WHEN RHETORIC DOES NOT TRANSLATE TO REALITY: HARDSHIP, EMPOWERMENT AND THE THIRD SECTOR IN AUSTERITY LOCALISM[1]

AUTHORS

Hulya DAGDEVIREN
University of Hertfordshire, Business School

Matthew DONOGHUE
University of Oxford, Department of Social Policy and Intervention

Alexis WEARMOUTH,
School of Business and Management, Queen Mary University of London.

Abstract: Austerity localism powerfully explains dynamics of (dis)empowerment at the local level, especially regarding the autonomy and accountability of local authorities and third sector organisations (TSOs) in the UK. Yet these dynamics at institutional level have also a clear impact on individuals, especially the socio-economically vulnerable people. This is especially true in a time of cost-containment and welfare retrenchment. This article addresses a gap in the literature by focusing not only on TSOs but also on the experiences of vulnerable individuals under austerity localism. The discussion is centred on two types of TSOs: foodbanks and advice / advocacy organisations. Drawing upon primary qualitative data from three locations in England and Wales, the article argues that the emphatic rhetoric of empowerment within austerity localism, which others have shown to be problematic at the institutional level, does not translate into real-world empowerment for service users and other vulnerable individuals. In making the argument the article contributes to work on expanding the analytical scope of austerity localism, as well as further exploring the roles and prospects of TSOs in the current long period of austerity in the UK.

KEY WORDS: Austerity, localism, vulnerability, empowerment, third sector, foodbanks, UK

Introduction

Rhetoric centred on self-help, self-sufficiency and empowerment has been central to the ongoing process of welfare restructuring in a period of austerity in the UK. Political narratives include invoking empowerment as a transfer of power from the state to communities, families and individuals. Drawing on a long history of the empowerment narrative in UK social policy, it is now frequently deployed to legitimise the severe retrenchment of welfare and other public spending (Jacobs and Manzi, 2013: 37) on the basis of promises such as 'state control will be released and power will be placed in people's hands' (Cameron, 2011).

This article contributes to existing debates in a number of areas. First, it critically examines the role of the third sector in supporting people in hardship in an environment of austerity and further transfer of responsibility from central government to communities and individuals during the Great Recession. Second, the paper aims to investigate the validity of claims of 'empowerment', often asserted in the political discourse of public spending cuts, by studying the experience of key informants from third sector organisations (TSOs) as well as users of these services. In particular, we focus on foodbanks and advice/advocacy services that have increasingly been characterised as empowering (e.g. Cloke *et al.,* 2017). We argue that these organisations are forced to play a primarily reactive and stabilising role, rather than a longer-term supporting role more suited to empowerment; and that within this context the prospects for vulnerable individuals' empowerment rest on the ability of these organisations to help navigate, resist or overcome the increasingly restrictive conditions imposed by formal welfare institutions, alongside powerful cultural constructs such as the stigma associated with accessing foodbanks.

Notwithstanding the fact that the issues of poverty and insecurity predates the austerity, this study focuses on the post 2010 period to explore austerity localism in the context of interactions between TSOs and people experiencing hardship as a result of austerity measures. Our arguments are supported by interview data collected during 2014-2015 in three locations across England and Wales. Our findings stand in contrast to discourses associated with the communitarian turn in governance (Eagle *et al.,* 2017: 59; Hickson, 2013: 409-410) and specific initiatives such as the Big Society approach and the New Localism agenda that laud and promise the empowerment of local organisations, communities and individuals. Instead, the transfer of some of the burden for welfare provision from the public sector to the third sector, especially with respect to basic needs like food has a primarily disempowering effect, which heightens the potential for social exclusion. This is not to say that the third sector is disempowering by design. Where there is potential for empowerment, it is through the support provided by advice organisations to their users in making claims on their social rights. Yet this is still reactive rather than proactive, and as such the extent of empowerment is limited. Although our interviews were carried out during 2014-2015, much of the findings are also relevant for more recent years with further changes in the benefits system such as those related to implementation of the Universal Credit.

We situate our analysis within the framework of 'austerity localism' (Featherstone *et al.,* 2012; Clayton *et al.,* 2015), which understands recent political and policy developments as built upon three main pillars: empowering local communities, increasing competition within public

service provision, and promoting social action that amounts to an asset transfer from the central and local government on to communities themselves (Clayton *et al.,* 2015: 724-725). Yet far from being empowering, this paper argues that austerity localism ultimately has had a disempowering effect on people facing hardship.

The article contributes to work on the changing role and significance of the third sector in times of austerity and the struggle to live up to the responsibility of empowering its users. It highlights the reactive nature of some third sector endeavours, such as the use of foodbanks (e.g. Loopstra *et al.,* 2015; Lambie-Mumford, 2015: 13-32) as well as debates on whether this is a fundamentally disempowering process (e.g. Garthwaite, 2016: 135-148). The discussion in this study is relevant for other countries such as the US, Europe and Canada where localism and empowerment arguments and associated policies have had some currency (Bailey and Pill 2015, Tait and Inch 2016). The experience in the UK with respect to the role of TSOs under austerity provides a particularly rich context for the assessment of such political discourses.

The article is divided into four sections. The next section sets out the role of austerity localism by taking the Great Recession as the primary flashpoint. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approach, the data and the rationale for focusing on foodbanks and advice organisations. Section three presents the main findings, in particular, the disconnect between the rhetoric and reality of empowerment. Finally, the article concludes by reflecting upon the role of the third sector and its prospects within the context of austerity localism.

Empowerment, retrenchment and 'austerity localism'

Welfare retrenchment has been a key theme in UK social policy at least since the reforms of the Thatcher government (Pierson, 1994; 1996). Though different governments have differed in their approach to, and the severity of, retrenchment, there is clear continuity up to the present day. Much of this continuous retrenchment and reconfiguration was justified on a dual track: either through appeals to frugality (i.e. 'we must live within our means') or through appeals to the empowerment of individuals and communities. New Labour emphasised the importance of localism to promote neighbourhood-based public policy strategies along the lines of 'participative communitarianism' (Carr *et al.,* 2001, Jacobs and Manzi 2013: 34). The promotion of 'self-help' and 'voluntary action' has ensured that the Third Sector expanded rapidly (NVCO, 2012: 17). In particular, TSOs could play a more significant role in the New Labour years because of a favourable funding environment, pre-crisis stability, and the expansion of partnership working between the third sector and (local) government. This was partly due to increasing decentralisation which, in some circumstances, led to a dramatic fall in central funding of social provisions that has subsequently increased the importance of the voluntary services for providing legal advice, housing, food and other basic needs.

The period after the crisis saw New Labour departing from office and the election of the Coalition government in 2010. Since then, the strategy has been to introduce austerity measures aimed ostensibly at reducing the public deficit, but also widely understood as part of a larger

political strategy to roll-back the state (Taylor-Gooby, 2012). This has been particularly prominent in the provision of social security. A rise in unemployment (ONS, 2016a) alongside worsening employment conditions (LFS, 2010; ONS, 2016b), have intensified labour market precarity and socio-economic insecurity for millions (Gallie *et al.,* 2017; Mitton, 2016; Bailey, 2016, Andre *et al.,* 2013). Yet rather than responding to this effect of the financial crisis in a traditionally Keynesian way (see Vis *et al.,* 2011 for a discussion), the Coalition and Conservative governments committed to cost containment. Although this is not new (Powell and Hewitt, 1998; Powell, 2000; Finn, 2003), the reforms of 2010 onwards saw welfare reform take a more punitive turn when compared to the New Labour years (MacLeavy, 2011; Wiggan, 2012).

Austerity measures included a 20 percent reduction in per capita government spending (ONS 2016), a decline in the real value of unemployment benefits (resulting from a change in indexation in 2010 and a cap on the amount of benefits), a shortening in the period of support (e.g. Employment Support Allowance and support for young people) (Mitton 2016, Kersbergen *et al.,* 2014) and the elimination of the Social Fund (a discretionary benefit paid in addition to other benefits for those with 'exceptional needs'). The activation policies have become more aggressive (Watts *et al*., 2014, Andre *et al.,* 2013: 29), which has led to many people not engaging with the benefits system, even when clearly eligible (Watts *et al.,* 2014). The use of sanctions has more than doubled post crisis (DWP 2016), affecting some of the most vulnerable people the worst (Oakley, 2014). Many were compelled to take low paid and unstable jobs, oftentimes resulting in bouncing between welfare and work (Shildrick et al. 2012).

Crucially, the potential social impact of the cuts and punitive measures were masked through a commitment to localism. Increasing the restrictive nature of the conditions placed upon receipt of social security ran parallel with the transfer of authority and responsibility for the provision of services to the local level. Originally, this was allied to the ill-fated 'Big Society' agenda (Featherstone *et al.,* 2012: 177) that highlighted 'empowerment of communities' with the ability to solve local problems themselves, as reflected by David Cameron's Big Society speech:

> You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment…It's about the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street…we can give people the power …to take action themselves…It's about pushing power down.[2]

While the 'Big Society' concept was shelved, there is more or less consensus in the literature that the commitment to a rhetorical localism and its principal elements has continued apace (Ludwig and Ludwig 2014; Bailey and Pill 2015; Tait and Inch 2016; Findlay-King, et al. 2018). Indeed, these principles remain alive in Theresa May's domestic vision through the 'shared society', which involves 'people looking out for others at a community level, as an alternative to large-scale standardised service provision for those in need' (Aiken and Harris, 2017: 338).

This policy continuity since 2010 has been usefully framed as 'austerity localism' (Featherstone *et al.,* 2012; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Clayton, et al. 2015). The concept encapsulates the contradiction that the local is mobilised 'as part of an "anti-state", "anti-public"

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[2] Available through https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/big-society-speech

discourse to build support for an aggressive round of "roll-back" neoliberalism' (Featherstone *et al.,* 2012: 177; see also Newman, 2013). The *rhetoric* of empowerment is central to the construction and promotion of austerity localism. It legitimises decentralisation of *responsibility* and the further, accelerated, de-coupling of the state from its traditional role as welfare provider. The devolution of power promised by austerity localism does not, by design, increase opportunities for the empowerment of those facing hardship. Its refusal to deal with locally based inequalities and power asymmetries means that it inherently favours 'those with the resources, expertise and social capital to become involved in the provision of services and facilities', and thus embodies a 'middle-class voluntarism' which is especially problematic for deprived areas (Featherstone *et al.,* 2012: 178-179).

Thus, austerity localism describes the process by which the state can be rolled back via the pretence of dispersing power, when in reality a highly centrally controlled framework of responsibilisation has led local actors to respond reactively in order to contain its worst consequences. Within this context operate TSOs, which have found themselves occupying more and more of the vacuum of social service created through the aggressive roll-back of the state (e.g. Williams *et al.,* 2014). The increased emphasis on TSOs as primary service providers in the British welfare state means that their relative success or failure cascades down to the marginalised individuals and communities. In previous models such as New Labour's, the voluntary sector 'received significant government support, enabling it to move from the economic margin towards the mainstream' (Haugh and Kitson, 2007: 975; see also Kendall and Almond, 1999; Kendal, 2000; Osbourne and McLaughlin, 2004; Cairns *et al.,* 2005). However, in the current climate these services of last resort are transforming into front-line services, but without the resources and structures required to actually provide front-line assistance.

Table 1: An overview of 'Austerity Localism'

Pillar	Discourse / Rhetorical Aim	Measures taken	Locus of power	Consequences
Empowering local communities	Devolution of power from central government to local government and communities (Bailey and Pill 2015)	Giving councils 'general power of competence' and ability to set business rates; increased accountability to local residents (Hildreth, 2011); 'the freedom to spend money' (Conservative Party, 2009: 3).	Devolution of 'decision making' to local govt; central government retains overall control over localities (Smith and Wistrich, 2014).	'Local authorities rather than central government are more susceptible to blame for diminishing local services and not managing their budgets effectively' (Clayton *et al.,* 2015: 725).
Promotion of social action	Mobilise 'active citizens'; encourage individuals to 'take charge of their communities through philanthropy, civic participation and social enterprise'	The Big Society; 'asset transfer from the state to community groups' (Levitas, 2012: 330); 'the promotion of unpaid labour in a low-paid labour market' (Clayton *et al.,* 2015:	Ostensibly with local communities, although this is highly dependent on the financial position and resource wealth of those involved; promoting voluntary activity over state intervention 'does not always result in positive outcomes for marginalised	Local communities effectively responsibilised to maintain essential services as a community endeavour; withdrawal of support from state means that communities and

	(Clayton *et al.,* 2015: 725).	725; see also Coote,2010)	communities' (Clayton *et al.,* 2015: 726; Davies and Pill, 2012).	organisations that cannot afford to do this lose out.
Opening public services to competition	Improve efficiency within service provision (Le Grand, 2007).	Putting service contracts out to tender to both third sector and private organisations (Raco, 2013)	Those with the resources (time, money, experience) needed to produce bids at short notice, and who can provide the cheapest service are at a distinct advantage	TSOs especially when locally-based and small-scale struggle to obtain the necessary funding to provide services. Organisations with financial security and backing more likely to survive/thrive.

Source: Adapted from Clayton et al. (2015)

Austerity localism, then, can be seen as part of the broader process of reconfiguring social citizenship from above (in our case through informal welfare institutions), which in turn reconfigures how it is lived and experienced from below (e.g. Patrick, 2017: 18). The type and depth of support available through TSOs has significant bearing on people's ability to 'participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas' (Levitas *et al.,* 2007: 9). Using the austerity localism framework therefore allows for an analysis of both the experiences of TSO workers and service users, to provide a more complete picture of how disadvantage and a lack of resources cascades downwards.

This article shows the debilitating impact of austerity localism on individuals via these institutions, demonstrating the interlinked and multilevel nature of disadvantage. It does this by engaging with the narratives of both those facing hardship and accessing support through the third sector, and from those working within various TSOs.

Method and Data

Our data is drawn from a total of 57 semi-structured interviews with both TSO workers and service users across three rural and urban sites from October 2014 to May 2015: East London, Cornwall and Pembrokeshire. 18 key informant interviews were drawn from law centres, foodbanks, homelessness-related charities, local authorities and community support organisations. These interviews lasted on average about one hour, and involved discussions about how service provision has changed in recent years and the major challenges facing the sector and service users.

26 in-depth, semi-structured household interviews were conducted, in which participants discussed with the interviewer how they made ends meet, how they understood themselves as part of a wider community, and whether they accessed support from the welfare state and/or voluntary sector and the nature of this support. Considering the focus of the article is on austerity and its impacts on TSOs as well as people facing hardship, the household interviews have been used to provide vignettes that emphasise the personal impact of changes that are ostensibly

concerned with changes in the governance and funding of service provision. The interview questions were designed to be mindful of the context in which participants were likely to situate their experiences: recession and austerity and navigating routes for support and empowerment, either through informal networks (e.g. family and friends), semi-formal (e.g. church networks) and more formal structures (e.g. the third sector, local services and the welfare state, broadly conceived). Each interview lasted one to two hours. Household participants largely self-identified as facing hardship, and included those who had recently been destitute, or who were facing destitution, as well as a number who were not technically in immediate hardship but were one crisis or paycheck away from significant hardship, and/or were experiencing in-work poverty (McBride *et al.,* 2017).   Of the 26 participants, 13 agreed to take part in a follow-up interview, which involved discussing a number of photographs they agreed to take beforehand documenting their daily lives. This visual element aimed to further our understanding about the lives of participants although it was not the photographs but the transcripts of the interviews around them that were used as primary source of analysis.

The research used purposive sampling strategies (e.g. Barbour and Schostak, 2005; Richie *et al.,* 2003). Regarding the key informant interviews, contact was made directly with organisations working in relevant areas where possible. Snowball sampling was used as part of the key informant interviews, in which participants recommended other socially situated experts to contact. This was especially useful in the rural areas, where identifying local charities would have been difficult without these recommendations.

A number of key informants acted as gatekeepers and assisted in the recruitment of participants for the household interviews. Criteria for these interviews included household type, gender, ethnic background, and employment status. Snowball sampling was also used to a limited extent, particularly in the rural areas, where local knowledge of community members was especially important. Within the sample, female participants were slightly more represented (16 female, 10 male). The sample in the rural areas was much more homogeneous: every participant was white British apart from one. More participants were from ethnic minority groups in east London than in Cornwall and Pembrokeshire. In east London, participants' backgrounds included Nigerian, Australian, Singaporean, White British, White Irish, Turkish and Kurdish, and Vietnamese.

All participants, including key informants, were guaranteed anonymity. All names used in this article are pseudonyms, and fieldwork locations are referred to as the region/area in which they are located.

Experiences vs narratives of empowerment under austerity localism

Under the Coalition Government, £33.6 billion was cut from the welfare budget, excluding the increases accounting for indexing and rising number of beneficiaries. Further cuts of £11.8 billion are planned to take place under the Conservative Government until 2020 (OBR 2016). These measures represent a significant shrinking of the state as provider of front-line services,

creating a vacuum into which the third sector has stepped. Yet as highlighted earlier, assuming these responsibilities has been met with increased competition for a smaller pot of funding, which is increasingly controlled by local authorities that themselves are facing pressure to cut costs (Hastings et al 2015b) and spend only on absolute necessities. Austerity localism therefore represents a significant shift of *risk* away from the state on to TSOs alongside a *potential* 'creeping privatisation' of public services (Myers, 2017).

Clayton *et al.,* (2015: 726) call for the examination of two central questions: 'the extent to which progressive rhetoric surrounding localism has resulted in the empowerment of organisations that are most exposed to economic fluctuations and political decisions', and whether TSOs 'have the capacity to cope in an environment in which their work is championed, but not necessarily supported by those controlling resources'. Our data point to significant contradictions under austerity localism in Britain: against the rhetoric of localism and empowerment there is centralised decision making with respect to cuts in public spending, cascading down to local authorities and severely limiting their abilities to respond to the needs of their communities. As discussion below shows, austerity localism has neither empowered TSOs nor service users. The explosion in the number of foodbanks is directly related the conditions of austerity rather than the empowerment of the local communities. The rising demand for the services of advice organisations in an environment of shrinking resources is likely to have had adverse impact on the accessibility of their services.

This article emphasises the lived experience of both service providers and service users. It does this to situate analysis at the micro level within the meso (community and civil society) and macro level (broad level welfare reform). This is compatible with the general framework of austerity localism because it helps explain and understand how dual processes of decentralisation and cost-containment affect service users. This helps build the framework of austerity localism beyond the institutional level by demonstrating the material impacts of the agenda on hardship at the individual level.

The role of foodbanks

The expansion of foodbanks in Britain, particularly after the financial crisis, has been considerably rapid. The number of individual food supplies from Trussel Trust[3] foodbanks increased from 28 thousand in 2008-2009 to one million in 2013-14 continuing through 2016-17 (for an overview of the explosion in foodbanks and foodbank coverage, see Garthwaite, 2016: 2-16). The proliferation of foodbanks was used by interview participants as a proxy measure for the severity of food poverty (and by extension other forms of poverty):

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[3] Trussel Trust is a Christian charity with the largest number of foodbanks in Britain. Independent foodbanks also exist.

'there wasn't a foodbank in [this area], there wasn't a desperate need… [this] foodbank is very recent, it's open two years'. [Manager of a foodbank in East London]

The explosion in the number of foodbanks that provide assistance for the most basic human needs reflects the impact of austerity policies after the Great Recession, involving benefit caps and freeze and sanctions that have further deepened the vulnerability of the poorer sections of society. Around 50% of the beneficiaries were referred to a foodbank either because of delays or changes in benefits resulting from the post-2010 welfare reforms (Trussell Trust 2017).

However, within the government's localism framework the rise of foodbanks is not portrayed as a necessary response to tackle deprivation and destitution, but as local communities responding to the rise in local demand. Rather than recognising the increasing punitiveness of welfare system, the logic of the localism agenda paints the explosion of foodbanks as community agency in action, and an example of what can be done with limited resources, therefore justifying further cost-containment.

Yet, the charitable sector is not able to provide comprehensive and regular support for those cast-out from the labour market and the welfare system; something highlighted by a number of participants who had their social security support withdrawn or modified. For example, when Samantha's benefits were stopped, it was her housing association (to whom she was in arrears) that referred her to a local foodbank:

I'm living at home with two daughters, living on £20 a week, I mean they haven't… and that's it. Well what are you supposed to do? You know, what are you supposed to do? It was my Housing Officer who put me in touch with… she gets me… food vouchers but you can only use them, you can only go to the place three times.

This is particularly important in understanding the broader implications of austerity localism and the direct impact it has on some of the most disadvantaged members of society. The roll-back of the state, which has created a vacuum in some places, has been filled by organisations from the third sector, like foodbanks. Yet taking up this role in a reactive fashion (i.e. as a stop-gap to help people avoid destitution), many foodbanks have become a central part of the social security system. But Samantha's reflections above clearly show that foodbanks, by design, provide short-term and temporary solutions.

This is not necessarily the desired outcome for local authorities either. A council employee, when asked if they work with local foodbanks in east London, replied that 'Well, strictly speaking, no, but we do, in terms of, we don't refer to foodbanks but we do provide them with some funding locally'. The reasons for this are blamed squarely on the inability for the council to respond adequately to need in its own borough, in the context of severe cuts in resources:

That comes from… a conscious decision to provide, not a lot, but some level of funding through to the local foodbank, on the realisation that there will be a fallout, and there will be areas of community that the Council services just aren't in the position to be able to respond... Our concern at the moment is that… level of disconnect is starting to, those gaps

are widening and… more people are starting to fall into that gap between what we can provide and… what we can't.

If people are unable to access support from the welfare state and if TSOs are unable to provide comprehensive support to those who need it, their prospects for empowerment are significantly diminished. A minister of a youth church in Cornwall highlighted the constraints placed upon the voluntary sector, especially in an area like Cornwall which contains significant pockets of deprivation, largely hidden away from tourists and non-residents. She highlights the transformation of foodbanks in the area from last-resort to increasingly front-line services in the broader context of a significantly more punitive welfare state:

> I think the foodbank is enabling people to cope with benefit sanctions a bit better but they shouldn't have to go to the foodbank, this is ridiculous […] but they can't ask it all to be done by volunteers, that's the problem. I mean [..] there's only so much that community can do.

In a location such as Cornwall, council services are particularly stretched. As the minister remarks, 'the council are doing their best… with the budget they have'. This is compounded by the fact that even those active in contributing to service provision can themselves be suffering hardship. The minister, for example, volunteers for the Nightstop service whereby a household takes in homeless people on a night-by-night basis. Yet, as she highlights when it comes to travelling around the local area, 'I have crisis finding a bus fare'.

More importantly, individuals who the foodbanks are helping are in a fundamentally disempowered position. 'Kimberly', a single parent with two grown up children in Cornwall, is exemplary of this. She had obtained a postgraduate degree in legal studies before the crisis, but this did not help with her job search post-crisis. She lost her home as she could not maintain mortgage payments. At the time of interview, she was living in destitution. Her only source of income was Employment Support Allowance (ESA). For her, having no food was a literal situation:

> when I tell people sometimes I've got no food, I don't mean things are getting a bit low, I mean I've got *no* food […] I was about to turn my fridge off because it had been empty for so many days […] I don't think people actually realise that, they think you're just being silly or you're just, things are running a bit low, you know.

Despite her acute need, Kimberly felt shame in needing the help of a foodbank. After being referred to her local foodbank by her GP, she remarked that 'I felt so embarrassed […] I didn't want it, I didn't ask for it but he made me take it, I didn't use it'. A foodbank manager in London confirmed, 'there are some who will not even go to their immediate family and ask for help because they'd be embarrassed about it'. Kimberley's experience of feeling ashamed was not the exception but the norm amongst the participants who were referred to the foodbanks as reflected by our field-notes taken during a visit to a foodbank in East London:

> A new person enters. He looks to be from an African-Caribbean background. He has a typical London accent. They have the introductory chat in the room I'm sitting in. The man says he is a proud man and didn't want to use the Foodbank, but he is suffering from housing issues – rent arrears and council tax issues. You can feel however that he feels a bit uncomfortable

with being at the food bank in the first place. The volunteer leaves the room, and the proud man stares out of the window. He looks sad and wistful.

Overall, the rhetoric of austerity localism emphasises that the increased autonomy supposedly given to local service providers makes them more responsive and reflexive to local needs. The landscape portrayed by our data, however, depicts the opposite to this: a more fragmented, resource-poor competitive environment that compels TSOs such as foodbanks to specialise in providing absolutely essential, but limited and restrictive, support while the beneficiaries feel shamed and stigmatised rather than empowered.

The role of advice / advocacy organisations

Foodbanks' position within austerity localism is somewhat of a proxy, in that funding for these organisations comes largely from philanthropic networks such as church congregations and individual donations. This is not the case for advice and advocacy organisations: the Citizens' Advice Bureau (which provide advice around debt, welfare rights and related issues), for example, is funded through the Department for Communities and Local Government, whilst Community Law Centres (providing free legal advice and representation for people who cannot afford legal fees, for example, for benefit claims) are funded predominantly via Legal Aid, administered by the Legal Aid Agency (an arm of the Ministry of Justice).

The UK's austerity programme included deep cuts to local governments' budgets (Hastings et al 2015a and 2015b) and to legal aid, which put immense strain on finances and thus the ability of organisations such as law centres to remain open. As a senior lawyer in an east London Law Centre remarked, this threatened law centres' survival:

> Our annual budget is something a little less than half a million pounds I think of which perhaps 40% at the moment is coming from Legal Aid, that's a reduction of at least 20% of what it used to be before the Legal Aid cuts […] other Law Centres have closed, we've lost I think it's 17 Law Centres in the last three years leaving somewhere around 40 in the country due to financial pressures and certainly legal aid would have been part of that picture.

Beyond legal aid, cuts discussed by our informants included: council funding for supported housing; layoffs at County Councils that increased demand for advice; removal of interpreter services in GP surgeries for large immigrant communities; the removal of the Social Fund which cut-off an essential lifeline, according to our key informants, for families in crisis. The effects of cuts are visible even in cursory interactions with advice organisations as reflected by the following extract from our field-notes:

> Came to [XX Centre] to meet one of their clients... The reception has two admin staff. The phones are ringing constantly. One man has just walked in and made an immigration-related inquiry. One of the receptionists is very loud and talking to people in a curt

manner, leaving no room for negotiation. She informed him that they only take certain cases and sent him away.

Even the best funded, best organised and most responsive TSO can only do so much. A 35-year old single woman from East London highlighted barriers in accessing her social rights made difficult further by the funding cuts while reflecting on a picture she had taken with an advisor from a branch of a family support charity:

> I'm resourceful, I'm good on a computer, I'm articulate and like [the charity] absolutely invaluable, the same with Royal Courts of Justice, they're essential to be able to access things and that's what's being cut and so then if I can't even manage to access things how the hell is somebody with English as a second language and six kids around their ankles going to do it?

Resource constraints were compounded by the increased complexity of people's problems, meaning that the advice organisations were not able to help resolve problems as efficiently and effectively as explained by a senior manager at a Citizens' Advice Bureau:

> At one time, people would come to us with a problem and we'd sort it out in half an hour or something, off they'd go. People are coming with carrier bags full of problems now, so they've got debt problems, they've got benefit problems, they've got housing problems, and all of those things are linked

In addition to the funding cuts, civil society organisations have experienced significant pressures due to rising demand for their services which is accounted by two major factors. First is the use of a more aggressive benefit conditionality and sanctions regime (Oakley 2014, DWP 2016) which pervaded the narratives of participants and key informants in our research as a major factor driving the continuing crises of families long after the Great Recession. This has also been highlighted by a council adviser in east London with many years of experience in the sector:

> There's greater emphasis on benefits now for people to prove their circumstances, and the benefit of the doubt shifted away from *assuming in a positive way, to assuming in a negative way,* to a certain extent... I think the number of appeals has increased, you know, as the benefit rules become more complicated and more strictly applied...

Second, how the welfare system operates implicitly or explicitly requires citizens' problems to be verified and represented by third sector organisations. As a council adviser in east London indicated, 'it's much more likely that you will be successful in [a benefits appeal] if you go with a representative than if you… go by yourself'. Another frontline staff member in an east London council confirmed that a letter from an intermediary has now become a *de facto* requirement to access local authority funds. This evidence is also borne out by the household interviews, where TSOs acted as participants' intermediaries, facilitating access to benefit entitlements and negotiating delays and errors in assessments by state actors administering benefits. Jillian, a participant from Pembrokeshire, found multiple barriers when trying to claim Employment

Support Allowance (ESA), even with the support of medical documentation. Her claim ended up in the courts, and it was only through active support from the CAB that her claim was successful:

> in the end we got the help from CAB, they were brilliant… when we were going through the tough times, and a lady… she was brilliant, and she came to the court and she said, "But tell them how you feel," and I just broke down then and just went hysterical but we won it in the end […] if it wasn't for the CAB we wouldn't have had anything.

Another participant (Madeline, a middle aged single woman) who was evicted from her private rented accommodation in east London, found it increasingly difficult to access support from the state without an advocate:

> [not having an advocate] goes against you so you actually need support workers to help you to do things, not only for the actual physical getting it done but also *so it's listened to at the place… nothing happens without an intermediary saying, please listen to this, she's not coping.*

This problem deepens when one considers the implication that even those who *are* capable of challenging decisions (in terms of having the required knowledge, for example), may still need an advocate. This is, essentially, an institutional barrier to access rather than a form of empowerment. Under austerity localism, empowerment is inherently problematic; those it claims to empower (whether through intermediaries or directly) are in fact systemically disempowered.

Overall, several findings are worth highlighting. First, funding cuts have disempowered both the advice sector in terms of their ability to respond to the growing demand for their services under austerity and the service users who desperately needed their assistance. Some like Law centres saw a significant number of their offices close, others like CABs pursued both closure and mergers and attempted to compensate for the impact of cuts by providing online services.

Second, the manifold nature of the problems discussed above would, on the surface, suit the rhetoric of localism and its promotion of TSOs as ideal coordinating agents. Their responsiveness and connection at a community level produces services tailored to the needs of deprived individuals or communities, in a way that the state is supposedly unable to do (e.g. Davies and Pill, 2011). Yet, most decisions, affecting the functioning of local institutions and the lives of people in the community, are taken centrally without much participation at local level (cuts, sanctions, changes to the welfare system). Growing number of foodbanks, reduced law centres and advice organisations under pressure simply reflect a reaction to the negative consequences of austerity rather than autonomous community initiatives and empowerment.

Third, the explosion in the number of foodbanks in the UK is not a random and coincidental development. It illustrates the sorts of local action that emerge when localism is centrally imposed, devoid of participation and politically motivated to justify severe cuts in public spending. Despite the crucial role foodbanks play in providing a lifeline in the absence of alternatives, beneficiaries felt shame and disempowered for needing assistance from foodbanks rather than being empowered.

Finally, the services of advocacy organisations such as law centres and citizens' advice can be considered empowering at varying levels. At least in our sample, the issue of stigma was more or less confined to those areas of the voluntary sector that provide support for basic needs. There was little stigma attached to seeking advice from Law Centres or charities such as Citizens' Advice Bureaux, for example. This is possibly because they provide information to their clients about their rights (e.g. benefit entitlement and procedures of appeal) and represent their cases incorporating individual, legal and other technical criteria. To the extent that advocacy services solve adverse and unfair welfare decisions by local authorities by getting benefits reinstated, they offer a more viable route to socio-economic recovery. In other words, advice and advocacy organisations are able to potentially provide assistance that could lead to more long-term stability, which in turn could lead to greater empowerment.

Conclusions

Since the 2008 financial crisis, the conditions for the socio-economically vulnerable have worsened in the UK as a result of austerity policies affecting public spending and welfare protection. Welfare reforms have focused on cost containment alongside a retreat of the state in service provision. The third sector has partially filled the vacuum. A fragile labour market combined with a retreating and increasingly more punitive welfare state has left many facing a double crisis of insecurity. Voluntary and charitable organisations, particularly those providing support for basic needs, practical advice and legal assistance, have been crucial in addressing this ongoing crisis.

Using the framework of austerity localism, in this article we have examined the political ambitions to partially substitute state-administered welfare provision with the services of the Third Sector, especially charities providing some of the most basic needs. Our data has been situated in contrast to the prevailing political rhetoric around empowerment on the basis of evidence gathered from three locations in England and Wales amongst voluntary sector organisations and individuals accessing help from these organisations. The narratives of the participants clearly show that in contrary to this rhetoric, those charities tasked with supporting basic needs such as food are not capable of empowerment because of a) the shame and stigma that our participants associated with using such services b) the inability of these charities to provide regular and universal support to all who need it.

Advice and advocacy organisations, on the other hand, play an empowering role by helping their users to navigate through the ongoing complex changes in the welfare system. Yet, the rhetoric of austerity localism glosses over multiple difficulties faced by these organisations, such as funding cuts and rising demand for wider services. The potential for empowerment remains limited in the presence of these difficulties. The result is, notwithstanding those who can access help, the increased threat of significant social exclusion for those finding it difficult to find work, obtain some form of social security from the welfare state, or access support from the third sector.

The political landscape in which the third sector has been obliged to operate has restricted both its ability to cover the gaps in provision caused by austerity and the rolling back of the state,

and the ability for the third sector to empower its users. This ultimately results in an increase in generalised insecurity as more people feel that they have fewer places to turn for support, rather than an empowering and empowered third sector, as recent governments have claimed.

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