

Convening question:

What needs to be done to adjust our organisational models, systems and ways of working to serve better the common interests and protect the well-being of all?

Community Engagement in the Social Eco-System Dance
Eileen Conn

Amongst the many changes, we need to develop a new view of relations between the two human social systems of the organised world and the community. This will enable us to see and recognise that the currently invisible, 'below-the-radar' community system (part of the Commons) is distinct and different from the dominant organised world. This will help to see how to adjust organisational systems to move from the dominance of programme delivery to collaborative working within and between the two systems.

The theory and model of 'the Social Eco-System Dance' (SESD) offers a new lens. It explains some of why life can be very tough at the place where community action (the *horizontal peer* system) interacts with the organised work world (the *vertical hierarchical* system: which includes public agencies and the voluntary sector/charities with staff). The two systems dance to very different tunes. Generally the *horizontal* world, as a separate system with its own distinct organisational dynamics, is invisible to the *vertical* world. Lack of awareness of this makes it painful for both and often seriously interferes in the effectiveness of their interactions.

Using a complex systems perspective, the SESD model gives a new additional way of seeing this. It provides more ways of understanding how the dance might be adjusted gradually through '*adjacent possible*' steps to enable people in each system to work together, and allow effective collaborative ways of working to emerge, serving the common good more effectively. Nurturing relationships, and systems leading to trust, are a key to this.

The theory has arisen from practical work in the *space of possibilities* between the two systems, and is outlined in the paper 'Community Engagement in the Social Eco-System Dance' (link below). A large well of enthusiasm, goodwill and potential contributions exists, 'below the radar', in the form of an energy wave (see video link below) in the community *horizontal peer* system. This significant source of local knowledge and wisdom – part of the Commons - is very neglected and suppressed by the policy making process.

Sensitive new processes are needed to tap into this significant source of local knowledge and wisdom. Public agencies tend to 'harness' this energy, instrumentalising it and divorcing it from its life source. The voluntary sector approach is similar, and needs to develop new ways of offering support.

Public agencies are not equipped to engage effectively with this dynamic energy and knowledge source, nor to utilise the collaborative potential it offers. Staff are employed to deliver programmes, requiring different styles from collaboration with local people. Collaboration needs an awareness of the different dynamics of the two *vertical* and *horizontal* systems, encouraging positive working relations to enable the confidence and trust necessary for genuine partnership between the different systems.

The *adjacent possible* approach offers a way of making progress, but this needs awareness by staff (and the line managers) who are in direct interaction with the community. They, and active residents, need tailor-made training and support in navigating these turbulent waters for evolutionary change in working styles. The working practices which emerge from this collaborative way of working are probably the same or consistent with those outlined in examples of practices relevant to the Commons. But to achieve them, and ensure they are rooted, the *horizontal peer* system interacting with the *vertical hierarchical* system has to be made visible and acknowledged, and its organisational dynamics understood.

How to find out more:

* YouTube clip on the *horizontal* community energy wave and its distinction from the *vertical* organised world of matter - <http://www.socialreporters.net/?p=455>

* YouTube clip applying the model to community organising & digital social media - http://youtu.be/3Cq_TsuB6WM

* Submission to the House of Commons enquiry into the Big Society, using the model to show the impact of conflating the *vertical* and *horizontal* systems into one system - <http://tinyurl.com/6345I5j>

* Submission to the Greater London Authority review of community involvement in planning at neighbourhood level in the light of the Big Society and the new Localism Act, using the model to identify some of the cultural changes in working style and practices needed to make the system more collaborative - <http://tinyurl.com/soc-eco-system-dance-planning>

* The theory and model are explained in full with diagrams in the paper on 'Community Engagement in the Social Eco-System Dance' which is available here: <http://tinyurl.com/social-eco-system-dance-paper> and is on the TSRC website <http://www.tsrc.ac.uk/Research/BelowtheRadarBtR/CommunityEngagementandtheSocialEcosystemDan/ta/bid/827/Default.aspx>

* Further articles and books are listed in the references in the paper.

* The paper is published in the book 'Moving Forward with Complexity', which contains a number of other authors' papers on the application of complex systems approaches to a variety of organisational matters: [http://emergentpublications.com/\(S\(qxgarqfj4flbd0we2pft2ili\)\)/catalog_detail.aspx?Value=83](http://emergentpublications.com/(S(qxgarqfj4flbd0we2pft2ili))/catalog_detail.aspx?Value=83)

Author Eileen Conn has been an active local resident of Peckham in SE London for many years, and in parallel a senior civil servant in Whitehall focusing on the management & development of the Government system. Her theory on how organisations (*vertical hierarchical* system) interact with community activity (*horizontal peer* system) has arisen from that dual experience. The model is in continuing development, and queries and comments are welcomed.

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