

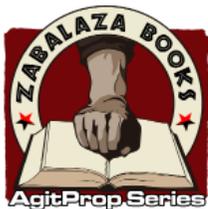
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Some Ideas for Community Action



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These are a few ideas which are open to being added to, changed, and adapted to reflect the needs of particular communities.

Despite the efforts of politicians and professionals to lump together working class communities as problem areas to be policed, those of us who live in these communities often see things differently. For us the problems we encounter daily are often not of our own making. Poverty, inadequate housing and crime are problems that come with the way society is structured. By taking control of our own communities, and deciding for ourselves how we should manage them, we are not only getting rid of the parasites who cause our problems but also starting on the path to a new type of society where each of us can be free to live our lives as we choose.

● Community Action

This is action to benefit all of us living in the community not simply those with the loudest voice, the more threatening manner or the most money. Some of the ideas may seem unrealistic at first glance, but most of them have worked in one form or another before.

Some principles of community action:

- ★ The people who live in a community are the ones who know best when it comes to improving that community.
- ★ Organisation in communities can only benefit all residents if it is from the base upwards. Beginning with the individual, household, street and outward to the wider community.
- ★ All residents, from the youngest to the oldest, should be encouraged to offer their opinions and solutions. Some people may feel intimidated or frightened by the idea of speaking in community assemblies. Alternatives such as written contributions or a clearly acknowledged advocate could be a way of encouraging people to participate while their confidence grows. If certain people choose not to participate that is their decision and should be respected.

the misery and suffering inflicted by these individuals' forces people to more extreme solutions.

While the help of professional mediators may be welcomed in a community, many of the skills needed for mediation could already be there in the community. People who have brought up a family, with all its problems, are the perfect example of this.

If a community decides they would feel safer with people checking on certain trouble-spots then a possible solution is for a street to organise a rota of residents who would feel comfortable in doing that. Perhaps each night a different person from each street could get together with, say six others from neighbouring streets, until any trouble calms down. Taking the dog for a walk, and helping your community!

● Community Defence

Community defence is about people in a community joining together to collectively deal with politically motivated attacks against their community themselves. If a community decides to organise a rent or mortgage strike then it's likely that landlords and banks will employ bailiffs and police to try to disrupt it. A good example of the type of community defence that could be used here is the groups and community mobilisations that defend people in the community when they are threatened with eviction.

As a community grows in confidence, and starts to assert its own self-management not only in the community but in workplaces then more particular forms of community/workplace defence are likely to be discussed and decided on.

● Care & Support

Communities are, of course, made up of individuals with a whole variety of different health and social needs. In the early stages of a community managing itself most of the medical needs will still require people using medical facilities outside of the local area.

There are however some areas of social care which people can organise for themselves. One example of this could be a local meals service, where those who are unable to cook for themselves have meals cooked for them at the social centre and delivered by volunteers. Another idea is for street volunteers who agree to take responsibility for checking that people in their street or building who are housebound are okay. Some of these ideas for social care are just common sense things that people already do for each other now. In other cases it's a matter of building on the care networks that have always existed in working class communities.

Childcare is another area where care networks are often already in place. Extended families have often shared childcare responsibilities in working class communities. Crèches and after-school groups are an area where those with young children can organise for themselves, involving people they know and trust.

● Crime & Community Disputes

Most, but not all, crime is a result of the type of society we live in now. Inequality breeds crime while the police feed off it. In encouraging a community to self-manage one of the essential requirements is that those who feed off crime, the police, are dispensed with, and community alternatives developed.

The use of mediation, someone independent bringing together the conflicting parties, is one way of dealing with community disputes which is becoming more popular. The use of mediation could be extended to include other anti-social behaviour. Initially, however, persistent anti-social behaviour like drug dealing, loan sharking etc. is likely to require a more direct community approach. This could take the form of those affected joining together to inform the person or people that they are not wanted in the community and should leave. A community united in condemning anti-social behaviour can be a powerful deterrent. Where the people involved are known to be violent or carrying weapons then a less direct, but equally confrontational approach may be taken. It's certainly not unknown for the likes of drug dealers and loan sharks to trip over balconies in working class communities. It's not a pleasant thought, but sometimes

★ Even the most well-meaning of community workers, social workers, and other professionals found in our communities are working to an agenda set for them. If they live in the community then they should participate as individuals with their own, and the communities, best interests at heart.

★ Activists, be they anarchist or otherwise, who endorse community action and wish to participate by moving into a community should do so with the long term interests of that community in mind, and not selfish temporary lifestylism. They are there to help empower, not to dominate or exist as a group separate from the community.

● A Community Meeting Place

A community meeting place is essential to any community transformation. This kind of social centre can act as the focal point for community action, bringing together all groups within the community in a safe space. To be able to do this the centre should ideally be located in a central position where the community can easily access it, but also difficult to access for those, like the police, who are likely to threaten the community from outside. In the early stages of action chances are an ideal location will be difficult to find. Using empty or unused buildings (see HOUSING below) is the perfect opportunity to show what is possible. Accurate information about the legality of reclaiming property should be distributed as widely as possible. Not just in libraries, waiting rooms, union offices, busses, trains, but also through local free sheets and internet/intranet forums. The sharing of information and experience should be seen as another essential part of any community action.

As well as being a meeting place the centre or centres could also act as a community resource and distribution point (see DISTRIBUTION & RE-DISTRIBUTION below). A few examples, amongst many, are a community food co-op, a swap shop and a practical resource centre where people can share their practical hands-on experience with others.

● Community Assemblies

Community assemblies are the forums where local decisions are made, decisions that have a direct impact on the whole community. While the obvious areas of decision making are likely to be things such as transport, housing, crime, social care etc., as self-management develops in the community other issues such as what types of workplaces the community wants are likely to be-

come more pressing. The more people realise they can manage their own communities the more likely they are to realise they can also manage their workplaces themselves.

The form of assemblies is likely to be dictated by the size and geography of a community. However, it should be argued that one overriding principle of the assembly is that anyone who has something to say is given the chance to do so. Likewise if the meeting is to be structured then the role of chairperson should be rotated to ensure the assembly is not dominated by any one person or group. People who have no experience of this type of meeting should be encouraged to become actively involved.

While, ideally people would attend assemblies in person, in reality this may not always be possible. The use of community radio and local intranets are some examples of how assembly proceedings could be relayed to people in real-time. Local internet systems could work particularly well, allowing people to feed back their views directly to an assembly.

● Housing

Poor housing, shoddy repairs, lack of choice and long waiting lists are some of the issues faced by working class people. Rather than appealing to landlords to improve things, another option is to create resident action groups. These can be independent groups rather than the resident/tenant groups set up by landlords. Using forms of direct action to highlight issues around housing is a move away from appealing for help towards empowering people to demand something is done. This sort of politicisation of a community can be seen as the first stage. Once a community begins to organise for itself then the options for other ways of organising housing and repairs for themselves is a step closer. The use of rent/mortgage strikes is one way residents could begin to flex their collective muscle (see COMMUNITY DEFENCE below)

Reclaiming empty or unused buildings is another strategy that could be used to practically address the lack of housing in a community. Rather than relying on landlords to allocate property those who need it should be encouraged to recover and make use of empty buildings. Information on the legal issues could be made widely available, and the sharing of the skills needed to successfully reclaim a building could be one of the things on offer at the social centre.

● Food

Creating a community food co-op is one way of not only bonding a community together, but also a positive way of offering good, affordable food and other goods. In the early stages this would probably involve the co-op buying goods directly from fruit and veg markets, from wholesalers or directly from the producers ie. farmers. While the production of all the goods a community needs is unlikely to be done locally, the growing of fruit and vegetables is one thing that could be produced in the community.

Wasteland and other unused land could be reclaimed by the community and seeded for popular small-scale food production. It's likely the skills needed in growing food are already present in a community with people who already enjoy tending to their gardens, growing their own food etc.

As local authorities seem intent on selling off unused land, a community moving onto this land and using it for other uses such as food production is a way of people not only spoiling a local councils plans, but also directly benefiting their communities.

● Distribution and Re-Distribution

Creating new methods of distribution is essential if a community is to effectively manage itself. The distribution of locally produced food via a co-op is one way of achieving this. Other goods that are not produced locally will need other methods of distribution. The idea of swap-shops, where people can take items they no longer use to the shop and look for and take items they need is one method of re-distribution which is practical and simple to organise; a bring and buy without the use of money.

Another method of distribution is a 'tool pool' where essential community items can be shared as and when they're needed. This could start with the items needed for producing food locally, and then spread to other items the community decides would be best distributed in this way. For example local transport, such as bikes, is one area where the idea of a 'pool' has worked before.

The distribution of information is another area where local and direct community alternatives can work effectively. The facility to create local news sheets is now available to anyone with access to a computer. Experiments in 'pirate' and activist radio stations have also begun to make the idea of local community radio stations a reality. Likewise experiments in linking communities via a community intranet show the possibilities for further distributing information.