Community ownership and management of assets

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Mike Aiken, Ben Cairns and Stephen Thake

A review of evidence on community organisations owning or managing assets, including buildings and land. This was carried out as part of wider scoping work to inform JRF work in this area.

Public policy is encouraging the community ownership and management of assets in England and there are similar moves in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Many community organisations own or manage assets – this report reviews the evidence on the scale of this activity, the benefits that arise and the factors that support it happening. The report also:

- sums up UK policy and funding initiatives;
- looks at the risks and barriers involved in asset ownership;
- gives perspectives from practitioners in this field;
- briefly reviews international perspectives;
- discusses the differences in the assets agenda in the four countries of the UK;
- presents proposals on ways to address the gaps in evidence.

The review finds that much of the existing evidence has been produced from within the community sector, and concludes that further independent evidence is needed. In co-ordination with others, JRF will be developing a new work programme on community assets beginning in 2009 to help address the knowledge gaps and inform future policy and practice development on this agenda.

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Executive summary

This is the final report of the evidence review of community ownership and management of assets, which was carried out by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). The main purpose of the evidence review was to capture the available learning about community ownership and management of assets in order to inform future decisions within JRF about possible investment in this area.

In Part I we set out our approach to the evidence review. In Part II we outline our key findings. Finally, in Part III, we discuss these findings and suggest some issues for further consideration by JRF.

Part I: Introduction

Community organisations have a long history of owning or managing assets, including buildings and land. Current government policy in England is encouraging the development of these arrangements and there are similar moves in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This study reviewed the evidence in this field by exploring what is known about:

- the scale of community ownership and management of assets;
- the benefits and outcomes that arise;
- factors that might best support it.

Evidence was examined from a wide variety of sources in the four UK countries including: policy documents, accounts from community organisations, evaluation reports and academic commentaries. Over 200 pieces of UK literature were studied and discussions took place with over 80 practitioners and key informants. In addition, a small sample of evidence was collected from other countries, including Poland, Sweden, Germany, Italy and the USA.

Four key terms were used in the study.

- *Assets* is used to cover physical assets such as land and buildings. Examples included community centres, resource centres, development trust premises, settlements and social action centres, former churches, community-owned parks or woodland. The assets owned by smaller housing associations, especially co-ops and community land trusts, are also included. There is a wide range of other important assets (such as human, financial, social and intellectual assets) that are not considered in this report.
- *Community ownership of assets* refers to a community-based organisation's freehold or leasehold interest in an asset on behalf of a wider community or for an organisation's own use.
- *Community-based organisations* are local organisations that are independent of government or market and include locally based housing associations and co-operatives.
- *Management of assets* means the day-to-day responsibility and accountability for the operation and use of land or buildings, whether owned by the community or occupied under licence (formally or informally) – by a third party.

Part II: Key findings

Historical context

The idea that communities might own or manage physical assets goes back at least 400 years in the UK. The Diggers in the seventeenth century aimed to take on underused land for the common good. Early charitable organisations owned land and buildings to support poor people. The collective ownership of assets also has roots in the co-operative and mutual tradition. People involved in running settlements and social action centres, community centres, and village halls have frequently managed a building as part of delivering their mission. From the 1970s a new community economic development movement that used assets as a way of meeting social and income-generating goals arose. It included co-operative housing, development trusts and other local, community-run facilities.

Recent policy and funding initiatives

Since 2002, particularly in England, there has been an acceleration in policy initiatives that have encouraged community organisations to own and/or manage assets. In 2007, the Quirk Review signalled that the transfer of public assets to community-based organisations should become a mainstream, rather than an exceptional, activity. The 2006 Local Government White Paper, the 2007 Public Involvement in Health Act and the 2008 Community Empowerment White Paper are just three recent examples of government policies that, alongside dedicated funding programmes (including the Adventure Capital Fund, Futurebuilders and Community Assets Fund), have given a prominent role to community asset ownership.

Different policy priorities have been emerging across the UK. In Scotland, the 2003 Land Reform Act gave communities the right to buy land and buildings in certain circumstances. The Welsh Assembly Government's 2005 Social Enterprise Strategy set specific targets for contracts, asset transfer and asset refurbishment for social enterprises, and it is developing further thinking on this area following the Quirk Review. In Northern Ireland, the 2007 Community Support programme was targeted at community centres and other facilities to underpin economic and social development. Despite these initiatives, the assets agenda has been developed most proactively in England.

Benefits of community ownership and management of assets

Policy initiatives have often implied that there are benefits that might occur as a result of transferring the ownership or management of assets to community organisations. Where benefits have been articulated, they include: improved public services; increased local employment; restoration of unused buildings; organisational and financial sustainability and greater independence for community organisations. At times the empowerment of a local community has been cited as a possible outcome. However, there has been little independent evaluation of benefits; such work as there is has suggested, cautiously, that organisational benefits for community organisations might include increases in turnover, capital assets and financial reserves.

Scale of asset ownership

The scale of asset ownership by community organisations is not clear. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations' (NCVO's) research calculates that general charities in England owned assets (defined as land, buildings, shares and investments) of over £86.1 billion in 2005–06, with just four charities holding 20 per cent of the entire amount. Three-quarters of assets held by the largest charities were in the form of investments rather than tangibles such as land and buildings. A Development Trust Association (DTA) mapping exercise suggests that its members held £436 million of assets by mid-2007.

Risks and barriers

There is little published evidence on the risks and barriers connected to the community ownership or management of assets. The available evidence highlights concerns about the liabilities of asset management, the imposition of rules by local authorities that effectively prevent community organisations benefiting from revenue streams that they derive from an asset, and the dilapidated condition of some assets.

The practitioner perspective

The largest volume of evidence on asset ownership and management comes from practitioner organisations. The DTA, which has had a consistent and specialist focus in this area for over 20 years, sees asset ownership as a means to achieve long-term social, economic and environmental improvements. It argues that there are multiple benefits arising from assets that can provide a means to support communities. These include enabling community organisations to earn an income for reinvestment in the community; supporting the delivery of a range of local activities; and assisting improvements in local partnership working where community organisations have more tangible resources to bring to the negotiating table. Other accounts give more emphasis to the role of assets as just one form of engagement with communities or point out the high cost of maintaining buildings, which might detract from the original mission of community organisations to deliver particular services or activities. Elsewhere it has been felt that the extent and different type of asset ownership in rural areas has been overlooked. In Scotland and Wales, there is a particular focus on community assets connected to renewable energy, sometimes in conjunction with social inclusion activity.

The international perspective

Asset ownership and management is not just a UK phenomenon. However, it is practised and conceptualised in alternative ways elsewhere, including: differences in the distinction between community and public ownership (Poland); higher degrees of co-determination in policy development and implementation processes between the local state and community organisations (Sweden); traditions of collective common land – private properties that are managed by a community for the benefit of all (Italy); and legislative mechanisms that act as imperatives for commercial and financial institutions to engage with community organisations, both as partners in local developments and as funders (USA).

Part III: Discussion

Assets: scale and concept

There is limited evidence of the scale and nature of community ownership of assets. There is no consensus on what an asset is or what organisations can be included as 'community-based'.

Benefits of assets

The *potential* benefits of asset management and ownership are clearly spelled out, although they focus mainly on the advantages gained by organisations. There is less evidence on benefits accruing to communities. A lack of multi-variant research means it is hard to understand which combinations of factors might lead to good results – either in the technical aspects of asset management or in improved outcomes for local people.

Risks from owning or managing assets

Assets might be run-down and of insufficient quality. Community organisations might be drawn from their core purpose work to become preoccupied with the technical and regulatory burden of asset management. Small organisations, which include rural or black and minority ethnic groups in particular, might have insufficient scale to experience benefits. There might be a lack of technical aid available from organisations and expert advisers to provide support.

Country differences

There are some differences in the policy frameworks between the four countries of the UK. Policy and delivery programmes seem to be more advanced in England – certainly if measured by the number of initiatives.

Learning from international perspectives

The experience from other nations shows different ways of thinking about assets. In some European countries the *use of,* and *access to*, buildings appears more important than ownership when compared to the UK. Elsewhere, asset ownership is underpinned by a range of infrastructure bodies that offer technical aid, legislative support to engage different cross-sector institutions and financial support. With some indigenous groups, the notion of assets stretches beyond *ownership* to *rights*.

Proposals for addressing the evidence gaps

Some of the evidence gaps could be addressed by the following.

Reflective debate

A multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder inquiry could examine how asset ownership and management relates to the wider issues of rebuilding our societies.

Knowledge sharing: an open access resource

Data and evidence collected through this and other studies could be collated and made more easily and openly available to practitioners, academics and policy-makers in one location (probably on-line).

Building the evidence base: three studies

An evidence base that can help shape and guide policy and practice needs to be built. Three study areas are proposed initially.

- *Learning the lessons*: to capture the retrospective experience of practitioners, organisations and communities of asset management and ownership. It would focus on learning the lessons from practice and sharing these with new entrants.

- *Finding out the organisational and management factors needed to achieve good outcomes in asset ownership and management*: to identify the key variables associated with organising work in this field and to plot the benefits that accrue to communities. It would assist practitioners and policy-makers by testing and refining the assumptions underpinning asset ownership.

- *Developing an effective support infrastructure for asset ownership and management*: to focus on what kind of organisational infrastructure needs to be developed to support communities in areas where it is weak or absent. This includes urban or rural locations where the organisational capacity in existing communities has been severely eroded or in areas where there is new development.

1 Introduction to the evidence review

1 Aims of the evidence review

The aims for the evidence review were to:

- *review research, policy and practice evidence on 'community assets' across the four jurisdictions of the UK* (later expanded to include material from the USA, the European Union and Australia/New Zealand);
- *identify areas of commonality and difference in different jurisdictions of the UK: England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland;*
- *identify the key issues relating to community asset development that are known from existing research;*
- *identify areas where work is planned to take place – for example, evaluation of current initiatives and gaps in the evidence that warrant further exploration;*
- *set out themes and questions that could be explored in any future programme.*

There were two key drivers for this evidence review. First, there is an increasing policy emphasis on the community ownership and management of assets across the UK, with different approaches becoming apparent between the four constituent countries. Second, what is the available evidence base on the role, extent and benefits of asset ownership and management?

2 Our approach to the evidence review

The evidence review was carried out over a ten-week period from the beginning of April to mid-June 2008. It comprised two core phases.

Phase 1: initial assessment

The initial assessment drew on the accumulated experience of the scoping team, in partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, to develop a set of three key questions to guide the search for, and collection of, evidence.

Key question 1: evidence on the size and scale of community ownership and management of assets
What evidence is in the public domain of the scale of community ownership and management of assets in helping to create a strong civil society?

Key question 2: evidence on the benefits to communities arising from assets
Where there is community ownership or management of assets, is there evidence of the benefits, outcomes, barriers and risks for communities? In particular, is there evidence that assets help to create a stronger, more stable civil society?

Key question 3: factors needed to offer benefits
Is there evidence of factors that increase the potential for beneficial and meaningful outcomes from community ownership and management of outcomes?

Phase 2: investigation

The purpose of the investigative phase was to search for evidence on the community ownership and management of assets. Sources included:

- published policy, from UK governmental agencies;
- published research in peer-reviewed journals;
- published evaluation studies undertaken by governmental agencies, academic bodies, and community-based and other charitable organisations;
- practitioner material, including case studies and other unpublished research;
- published policy, guidance and other relevant material from the USA, the European Union and Australia/New Zealand.

Please see the Appendix for details of the research process.

In addition, the views of key informants were sought through semi-structured interviews, as well as attendance at three 'stakeholder forums' with practitioners in Shrewsbury, Edinburgh and London.

II Key findings from the evidence review

3 Introduction to Part II

In Part II we present the findings from our evidence review of the community ownership and management of assets.

For the purposes of this evidence review, ‘assets’ has been used to cover physical assets of land or buildings. This includes buildings such as community centres, development trusts, resource centres, working men’s clubs, schools and former churches, village greens, parks, woodland, settlements and social action centres. Smaller, community-based housing associations, especially co-ops and those associations that are community owned or managed and operating at a local scale, were included, alongside community land trusts.

The ‘community ownership of assets’ is used to describe freehold or leasehold interest, whether held for an organisation’s own use or on behalf of a wider community of interest. In the UK, ownership appears to be understood as possession mediated through an organisational structure that is neither private nor state run. Hence, neither municipally owned facilities, such as the majority of public parks, nor housing stock still in public ownership appear to be included in the current policy discourse on community-owned or managed assets. The local and neighbourhood nature of asset ownership, however, appears at the outset to be an important component in the discussions on asset ownership.

It was recognised that there were blurred edges and tensions within this framework – for example, the importance of other forms of assets such as human, financial, social, intellectual and capital tends to be downplayed in the UK, unlike parallel debates in other countries (see Chapter 10 of this report). There is also a blurring in relation to the benefits of sustainability for both *organisations* in receipt of assets and the *communities* that they serve.

Other key terms used in the evidence review include:

- *community-based organisations*: local organisations that are independent of government or market, including locally based housing associations;

- *management of assets*: day-to-day responsibility and accountability for the operation and use of land or buildings, whether owned by the community or occupied under licence – formally or informally – by a third party.

It was recognised at the outset of this evidence review that assets are a contested area. First, it was anticipated that there would be a rapid falling away in understanding of the issues beyond a relatively small circle of those deeply involved in current practice or policy. Second, the UK Government’s current Community Assets programme involves the transfer of assets from local authorities; this may be controversial at times. Third, community-based organisations receiving assets may be taking on the liabilities and risks for those assets; this was expected to be problematic in some cases because of organisational capacity or, for example, the disrepair of buildings or land acquired. Fourth, smaller organisations may feel that they will be disadvantaged by not being able to operate at the scale required to manage assets.

It was also anticipated that there would be difficulties in the process of finding and assessing evidence for four principal reasons. First, community ownership and management of assets could be expected to encompass a series of complex and interrelated issues. Second, practice might be in advance of policy or research. Third, the evidence could be scattered across a wide range of agencies, uneven in geographical coverage. Fourth, it was expected that much of the evidence would have been self-assessed. These are issues that we return to in the review of the summary of the UK evidence in Chapter 9.

In addition, early discussions also suggested that 'community ownership and management of assets' could be a term covering many different and inadequately articulated factors and ideas. In such a case, one might expect conceptual inconsistency across the literature. Such an undifferentiated use of the term would then be a 'chaotic conception' (Sayer, 2000), with literature from different sources using the same term to refer to different phenomena. Hence, some conceptual clarification could be necessary. Some of these conceptual issues are returned to when we assess both the international and UK literature in Chapters 10 and 12. For the purposes of this review it was necessary to work with the terms in use.

We present the key findings in Part II in the following six chapters:

- historical context;
- recent policy initiatives;
- benefits;
- risks and barriers;
- the practitioner perspective;
- the international perspective.

4 Historical context

The idea that communities might own or manage physical assets, such as land and buildings, is not a new one. In the UK, it dates back over 400 years. The group known in the seventeenth century as the Diggers can be understood as part of a squatting movement that sought to take on underused land for social and economic development for the common good (Brockway, 1980). Before the enclosures from the middle of the eighteenth century, 'common land', which could be used for grazing livestock, remained a feature in England and Wales. Early charitable organisations, such as almshouses in the early part of the seventeenth century, provided residential accommodation for the poor, often using an endowment (Tomkins, 2008). In the eighteenth century, the Thomas Coram Foundation owned land and buildings as one part of furthering its work for disadvantaged children (Pugh, 2007). Similarly, the co-operative and mutual movement, from 1769 onwards, saw advantages in collective forms of asset ownership. Permanent building societies from the 1830s offered a particular and still present example from this tradition. Meanwhile community land trusts have antecedents in that same movement, via the co-operative land society system devised by Ebenezer Howard, which led to the first garden cities in the early twentieth century (Community Finance Solutions, 2008). These ideas have now been revived in Scotland (Satsangi, 2007) and Wales, alongside suggestions to develop a national policy framework (Clarke, 2005).

The attempt to gain or utilise assets also has a long history outside the UK. Examples range from land rights movements in post-colonial developing countries to campaigns by indigenous groups in the USA, Australia and New Zealand (see Chapter 10).

Many of the organisations and movements that, historically, have had some concern for physical assets in the UK are still active today. In the settlement movement, Octavia Hill had sought to put local people in control – giving skills, putting women in positions of power and providing assets (Clarke, 1990). The community association movement, often located within new housing developments, was concerned with building communities and associational life (Clarke, 1990). This frequently entailed a physical community centre, which might typically be owned by a local authority but managed by the local association. Village halls have long been a centre for community life in rural areas. For these diverse, community-based organisations, owning or managing assets has nearly always been seen as just one of many facets of their operation.

In Scotland, practitioners in the 'new' community economic development movement in the late 1970s saw the importance of 'community-owned' assets. This was considered as one of many possible characteristics that community-based organisations seeking social and economic development could possess in order to achieve community benefits (Pearce, 1993).

This period of history also saw an expansion of housing co-operatives, involving ownership, co-ownership or management of property. Later, in the early 1990s, community ownership of assets formed a central part of area-based regeneration initiatives (Taylor, 1995; Thake, 1995). At this time, practitioners in Scottish community enterprises and emerging development trusts began to associate income-generating assets more explicitly with the creation of long-term independent organisations (Thake, 1995, Hart, 1997; Pearce, 2003). These various organisations were, to differing degrees, active in, or linked to, a broader community development agenda (Cooper *et al*., 1991) that was concerned with improving the economic and social life in a locality. Development trusts, for example, played a dual role, as practitioners as well as advocates for policy change. They became seen by Single

Regeneration Bid funding programmes as a convenient vehicle for a ‘succession strategy’ in the 1990s. The transfer of a physical asset to a community-owned organisation, such as a trust, was seen as a way of continuing local development work after government funding had ended.

Drawing on this long heritage, third-sector practitioners have sought to shape the policy agenda on the community ownership and management of assets for over two decades. Although the then Department of the Environment published case studies in 1987 exploring the asset-owning work of early development trusts (DoE, 1987), policy-makers and researchers have, until recently, generally followed behind the ‘social inventions’ (Whyte and Whyte, 1991) of third-sector practitioners in the field of assets.

5 UK public policy agenda on assets

As recently as 2001, very little policy attention was given to the role of assets. For example, in a major national strategy for renewing neighbourhoods there were only two sentences on this theme. In an annex summarising responses from the consultation, it was noted that respondents had cited ‘the advantage of assets’ in relation to funding (Cabinet Office, 2001, p. 71).

From 2002 onwards, there has been growing policy interest in encouraging third-sector organisations in general to take on the ownership or management of physical assets.

2002

The £2 million Adventure Capital Fund (ACF) was launched in England to support medium to large community-based organisations to become sustainable through social enterprise activity and the acquisition of physical assets.

2003

The ACF allocated a further £4 million to invest in medium to large community-based organisations.

The Scottish Parliament passed the Land Reform (Scotland) Act, which gave communities in specific circumstances the right to buy land and buildings.

2004

The £215 million Futurebuilders England and Futurebuilders Scotland programmes were launched to assist third-sector organisations to deliver publicly financed services. A third of the allocations made by Futurebuilders England included the acquisition of physical assets.

2005

ACF awarded a further £4 million and was also appointed to deliver the £2.5 million Managed Workspace programme.

The Big Lottery Fund (BLF) launched its £60 million Reaching Communities programme for third-sector organisations to invest in capital assets that would promote better life skills, stronger and healthier communities and an enhanced environment.

2006

HM Treasury published guidance to clarify the circumstances in which clawback arrangements (whereby third-sector organisations can be required by public sector agencies to repay a grant or return an asset) apply (HM Treasury, 2006).

The Office for the Third Sector (OTS) launched a £30 million Community Assets Fund to enable community-based organisations working with their local authorities to take control of publicly owned buildings and other physical assets such as open space.

Yorkshire Forward, the regional development agency for Yorkshire and Humberside, introduced its Key Fund programme to support third-sector organisations to engage in social enterprise activity.

2007

The Commission on Unclaimed Assets (2007) published its final report recommending that dormant accounts held by banks and other private sector financial institutions should be transferred to a social investment bank that had a remit to invest in the third sector. It was envisaged that asset development was one of the three core activities of this new agency.

The Quirk Review (DCLG, 2007d) placed the ownership and management of assets within the wider context of the fundamental review of public sector asset management. It helped to move the transfer of assets from local authority ownership to third-sector organisations from being an *exceptional* activity to a *mainstream* policy objective. The Quirk Review concluded the following.

- There were no fundamental impediments to the transfer of public assets to community-based organisations.

- The benefits of asset transfer to the community, receiving community organisations, the public sector agency involved and other public sector agencies frequently outweighed the risks and opportunity costs.

- There was a multiplicity of approaches to, and levels of engagement in, the community control of assets.

- The option appraisals undertaken by local authorities were often too narrowly drawn.

- Further work needed to be undertaken if the asset transfer agenda was to be extended to central government and other non-municipal bodies.

The Quirk Review also recommended the publication of comprehensive guidance on asset transfer, a toolkit to establish and manage risk, better access to advice, a smarter approach to the investment of public funds and a major information programme to disseminate good practice.

References to asset ownership were given prominent mention in the Local Government White Paper; Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act; the Community Empowerment Action Plan; the Housing Green Paper; and the development of community land trusts. Other new structures which aim to provide a convenient organisational vehicle for such ownership are relevant here including: limited liability partnerships (LLPs) and community interest companies (CICs).

Communities and Local Government (CLG) established its Advancing Assets demonstration programme, which was designed to develop 20 strong local authority–community sector partnerships focused on strengthening community-based organisations through the transfer of publicly owned assets to the third sector. This was later extended to 80 partnerships.

The Housing Corporation opened its national investment programme to community land trust applications.

Gordon Brown, in his acceptance speech as Prime Minister, identified community ownership of assets as one of the four planks in his proposed new constitutional settlement for Britain. He emphasised the importance of strengthened local government and 'local communities empowered to hold those who make decisions to account' and 'community ownership of assets – greater power for more people to control their lives' (Brown, 2007).

The Department for Schools, Children and Families (DCSF) launched its £220 million Myspace programme to improve the facilities available for young people, many of which are run by third-sector organisations.

The East of England Development Agency (EEDA) introduced its £3 million Building Communities Fund, which is closely modelled on the Adventure Capital Fund.

2008

Communities in Control: Real People: Real Power, the Government's Empowerment White Paper, was published (DCLG, 2008b). It seeks to strengthen both civic and civil society, and includes a number of announcements relevant to assets:

- further extension of the Advancing Assets programme by a further 30 partnerships;

- broadening the remit of the team responsible for the Advancing Assets programme to promote and advise more generally on asset transfer, and formalise the team's status as the Asset Transfer Unit;

- consultation on the development of a national framework for community land trusts;

- the launch of the £70 million Communitybuilders programme to support the development of community anchor organisations.

This formalisation of policy interest in community ownership and management of assets has arisen during a period of unprecedented interest in the role and contribution of third-sector organisations. The current UK Government's policy agenda has focused on the expanding role of the third sector in the provision of public services (HM Treasury, 2002; HM Treasury and Cabinet Office, 2007a).

At the same time, the Government has encouraged the involvement of the sector in implementing a range of other public policy initiatives, most notably the 'civil renewal' agenda, which is described as 'a way to empower people in their communities to provide the answers to our contemporary social problems' (Home Office, 2003, p. 1) and which is broadly concerned with 'community engagement', 'social cohesion' and 'neighbourhood governance' (DCLG, 2006a). To this end, the UK Government has recently stated its commitment to focus specifically on community-based organisations, in particular by enabling them to play a major part in the development of 'strong and sustainable communities' (DCLG, 2007b, p. 43; HM Treasury and HM Cabinet Office, 2007a). Within this agenda, there has been a particular interest in tackling traditional forms of exclusion, especially in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. At the same time, other social needs have gained a stronger place on the policy agenda: childcare provision; the integration of disadvantaged groups into employment; the needs of carers; interracial tensions; the importance of citizenship and migration.

In the public sector, funders and commissioners have also experienced significant changes in the way they interact with addressing social needs. There have been shifts in the boundaries between the respective roles of the public, third and private sectors in service delivery. The idea of social enterprise has moved to centre stage. Partnership working in planning services has increased yet further. Income from European funds targeted at the most deprived regions has declined. With the discovery and promotion of 'social enterprise' by government policy-makers from the start of the millennium, terms such as 'earned income', 'grant dependence' and 'sustainable funding' have become part of a shared vocabulary between the public and third sectors.

Much of the activity focused on the asset development agenda has taken place in England. However, the Welsh Assembly was established in 1998 as a consultative body and given limited legislative powers in 2006. The Northern Ireland Assembly was set up in the same year but was suspended between 2002 and 2007. The Scottish Parliament commenced work in 1999 with more extensive powers to introduce legislation. Each of these bodies has taken time to become established, but there are indications that, as a consequence of devolution, different patterns are beginning to emerge with respect to governance and community ownership of assets across the four nations.

The relationship between the Scottish Parliament and local authorities is not set within the framework of local strategic partnerships as in England. Developments in Scotland include the Land Reform Scotland Act 2003 referred to above. More recently, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA, 2008) announced a joint agreement between central and local government concerning community empowerment. It intends to include direct support for community groups in order to help them own assets.

The Welsh Assembly Government's 2005 *Social Enterprise Strategy for Wales* aims to give social enterprises a central place in Welsh life. As well as setting out aspirations around the growth of social enterprises, it includes specific targets around social enterprises gaining: £2 million in new contracts, £6 million worth of transferred assets and £12 million in refurbishment costs for assets. There is also support for a community right to buy. Several community land trusts have since been initiated.

In Northern Ireland, the Department for Social Development's Community Support programme is worth £16.7 million per year. It offers targeted support to community centres, local advice centres, grants to community groups and employment of staff in district councils. The aims are to achieve an active, influential, informed and sustainable community with economic and social development as part of the target.

In all four countries, there is a clear divide between the rural and the urban agendas. These are more evident in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales where the urban settlements are more concentrated. The engagement with issues facing minority communities takes a different form in England – with a focus on black and minority ethnic groups – than it does in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where there is a much greater emphasis on indigenous communities. In Northern Ireland and England, the role of faith communities and, in the light of civil unrest, social cohesion are more prominent in the debate.

Much of the policy literature stresses the benefits anticipated by community ownership and management of assets. These include: improved public services; increased local employment; community empowerment; and the restoration of unused buildings. Difficulties are highlighted at times, such as concerns about the limited organisational and managerial capacity of some third-sector organisations; concerns around possible clawback of assets or income by statutory agencies either where local initiatives get into difficulties or where they are highly unsuccessful; and possible community fragmentation.

Although there is a great deal of activity, it is difficult to establish the scale of the interventions. The data is scattered and changing. Currently there are no plans to extend the Futurebuilders programme once the existing phase of investment has been completed. ACF is closed to further applications, as are the BLF's Reaching Communities and Community Assets programmes. The Capacitybuilders programme is also closed. In addition, it has been accepted that dormant accounts held by banks and other financial institutions will be invested in the third sector and paving legislation has been introduced to prepare the ground. However, the scale of the overall funds that will be made available and the proportion of these that will be allocated to the proposed social investment bank are not known.

Given this uncertainty, questions remain unanswered about the extent to which community ownership and management of assets can deliver against the expectations of policy-makers in a wide variety of communities and contexts. This is explored in more detail in the following chapters.

6 The benefits of community ownership and management of assets

Introduction

A generation ago researchers discussed guardedly the 'often claimed' idea that ownership of premises would bestow advantages on community groups (Cooper *et al*., 1991) – for example, organisational stability and the opportunity to raise loans for other activities.

Recent research by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) suggests that general charities owned assets – measured as land, buildings, shares and investments – of just over £86.1 billion in 2005–06 (Reichardt *et al*., 2008). This aggregate figure used data from charities in England and Wales as a starting point for scaling up, based on populations in Scotland and Northern Ireland, to give a UK figure. It does not cover some charities such as faith groups, benevolent societies, common investment funds and trade associations.

Asset ownership is strongly skewed, with just four charities holding 20 per cent of the entire amount and 750 holding around half the total. Most of these assets are not buildings or land. Nearly 75 per cent of the assets held by the largest asset-owning charities are in the form of investments rather than tangible fixed assets. In addition, there are around 40 common investment funds, which act like unit trust investors for charities, holding an extra £1.35 billion. Co-operatives' assets are calculated to amount to a further £7.42 billion.

These figures reveal the scale of, and by implication the experience of managing, assets in parts of the third sector. For example, the National Trust's annual accounts valued its ownership of tangible fixed assets at around £46 million in 2007. This is not rare or recent. Even at a county level, a registered charity such as the Sussex Archaeological Society manages a series of historic sites including a castle. Meanwhile the Coin Street Community Builders (CSCB) both own and manage land and property for community benefit on a 13-acre site in London, providing homes for over 1,000 people (CSCB, 2006).

It should be noted that this evidence review is interested in a sub-sector of community-based organisations that own and/or manage assets to address *social* needs which may, or may not, have charitable status.

The review uncovered evidence of the (perceived and actual) benefits of community ownership and management of assets from three principal sources:

- public policy documents and related analysis;
- independent evaluations;
- practitioner case studies.

Evidence from the first two sources is considered briefly below. Material from UK practitioners is presented in Chapter 8.

Public policy

Recent public policy in this area has argued that the transfer of assets has the potential to promote community development and social enterprise, with account needing to be taken of the social as well as financial benefits to the organisation and the community (Home Office, 2004). The advantages of community ownership have been seen in the provision of space and a secure base, increased income streams, opportunities to plan ahead and the ability for groups to experiment with new approaches (DCLG, 2006b). Available assets could also be used to invest in the long-term sustainability of the third sector

(HM Treasury and Cabinet Office, 2007a). The Local Government Association's approach (LGA, 2007) has been slightly more rounded, suggesting that the focus should be more on gaining the outcome of sustainable, robust and 'revenue-balanced' community organisations. It stresses that organisations engaged in this process are likely to need appropriate support in business and management skills.

Setting out future roles for the third sector in social and economic regeneration, the Government stressed three key issues in relation to assets. First, there was the importance of developing community assets to enable community organisations to generate their own wealth. Second, there was the need to generate surpluses for the community. Third, the critical role of asset development in building the sustainability of community anchor organisations was stressed (HM Treasury and Cabinet Office, 2007a). Other Treasury documents, on unclaimed assets, have argued for the importance of investing funds in the long-term sustainability of the third sector (HM Treasury and Cabinet Office, 2007b).

It is anticipated that the Community Assets programme, which is being delivered by the Big Lottery Fund, will allow community organisations to exercise greater control over the buildings they use (OTS, 2007a; BLF, 2008). The Department for Communities and Local Government has also identified the positive impact for community organisations from managing and owning the buildings that they occupy. Control over such assets has also been linked to increased organisational and financial sustainability (DCLG, 2006b).

In some cases, it has been argued that the anticipated outcomes could go further still. For example, the transfer of assets from a local authority could 'empower' recipient local communities (OTS, 2008); the development of 'charters' between sectors might spark interest in community organisations taking responsibility for delivering services or managing assets (DCLG, 2008a). The Social Enterprise Action Plan envisages benefits to communities with a further relaxation of 'clawback' rules and with the compulsory asset lock in the community interest companies (CIC) structure – so assets could not simply be sold on for private benefit and organisations could earn income and secure future borrowing against an asset (OTS, 2006).

Elsewhere, there has been a focus on the potential benefit of increased financial independence. An OTS (2007b) discussion document welcomed the removal of barriers to community organisations owning assets as a way of moving from 'grant dependency'. It did, however, sound a cautionary note in suggesting that community anchor organisations needed to support smaller groups that lacked the capacity to own their own assets (OTS, 2007b). The Local Community Sector Task Force argued for the selling off of unused assets. It too emphasised that asset building underpinned by sustained investment could help organisations move away from 'grant dependency' towards capacity building. Such asset management or ownership could also aid planning by enabling wealth creation, which could 'restore confidence in that place ... help to reverse the exodus of residents and businesses … restore land values and attract new investment' (LCST, 2006, p. 28).

The Quirk Review (DCLG, 2007d) offered a more balanced view, suggesting that the benefits of community ownership and management could outweigh the risks, and that legitimate transfer had already occurred in many places. Nevertheless, it also recognised that it was important that community purpose should not be overly burdened with asset management.

Others see assets as playing a role in defining new roles between government and state. Duncan Smith (2005) argued that donors and users should have their views better reflected in community organisations and that government was too close to the third sector. This raises familiar issues about the relationship between government and the third sector; the extent to which the independence of community organisations is constrained by funding mechanisms; and the degree to which these organisations are representative of their local communities. In the context of the first of these two issues, 'stakeholder mechanisms' such as asset transfer, vouchers and match funding for third-sector organisations were proposed and lauded. The need to maximise return on charitable assets balanced against the risks of declining values has also been highlighted (Gilmartin, 2007). In discussing the issue of regulation, Chapman

(2007) pointed out that community interest companies are less stringently regulated than charities and that the community interest definition offers more leeway than the public benefit test for charities.

Most recently, ministerial speeches have strongly emphasised benefits – for example, asserting how 'assets enable organisations to diversify their income streams ... create a buffer for organisations to take more risks and act more independently' (Miliband, 2008) and that developing a high quality asset 'will have long term benefits ... These assets will benefit the organisation and the communities they serve' (Hope, 2008).

The Department for Communities and Local Government has argued for the importance of developing community assets to enable community organisations to generate their own wealth. To facilitate this, it has highlighted the need to support community anchors 'to stimulate and develop self-sufficiency through transfer of assets to community ownership and management' (DCLG, 2007e, p. 20).

Independent evaluations

Although the idea of communities taking control over local assets has attracted policy interest, there is little independent evaluation. The BLF is not undertaking any evaluation of its Reaching Communities programme. At a regional level, the evaluations of Yorkshire Forward's Key Fund or EEDA's Building Communities Fund are still at an early stage. Only the ACF and Futurebuilders have produced reports that are in the public domain.

Adventure Capital Fund

The Adventure Capital Fund (ACF) which is being evaluated by London Metropolitan University, aims to provide packages of support for community-based organisations wishing to engage in social enterprise and asset development to improve their resilience. It grew from a one-year £2 million programme in 2002 to a £12.5 million programme today. It pioneered the concept of Patient Capital and investee support programmes. Patient Capital takes the form of grants and long-term loan finance. The support programmes comprise partnering investees with dedicated supporters to provide independent strategic advice combined with the offer of small grants to enable investees to strengthen their organisational capacity or project proposals.

Sustainable Futures (Thake, 2004) established that the ACF, though simple in concept, was complex in delivery. Both organisations and their projects had made greater demands on the support programmes than anticipated and highlighted a number of areas for further consideration:

- longer-term funding to enable the market to become established;
- the demands that asset development placed on participating organisations;
- strengthening the application process to better understand where support was needed;
- better co-ordination of the various stakeholders contributing to the programme;
- establishing the underlying purpose of the programme.

Delivering against Expectations (Thake and Lingayah, 2008), which included early impact data, indicated that, taken together, the organisations participating in the ACF Round 1 Patient Capital programme had increased their turnover, capital assets, financial reserves and organisational capacity. However, the sample was small and included considerable variation.

It also indicated that the rate at which offers translated into completed projects was slower than anticipated and suggested that organisational capacity, uncertain trading environments and fragile partnerships with other – often public sector – stakeholders were important contributory causes.

The report also suggested that further consideration should be given to:

- the high level of aspirational and ineligible applications;

- the different demands that different types of projects made on investees and the ACF;
- strengthening the support element within the programme;
- measurement of social return;
- whether the focus on social enterprise led to a diminution of community development activities not supported by such an approach;
- establishing the ACF as a two-stage programme in order to reduce the risk of organisations and projects entering the implementation phase before they were investment ready.

Futurebuilders England

The evaluation of Futurebuilders England is being undertaken by Sheffield Hallam University. The Futurebuilders programme is modelled on the ACF. Both provide investment in the form of grants and loans as well as support programmes that comprise grants for organisational/project development and independent advice.

Sheffield Hallam's interim report noted that, like the ACF, the Futurebuilders portfolio included a wide variety of organisations and projects, and that the programme generated a high level of applications that did not progress through to the offer stage. It also identified that organisational capacity and uncertainties in the trading environment were key factors in determining whether organisations and their projects thrived.

Scottish Land Fund

An independent evaluation prepared for the Big Lottery on the Scottish Land Fund programme found that it 'has allowed communities to take charge of and develop assets from which they will benefit for many years' (Browning, 2007). Evaluation evidence suggested that there was improvement of quality of life from most projects, although the pace of the change was variable. Community ownership had 'promoted local interaction and networks' and community groups have remained as strong after asset acquisition. Community ownership was not always the best solution though and maintaining momentum might be a crucial issue longer term. Spin-off social benefits arose as part of developing projects, such as people gaining confidence. Economic benefits were 'harder to measure', although there were examples of tangible increases in jobs and businesses. The evaluators stressed the importance of monitoring progress and finding ways to track benefits.

URBAN programme in Derry

The evaluation of a European URBAN programme in Derry focused attention on physical projects, including refurbishment and new build aimed at young people, community development and training activities. It identified an emphasis on risk taking, wide consultation and high community involvement. The evaluation claims to have 'traced definable impacts on a large number of people in need in some of the most deprived and excluded places in the UK' (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2001).

7 Risks and barriers connected with community ownership and management of assets

There appears to be little published evidence of the risks and barriers connected with community ownership and management of assets. Some recent policy documents have engaged with this dimension, pointing out that community groups having more control over their buildings is neither cost nor risk free and that ownership of buildings is also not necessarily a guarantee of sustainability (DCLG, 2006b).

The Local Community Sector Task Force engaged more directly with some of these concerns (LCST, 2006). It argued that some community organisations might not be willing to manage assets or to take on the associated risks and liabilities. In addition, it recognised that communities might not always have the capacity to manage assets, that those assets could become monopolised by unrepresentative groups, or that community fragmentation could occur as a consequence of dividing up assets across different groups. It also identified the risk that, without adequate 'clawback' mechanisms, assets might be lost to community benefit.

Other views on obstacles include the suggestion by Coxon (2006) that, despite the Quirk Review, some senior policy advisers are aware that, for local councils, there do not appear to be any tangible benefits to asset transfer. Carpenter (2007) described the tendency for public bodies to impose rules on community organisations to repay profits from revenue schemes, meaning they could not use assets to raise money for further loans. Others warn that assets may be liabilities or 'crumbling wrecks' (Cater, 2007).

8 The practitioner perspective

Introduction

The largest volume of evidence on the theme of assets comes from practitioner organisations. It includes descriptive case study material and some evaluations. Central to this evidence base is the work of the Development Trusts Association (DTA). This is not because DTA is the only organisation whose members are engaged in owning or managing assets. Indeed, within the community sector, bassac, Community Matters, Action for Communities in Rural England (ACRE) and the Federation of City Farms and Gardens have all been active in this field for many years. At the same time, large third-sector organisations, such as the National Trust, have a significant portfolio of assets; and other smaller organisations have been active in managing land. However, DTA has had a consistent and specialist focus on the issue of both asset-based development and disadvantaged communities. Asset ownership is one of the distinctive aspirations of its members. It has made a dominant footprint in the field of asset ownership and much practitioner literature comes from this source. More than 50 DTA documents were considered as part of this study.

In this chapter on the practitioner perspective, we focus on:

- the Development Trusts Association: policy positions and case studies;
- other organisational views;
- Wales and Scotland;
- Northern Ireland.

Development Trusts Association

Early trusts, such as Westway, from the late 1960s, identified the importance of 'building assets, developing skills' (Duncan,1992), while Coin Street, from 1977, set out its own plans for social housing, a park, shops and managed workspace (CSCB, 1998). Both ventures arose from community campaigns. After long struggles, both developed assets as part of a wider community renewal strategy.

Documentation on development trusts goes back to before the formation of its national umbrella (DoE, 1987). Policy, research, analysis and case study material from DTA can be derived from the mid-1990s. Few funders were offering support for asset-based development at this time. Taking a sample of DTA's membership, Hart (1997) estimated that members from urban areas held assets worth £29 million, which dwarfed the £92,000 held in rural settings. She found that most of the assets were held by a small number of trusts that had been active for more than 15 years. The assets were areas of land or buildings that were used mainly for managed workspace, offices or community centres.

Ward and Watson (1997) also examined development trusts, looking at their achievements and potential before setting out a forward-looking policy framework. Their introduction stressed the importance of casting a 'critical eye' over the claims and demands being made by this growing force for change and emphasised that *people* were assets as well. Many of the key needs identified over ten years ago (including a new legal organisational structure, access to finance, capacity-building work) appear to have been responded to by government and others.

DTA's (2008b) position statement argues for the multiple benefits that arise from the community ownership of assets.

- The asset yields a return of earned income annually, which is reinvested in the community.

- Assets are used to deliver a variety of activities, such as small business support, leisure, housing, retail and other locally appropriate services.

- The possession of an asset can make partnership working more productive, as the development trust can bring something tangible to negotiations.

- Developing an asset can assist locally in network and skill development, fostering community enterprise and building participative democracy and social capital.

DTA argues that asset ownership is a means to the end of having an independent development trust in every community, so as to achieve long-term social, economic and environmental improvements. Its own mapping suggests that its members had collectively gained assets worth £436 million by mid-2007 – a fifteenfold increase on Hart's estimates from ten years earlier.

DTA has also been prominent in policy debates, arguing variously for:

- the release of £100 million per year of the underused public assets identified by the Audit Commission;

- an extension of the Scottish Land Reform Act (2003) – which offered a community right to buy – to the whole of the UK;

- a £150–200 million investment to enable over 500 community organisations to achieve a sustainable asset (DTA, 2006; 2008a);

- finance for community asset purchase, refurbishment and new build;

- new local finance mechanisms, such as community share and bond issues;

- new arrangements for supporting asset transfer between local authorities and the third sector (DTA, 2008b).

Case studies by DTA members in the field provide an important part of the evidence base. It should be noted that these are illustrative examples, rather than case studies in a formal research sense (Yin, 1995). However, they do provide important insights into the practical experiences of third-sector organisations, either during the process of asset transfer or in the processes involved in asset management. For example, Amble Development Trust described eight property-based asset development projects that it had developed since its establishment in 1994 (Milburn, 2008). Organisational benefits included: rental income, increased independence from grant income, a higher local profile and a track record in delivering projects. Community benefits were identified as: the refurbishment of the town square and other areas; the creation of enterprises and associated jobs; the development of a centre that helps people into training, jobs or volunteering; maintenance of a community newspaper and other media initiatives; and the attraction of private sector investment. A rise in community confidence, self-belief and civic pride is also cited. Long-term planning was seen as a key ingredient of success, as was the balance between commercial and community involvement.

Other organisational views on assets

A variety of other views on assets can be found in the practitioner evidence.

- Tyler (2008) from Community Matters argues that asset management should be seen as just one of many approaches to community engagement. Freehold or leasehold transfer should be explored and councils should consider exit strategies in case community organisations experience problems in managing.

- The importance of investment in human capacity to develop assets is emphasised by bassac (2007) in response to the Community Asset Fund (CAF).

- Elsewhere, bassac (2007) illustrates the complexity of the ownership and management of buildings for their members. It found that, for those renting their space from statutory organisations, 30–37 per cent of their income is spent on the management and maintenance of the building and it would not be easy to increase rental streams as the buildings are seen as integral, rather than adjuncts, to service delivery.

- Other practitioner evidence provides a snapshot of the scale and nature of *rural* asset ownership across England. ACRE (2008), in response to a request for evidence from London Metropolitan University, suggested that rural communities have owned and managed buildings for decades and argued that the current 'urban agenda' on asset ownership threatens to draw attention and resources away from rural issues.

- CEMVO (2007) argued for smaller projects to be included in relation to the Community Adventure Fund to benefit underdeveloped groups including black and minority ethnic groups.

- The Voluntary Arts Network (Simpson, 2008) supported the thrust of the Quirk Review but felt the sector should still be funded in part by government.

- SOLACE (2007) also welcomed the Quirk Review, agreed with the caution on the community right to buy and argued that the strongest assets in any community were the people and their connections.

- The National Trust identified that the costs of seeking to value heritage assets to comply with the Accounting Standards Board could be up to £9 million per year (Pearson, 2007).

Wales and Scotland

Case study examples from Wales have a particular focus around asset-based development in relation to renewable energy resources, as well as combating social inclusion. Some projects such as the Arts Factory have sought to combine both.

A particular feature of the Scottish field is the emergence of community right to buy. Practitioner-led case studies and popular articles have both been informative here. Simmons (2008) describes how the local community in Comrie, Perthshire came together to buy 90 acres of Ministry of Defence land, via the development trust making use of the 2003 'right to buy' law. The purchase was underpinned with loans from the Tudor Trust and Triodos Bank.

Similar accounts (Robertson, 2008) concern the Isle of Eigg, which is now owned by the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust. A subsidiary of the Trust, Eigg Electric, was established to bring regular electric power to the islanders. There is also a positive analysis of the benefits of community land trusts for local economic development on Gigha (Satsangi, 2007).

Material from Scotland reported by the Plunkett Foundation makes a case for community-owned renewable energy (Perry, 2007), while the economic case for land reform is made by Stephen Hill (2008).

Northern Ireland

Recent initiatives in Northern Ireland have involved building economic infrastructure alongside reconciliation activities. Although it was hard to locate asset-based projects beyond the major urban areas in Northern Ireland, there are notable examples.

- The Junction, in Derry, is a community relations resource centre, which is likely to receive funding for a Peace Building Centre. This will be a venue for workshops, seminars and drama with offices for community groups.

- INCORE at the Magee University College of Ulster in Derry is a conflict-resolution research centre that touches on asset-building issues.

- The Ireland Fund gives financial support to organisations such as the Flax Trust, 'the largest regeneration project in Ireland', which made use of former linen mills to create a business and training centre in the previous 'no-man's-land' areas of Belfast.

- A franchise of the School for Social Entrepreneurs operates across the region.

- The Inner City Trust in Derry is seen to have made a ‘significant contribution to the development of Derry as a tourist destination’ through a heritage centre and Tower Museum.

9 Summary of the UK evidence

The asset-based agenda has been pioneered by practitioners in the UK. Different models, finance arrangements, development paths and capacity-building approaches have been built from their knowledge and experience.

It appears that public policy has, reluctantly at first but with ever greater speed in the last five years, followed. Most contemporary policy is framed by an assumption that the community ownership and management of assets might lead to a stronger civil society.

It would appear that the assets agenda has been developed more proactively in England and Scotland than in Wales and Northern Ireland. In England, greater focus has been given to buildings, while, in Scotland, more emphasis has been given to land. There have been general policy statements particularly around service delivery roles; explorations of specific mechanisms such as community land trusts, limited liability partnerships and CIC structures; legislation (in Scotland around land) and programme funding (including the Adventure Capital Fund, Futurebuilders and BLF's Community Buildings Fund).

Evaluations of individual programmes or organisations have taken place, but little detailed and persistent research has been carried out on the benefits or disadvantages to communities, the difficulties of managing these assets, or capacity building in practice. There have also been few attempts at longer-term tracking of organisations and communities to look at the operation of multiple factors. The amount of independently verified research undertaken in the UK is negligible.

In order to broaden our understanding of the assets agenda, and to compensate for some of the gaps in the UK evidence, we also considered material from outside the UK. This is reviewed in the next chapter.

10 The international perspective

Introduction

Asset ownership and management is not simply a UK phenomenon, although it should be noted that it is practised and conceptualised in different ways in other countries. This chapter offers some perspectives from four European countries (Poland, Sweden, Germany and Italy), the USA and beyond.

Poland

The idea of the community ownership and management of assets appears to be interpreted as the *public* ownership of assets (such as parks and buildings) by local or national government, rather than as an activity that would be undertaken by a small and newly developing third sector. There is an emergence of a sector characterised as a 'new wave of social economy organisations' (Rymsza, 2007). These organisations are not asset rich and their income comes from contracts for service delivery, supplemented by aid from international NGOs such as the Ford Foundation, European programmes such as Equal and a government Civil Initiatives Fund. Low levels of funding have been accompanied by only rudimentary financial management and research has suggested that organisations could invest their scarce assets in better ways – for example, by pooled investments with other third-sector organisations (Zagrodzka and Bruski, 2005). In Poland, the holding of assets or other collateral by third-sector organisations has been rare. They do not have steady flows of income and banks have been reluctant to lend them money (Królikowska, 2005). In addition, a broader range of financial and technical support is required (Fraczak and Wygnan´ski, 2008).

Sweden

The idea of community ownership of assets also appears to be underdeveloped in Sweden. Trägårdh (2007) suggested that relations between the state and civil society in Anglo-American countries tend to be tinged with conflict, when viewed through Swedish eyes. In Sweden, a multitude of cross-interest consultative forums, particularly government commissions, have tended to reinforce a state–citizen relationship that has been more co-determining than confrontational in policy and implementation issues. Ode (1999), for example, highlights how community engagement in forest management is considered important, irrespective of ownership. If community relations are more consensual and trusting, this might offer some clues as to why direct ownership of resources by community organisations might not be so crucial. *Use* of and *access* to facilities and services might be more crucial than *ownership*.

Germany

Several interesting illustrations around assets are apparent in Germany. Sports clubs, for example, occupy a very significant place in German communities. These voluntary associations of adults and children had, in 2007, around 24 million members across 91,000 clubs, according to Müller (2008). Two-thirds of these clubs used municipal buildings, typically schools. Nearly a third of clubs can use the facilities free of charge, while the rest must pay some contribution. Müller's research offers an interesting example of voluntary endeavour in shared space with the local state.

A second illustration comes from organisations providing childcare services. Until recently, these services were funded through ring-fenced contracts for third-sector groups and delivered in properties that are usually municipally owned. Taking over ownership of such sites was felt to be a risky operation outside of the competence of those groups. It has been suggested that asset ownership could be conceptualised as a 'community endowment'. In this model, local community foundations gain assets (mainly financial) and undertake a development role that could be similar to that undertaken by (physical) asset-owning organisations in the UK (Strachwitz, 2008). Part of this role would involve building democracy and social capital at a local level (Petry, 2006), alongside longer-term work to overcome social exclusion (Gemelli, 2006). While direct community ownership appears rare, one large multi-purpose community centre in Berlin, called Pfefferwerk, did obtain ownership but with the aid of a dedicated foundation that it had established (Birkhölzer, *et al*., 2007).

Italy

In Italy, the theme of asset management and ownership is a novel one and not well understood by local authorities. Research in this area is often based on US case studies (Minora, 2008, forthcoming). One noteworthy example, however, concerns collective properties and commons, estimated to make up 5 per cent of the country's land, which are managed under community ownership belonging to small groups of families or to the local residents of a hamlet ('usi civici'). Legally, these are different from the UK's common lands and village greens, as, in Italy, they are regarded as private properties that are managed by a community of people for the benefit of all (Minora, 2008, forthcoming). The word 'community' in this context is used with reference to 'village community' in rural areas. Overall, the 'commons' – from land to buildings and from fishery rights to forests problems – is a new theme for Italy.

United States

The US field is characterised by a wide range of institutions – from public, private and non-profit sectors – that are actively involved in asset-based initiatives for communities. The local government tends to contract out anything other than essential services. There are thus a wide range of non-profit organisations working across issues such as housing, regeneration and employment, supported by a large number of intermediaries offering support in terms of finance, know-how and training. This is then reinforced by a number of legislative Acts that offer incentives to support community organisations through a variety of means, together with an interlocking network of organisations that are engaged in asset ownership and management.

In the USA, local authorities are not necessarily reluctant to transfer land and property to community organisations. They see the potential for increasing local tax revenues from run-down properties by transferring them to community development corporations that will produce revenue-producing developments. In that sense, they often share the same aims as community-led organisations in regenerating areas and promoting economic benefits. Research also shows that, for some communities in the USA, open space (such as parkland) is conceptualised as an important community asset, while social housing can be viewed as a disadvantage, say for existing home-owners who fear falling property prices (Campbell and Salus, 2003). Asset-based community development (ABCD) approaches have also emphasised valuing a range of other kinds of assets beyond land and buildings, and this has had significant importance with indigenous groups in the USA and beyond (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993).

Despite a regime characterised by a high degree of contracted-out services and asset disbursement to non-profit organisations, there are market interventions in the form of legislative mechanisms that act as imperatives for commercial organisations to engage with community organisations. In addition, there is a rich institutional mix at city and federal level that provides finance, capacity building and technical support.

Wider international perspectives

The attempt to gain or utilise assets has currency beyond Europe and the United States. Examples range from land rights movements in post-colonial developing countries to campaigns by indigenous groups in Australia and New Zealand. The rich and varied conceptualisation of assets from a variety of critical international researchers has been undertaken through the conferences of the International Association for the Study of Common Property whose work is recorded on the Digital Library of the Commons (IASP, 2006).

Fletcher *et al*. (2003) included intellectual capital as an important community asset, while others have considered forestry, tourism, fish – and even the sky (Watt, 2006) – as assets. Wagha (2005) examined fishing and farming rights for indigenous people in Pakistan, suggesting that they are valuable assets that play an important role in community development and growth. There are negative consequences of denying indigenous people access to such community assets. Wilkinson-Maposa (2008) also draws attention to the need to increase community ownership of property for indigenous communities. In relation to South Africa, Kalegaonkar and Brown (2000) argue that the uniqueness of its political situation means that community organisations play a distinctive role in building civil society. The representativeness of black community organisations acts as a key asset in enabling such organisations to act as advocates.

In Australia, McShane (2006) highlights the long history of public service provision by community-based organisations, and argues that the priority given to promoting community-based assets in the public policy agenda is integral to social and economic development. Similarly, Mathie and Cunningham (2003) argue that asset-based community development in Canada provides the means by which communities are sustained and developed economically. They also draw attention to the value of human assets in nurturing social and economic assets.

Finally, O'Leary's (2008) research with Carnegie on asset-based approaches (or ABCD) to rural community development (undertaken as a collaboration with partners in Australia, Brazil, Canada, India, Romania, Uganda, UK and New Zealand) highlights three different approaches. One draws from a community's own culture and values. A second approach is from practice, theory or 'sense-making' from those active as academics or practitioners in the field. The third strand is funder-driven. This research reveals that ABCD approaches are being developed at community as well as local and national levels, across many countries.

Summary

This brief overview of perspectives from beyond the UK illustrates how assets may be understood as encompassing much more than land and buildings, with a greater emphasis being given to human or intangible assets, and how asset management and ownership may be conceptualised in very different ways. Where there is a more consensual relationship between the government and third sector, a greater importance may be placed on the *use*, rather than on the *ownership*, of assets. For some indigenous groups, the right to have control over land or other resources, such as fishing, might be connected to a more radical agenda of self-determination.

III Analysis

11 The UK evidence

Introduction

In this final section, Part III, we present a brief discussion of the evidence set out in Part II.

The scale of community ownership and management of assets

There is limited evidence of scale and type of ownership and, in an emerging field such as this, there are definitional and conceptual issues that complicate the available data. For example, there is no clear consensus around what an asset is and how it should be measured and accounted for. Furthermore, in relation to vehicles for ownership, there is no common view about what type of organisations should be included within the category of ‘community-based’.

The benefits of community ownership and management of assets

The benefits that *can* derive from asset management and ownership, for both organisations and communities, are well rehearsed. They encompass financial, organisational and community aspects – for example:

- independent income sources and financial sustainability;
- organisational stability suitable for undertaking long-term development work;
- improved partnership work due to possession of a needed commodity;
- an engine to drive the local economy towards environmental and social improvements;
- the building of community pride, networks and skills, and empowered citizens.

While there are numerous case studies that attempt to demonstrate these benefits, the evidence here is not rigorous. Much of it focuses on the benefits to the organisations developing land and buildings. The links to demonstrable community benefit are less evident. The focus has also been mostly on existing communities rather than on communities that are new or where there is insufficient community sector infrastructure. There appears to be little multi-variant research that looks at combinations of factors leading to better technical asset management or better outcomes for local residents. This is likely to remain the case without adequate investment in long-term research that can track neighbourhood and organisational changes.

The lack of evidence in this area leaves certain key questions unanswered, particularly in relation to: the distinction between organisational and community benefits; the optimum conditions for achieving either or both; the characteristics of communities in which asset ownership and management is most likely to work; the actual impact of asset ownership on organisational independence.

The risks of community ownership and management of assets

Some of the risks of community ownership and management of assets have been cited or implied from scattered sources in this review. These include:

- organisations being pulled away from their core activities and becoming burdened with the regulatory burden of asset management;
- small community groups and black and minority ethnic groups being excluded from the benefits of asset ownership;

- assets gradually becoming unworkable because of excessive refurbishment or renovation costs;

- a lack of concentration on supporting mechanisms, including funding to extend and improve the pool of expert advisers as well as to provide organisational and individual development in this field.

Country differences

The emerging policy frameworks in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland differ. There is evidence that both policy and practice in England have gone further and quicker – certainly if measured by programme initiatives. Scotland and Wales have developed more modest numbers of initiatives. However, community land trusts, particularly in Scotland, appear to be growing in popularity. In Wales, there has been a focus on targets around social enterprise growth and contracting quotas. In Northern Ireland, assets do not appear to play such a prominent role. The issue is currently embedded in other activities, focused on reconciliation and rebuilding the local economy. The limited evidence of practitioner activity outside England gives greater emphasis to renewable energy initiatives in Wales and land transfer in Scotland.

International perspectives

International perspectives offer a different way of thinking about assets. For example, other forms of asset development are given priority in rural communities in the USA and globally. In addition, it is clear from the USA that legislative changes have brought certain financial institutions into activities around disadvantaged neighbourhoods in a way that does not seem common in the UK. The infrastructure of institutions and mixed patterns of advice, support and finance is striking in the USA. Furthermore, economic and social goals seem more shared between the public and non-profit sectors in the USA than in the UK.

In other European countries, there appears to be less emphasis on ownership of property. Use of and access to facilities and services appear to be more crucial than ownership. In developing countries, and with some indigenous groups, there are ideas about assets that extend beyond the economic to encompass cultural, political and spiritual issues.

In general, there appears to be more theorising and researching on assets outside the UK.

Proposals for addressing the evidence gaps

Some of the evidence gaps could be addressed by the following.

Reflective debate

A multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder inquiry could examine how asset ownership and management relates to the wider issues of rebuilding our societies.

Knowledge sharing: an open access resource

Data and evidence collected through this and other studies could be collated and made more easily and openly available to practitioners, academics and policy-makers in one location (probably on-line).

Building the evidence base: three studies

An evidence base that can help shape and guide policy and practice needs to be built. Three study areas are proposed initially.

- *Learning the lessons*: to capture the retrospective experience of practitioners, organisations and communities of asset management and ownership. It would focus on learning the lessons from practice and sharing these with new entrants.

- *Finding out the organisational and management factors needed to achieve good outcomes in asset ownership and management*: to identify the key variables associated with organising work in this field and to plot the benefits that accrue to communities. It would assist practitioners and policy-makers by testing and refining the assumptions underpinning asset ownership.

- *Developing an effective support infrastructure for asset ownership and management*: to focus on what kind of organisational infrastructure needs to be developed to support communities in areas where it is weak or absent. This includes urban or rural locations where the organisational capacity in existing communities has been severely eroded or in areas where there is new development.

Summary

In summary, we can identify three overarching themes from the evidence.

Practitioners have been at the forefront of debates, experiments and innovations in the field of community ownership and management of assets. In this way, public policy around assets has been shaped largely by practitioners.

In the UK, there has been a rapid acceleration of public policy interest in this area since 2002, coinciding with a wider policy focus on the role and contribution of the third sector, and on neighbourhood renewal. This interest is now shared across the political spectrum, with the Conservative Party supporting the transfer of assets to co-operative and voluntary organisations (Conservative Party, 2008). The extent to which current policy debates are mindful, or even aware, of the history of community activity on assets in the UK is questionable. Furthermore, there is limited evidence of thorough interrogation of the differences between the civic approach (emphasising formal institutional governance) and the civil dimension (stressing the engagement of a broader range of participants from the community and voluntary sector) in the ownership and management of assets.

Despite this unprecedented level of interest and activity, there is still very limited evidence on different aspects of community ownership and management of assets, including: purpose, benefits, outcomes and management processes. Many of the assumptions that appear to underpin the arguments of advocates in this field remain untested.

The issue is international in scope. Outside of the UK, there are differences of emphasis and conception. Within the UK, some differences in practice and emphasis are emerging between the four home countries.

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Appendix
Approach to the evidence review

The evidence review was carried out over a ten-week period from the beginning of April to mid-June 2008. It consisted of four phases: initial assessment; investigation; synthesis; and presentation of a final report.

Phase 1: initial assessment

The initial assessment drew on the accumulated experience of the scoping team in partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to develop initial questions. This process involved:

- drawing up an initial assessment document with preliminary key questions on community ownership and management of assets;
- contributing to discussions with Joseph Rowntree staff and partners.

Phase 2: investigation

The purpose of the investigative phase was to test, confirm, reject, add to, explore and develop the themes outlined in the initial assessment. It examined:

- published policy from UK statutory agencies;
- published research and evaluation undertaken by government, academic bodies, charities and community organisations;
- grey data on UK case studies, advocacy, unpublished research;
- published policy, programmes and guidance from the USA, European Union and Australia/ New Zealand.

Phase 3: synthesis

The synthesis phase brought together the results of the fieldwork phase in order to reformulate the initial assessment and to make recommendations. This involved:

- contributing to discussions with Joseph Rowntree staff and partners;
- attending three stakeholder forums with practitioners in Shrewsbury, Edinburgh and London in June 2008;
- discussing and analysing findings through internal team meetings.

Phase 4: presentation

This involved the preparation and presentation of the final report and summary.

Study activities

The evidence review activities specifically involved the following.

- Searching for grey data by contacting 70 representative and individual organisations in the UK – covering the third sector, professions, funding agencies and the media – and gaining 39 responses from them relating to the study; 88 documents were received and reviewed.
- Searching for published academic, policy and evaluation and other data by conducting an electronic scan of databases using Athens, ProQuest and Google scholar search engines as well as searching government and third-sector websites. A total of 185 documents were downloaded, of which 114 were identified as relevant and summarised.
- Studying and summarising over 200 UK pieces of literature from academic, policy or grey sources.

- Searching three UK academic library catalogues.
- Contacting individual practitioners and academics, and asking questions on e-discussion lists about assets.
- Presenting and discussing the issues with over 45 practitioners across three stakeholder workshops.
- Directly ringing, visiting, talking to or emailing 37 academic and practitioner contacts (17 in the UK and 20 internationally) in addition to the above.
- Reviewing US policy and practice.
- Studying and summarising over 30 US pieces of literature from academic, policy or grey sources.
- Conducting discussions with researchers from the USA, Sweden, Germany, Italy and Poland.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy-makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
www.jrf.org.uk

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Disclaimers

There is no central database covering community ownership and management of assets. This evidence review is based on material gathered over a four-week period between May and June 2008. New material is constantly coming to light. This report, therefore, provides a snapshot at a particular point in time.

The proposals outlined at the end of the report are based on the evidence in the public domain. We recognise that in a rapidly evolving landscape issues emerge that have yet to surface in the public discourse.

About the authors

This report has been written by Mike Aiken and Ben Cairns, Institute for Voluntary Action Research and Stephen Thake, London Metropolitan University. It is based on background work carried out by Jane Andrews and Nina Jatana with support from Marilyn Taylor of Marilyn Taylor Associates. Kathryn Taylor provided editorial assistance.