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Could this local experiment be the start of a national transformation?

George Monbiot

One London borough has been bringing people together to work, socialise and dream. The results are extraordinary

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If there is hope, it lies here, in the most deprived borough in London. Barking and Dagenham has shocking levels of unemployment, homelessness, teenage pregnancy, domestic violence and early death. Until 2010, it was the main stronghold of the British National party. Its population turns over at astonishing speed: every year, about 8% of residents move out. But over the past year it has started to become known for something else: as a global leader in taking back control.

Since the second world war, councils and national governments have sought to change people's lives from the top down. Their efforts, during the first 30 years of this period at least, were highly

effective, creating public services, public housing and a social safety net that radically improved people's lives.

But they had the unintended consequence of reducing our sense of agency, our social skills and mutual aid. Now, in the age of austerity, state support has been withdrawn, leaving many people with the worst of both worlds: neither the top-down protection of government nor the bottom-up resilience of the community it replaced. I believe we still need strong state support and well-financed public services. But this is not enough. The best antidote to the rising tide of demagoguery and reaction is a politics of belonging based on strong and confident local communities.

Those who study community life talk about two kinds of social network: bonding and bridging. Bonding networks are those created within homogeneous groups. While they can overcome social isolation, they can also foster suspicion and prejudice, while limiting opportunities for change. Bridging networks bring people from different groups together. Research suggests that they can reduce crime and unemployment and, by enhancing community voices, improve the quality of government.

After routing the BNP, which had taken 12 of 51 seats in 2006, Labour councillors in Barking and Dagenham saw that it wasn't enough to target people's needs and deliver isolated services. They wanted to move from paternalism to participation. But how?

Just as the council began looking for ideas, the Participatory City Foundation, led by the inspiring Tessy Britton, approached it with a plan for an entirely different system, developed after nine years of research into how bridging networks form. Nothing like it had been attempted by a borough before. The council realised it was taking a risk. But it helped to fund a £7m, five-year experiment, called Every One, Every Day.

Researching successful community projects across the world, the foundation discovered a set of common principles. Typically, they demand little time or commitment from local people, and no financial cost. They are close to people's homes, open to everyone, and designed to attract talent rather than to meet particular needs. They set up physical and visible infrastructure. And rather than emphasising novelty - the downfall of many well-intentioned schemes - they foster simple projects that immediately improve people's lives. The foundation realised that a large part of the budget would need to be devoted to evaluation, to allow the plan to adapt almost instantly to residents' enthusiasm.

They launched Every One, Every Day in November 2017, opening two shops (the first of five) on high streets in Barking and Dagenham. The shops don't sell anything but are places where people meet, discuss ideas and launch projects. The scheme has also started opening "maker spaces", equipped with laser cutters and other tools, sewing machines and working kitchens. These kinds of spaces are usually occupied by middle-class men but, so far, 90% of the participants here are women. The reason for the difference is simple: almost immediately, some of the residents drew a line on the floor, turning part of the space into an informal creche, where women take turns looking after the children. In doing so, they overcame one of the biggest barriers to new businesses and projects: affordable childcare.

I visited the old printers' warehouse in Thames Road, Barking, that the scheme is turning into a gigantic new workshop where people can start collaborative businesses in areas as diverse as

food, clothing and renewable energy (it will be launched with a festival on 16 March). Already, the experiment has catalysed a remarkable number of projects set up spontaneously by residents.

There are welcoming committees for new arrivals to the street, community potluck meals, cooking sessions and street lunches. There's a programme to turn boring patches of grass into community gardens, play corners and outdoor learning centres. There's a bee school and a chicken school (teaching urban animal husbandry), sewing and knitting sessions, places for freelance workers to meet and collaborate, computing and coding workshops, storytelling for children, singing sessions and a games cafe. A local football coach has started training people in the streets. There's a film studio and a DIY film festival too, tuition for spoken-word poets and a scheme for shutting streets to traffic so children can play after school. Local people have leapt on the opportunities the new system has created.

Talking to residents involved in these projects, I kept hearing the same theme: "I hated this place and wanted to move out. But now I want to stay." A woman in Barking told me that "getting out and socialising is very hard when you're unemployed", but the local shop has "massively improved my social life". Now her grandad and mum, who were also isolated, come in as well. Another explained that, before the community shop opened in Dagenham, all her friends were in other boroughs and she felt afraid of local people, especially "the young hoodies". Now she has local friends with origins all over the world: "I no longer feel intimidated by the young guys round here, because I know them ... It's been the best year of my adult life." Another, a black woman who had lived in fear of the BNP's resurgence, told me: "This is hope at last. Hope for my generation. Hope for my grandchildren."

There's a long way to go. Four thousand of the borough's 200,000 people have participated so far. But the rate of growth suggests it is likely to be transformative. The council told me the programme had the potential to reduce demand for social services as people's mental and physical health improves. Partly as a result, other boroughs and other cities are taking an interest in this remarkable experiment.

Perhaps it's not the whole answer to our many troubles. But it looks to me like a bright light in a darkening world.

. George Monbiot is a Guardian columnist

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