy social networks, which saves money on professionalised interventions.

### **Time banking as a tool to get things done**

People have often focussed on time banking as a club for exchanges between individuals. This is very useful and effective for those involved. Yet its untapped potential for underwriting community participation is far more powerful than this. We have only just begun to scratch the surface of the application of this tool to increasing participation in community centres, youth, healthy living, adult learning and community environmental activities. Why not begin to underwrite the labour required to run social enterprises with time currency?

Professional agencies can start to build this new tool of time currency into their working practices so that it is as normal to underwrite rewards for participation in the annual budgets as it is to pay for salaries, office running costs or staff development.

### **Yes and No**

As an architect of the welfare state Aneurin Bevan probably did not anticipate some of its unintended consequences: the creation of dependencies and the professionalisation of misery.

So let's get radical. Let's ask Bevan's question of ourselves: "*To what should we be saying 'No' and to what should we be saying 'Yes'?*"

Let's say No to funding agencies that cannot provide evidence of consistent involvement of service users in the design, delivery and evaluation of their services. They are not required in this century.

Let's say Yes to funding service providers that treat people as assets rather than problems, value the work people do and reward them for getting involved in the life of their community. We need them more than ever.

Let's say No to keeping agencies going that clearly create new dependencies without any mutuality. They are history.

Let's say Yes to supporting agencies that greatly increase the numbers of active citizens. They are the truly public spirited institutions of the future.

Let's value active citizenship with a new currency that makes mutuality visible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The DNA of a new currency**

Time currency embeds different values into communities because everyone's effort is valued equally and so it does not reflect market values. Each time an hour is exchanged it reminds people of the values and practice principles of social justice, civil rights, civic responsibilities and community development. Each time credit is a reminder of the values of civility, fairness, and common humanity. If we turn mutuality into a currency, nobody will be able to take it away from us again. If you do something for your community, your community will do something for you – a new social contract. Money is a powerful tool for economic regeneration but if anyone asks you, "*Why time currency?*" just remind them, "*It's the culture, stupid!*"

It is tried, it is tested, now this currency for civil renewal needs champions in every community.

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