

Rustlings among the grassroots? The need to listen:



**Report of a Migration Learning Exchange
on Community Organizing**

Introduction

'I'm not racist, but. . .' – how often is this heard in local communities on both sides of the Atlantic? And it's true; people are not necessarily racist when they express anxieties and uncertainties about the pace of change and how it is seen to be impacting on their local area. This is the reality that community organizers are facing whether in Oregon (USA) or in Hull (UK). It is the challenge that encouraged Unbound Philanthropy, The Atlantic Philanthropies and The Social Change Initiative to support a Migration Learning Exchange (MLE) in July 2017.

Hope not Hate (hopenothate.org.uk) hosted the trans-Atlantic exchange in London. The topic was set as 'Engaging with Marginalized Communities: Challenging Comfort Zones'. Hope not Hate CEO, Nick Lowles describes the organization as established to offer a positive antidote to the politics of hate. Its objective is to identify a *'more positive and engaged way of doing anti-Fascism'*. In this context community organizing is a natural fit, ably supported by first class research and intelligence. Hope not Hate doesn't hesitate to name individuals and political groups that seek to expand their influence through peddling fear. Right-wing Fascism and Islamist extremism are equally fair game to be called out; however, the objective of *'making the community feel different about themselves'* remains a priority.



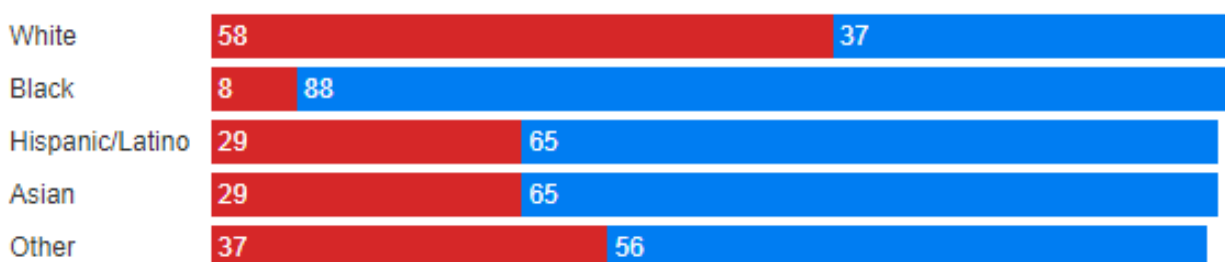
Community outreach takes place in those communities that have borne the brunt of post-industrial decline and feelings of marginalization. Merthyr Tydfil (Wales), Luton and the West Midlands are examples of where communities that feel 'left behind' can sometimes blame immigration for social and economic problems instead of engaging with the real causes. Local feelings of alienation are understandable; piling the blame on to 'others' in the community, just because they are different, is not.

A US Perspective

Visiting US community organizers brought experience from New York and Los Angeles, as well as from Tennessee, Oregon, Michigan, Nebraska and Washington DC. They outlined the diversity at both state and national level, while acknowledging that a lack of confidence in the future resulted in older, whiter and more poorly educated voters across the country swinging to support President Trump. This was particularly evident in the last ten days of the 2016 Presidential campaign. The Trump emphasis on trade, jobs and immigration resonated with voters that had experienced a shift away from living wage employment. A shift that has been paralleled by the fall in trade union membership (from 35% in the early 1970's to 12.5% in 2017).

Race

■ Republican ■ Democrat



Source: [Exit poll data via The New York Times](#) [Get the data](#)

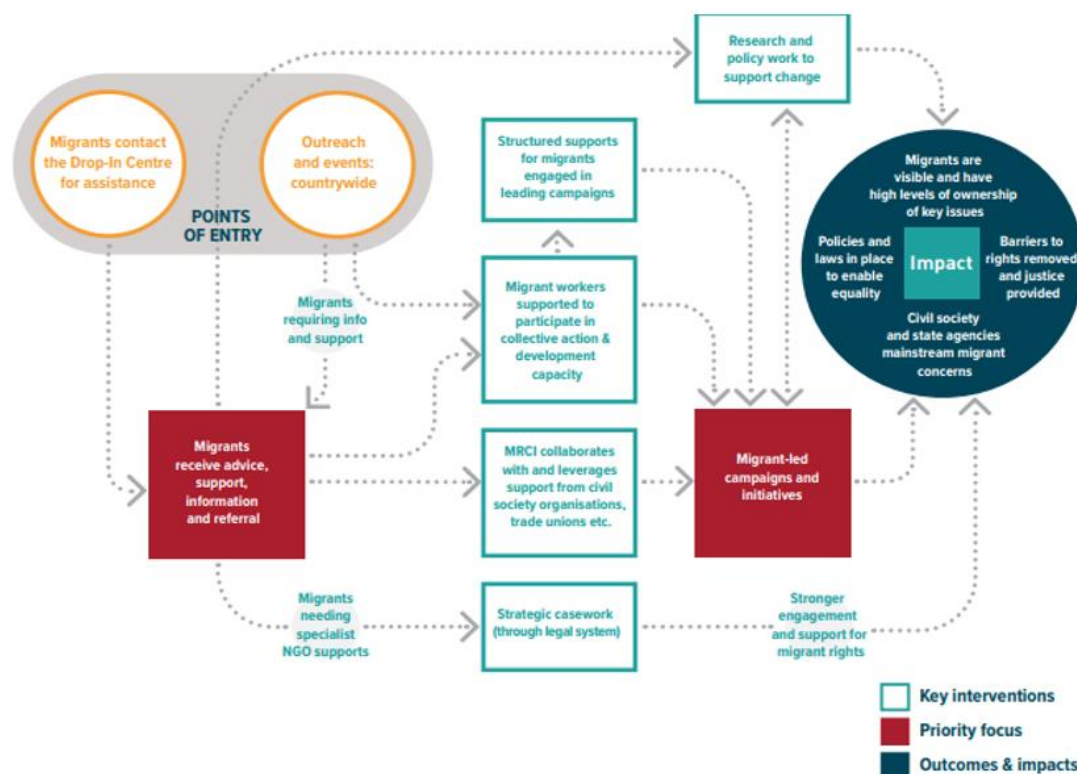
Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Ideologues advising the Trump campaign were successful in painting migrants as 'other', resulting in a spike in hate crimes and increased levels of detentions and arrests of migrants under the Trump presidency. One community organizer in San Diego (California) described as being on the frontline of the immigration debate, with the second largest Iraqi population in the country. The issue for her was the dehumanizing of the local Muslim population in the current political climate. A colleague from Oregon focused on the core challenge of how to talk with the white, working class community without sacrificing a race/gender/immigrant lens.

The Contribution of Community Organizing

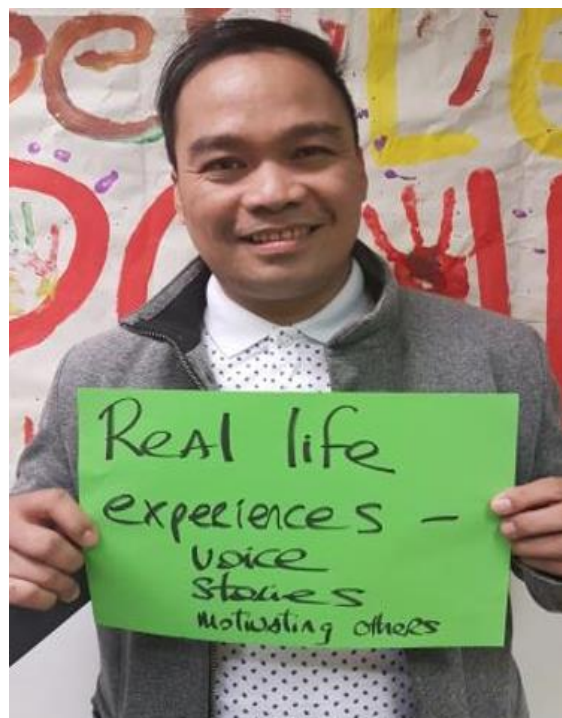
Introducing an Irish perspective, Helen Lowry (Community Development Coordinator, Migrant Rights Centre of Ireland – mrci.ie) argued the importance of winning the critical participation of migrants themselves through a combination of providing frontline services, policy advocacy and direct-action campaigning. This approach is encapsulated below –

Theory of change



It recognizes that migrants themselves have the right to participate in decision-making and structures that affect their lives, building critical awareness and participation. There is also a need to develop skills, knowledge, leadership and the experience of collective action to enhance a sense of power. Since 2006, MCRI has worked with over 6,000 undocumented migrants, establishing the Justice for Undocumented (JFU) campaign in 2010 to reach out to the estimated 20,000-26,000 undocumented migrants in Ireland.

Making the often invisible, visible, is particularly important. Storytelling focuses on 'The Story of Me'; 'Of Us' and 'Of Now'. A recent example saw undocumented care workers taking 'selfies' with the people that they care for –



It is essential to take the time to invest in relationship-building, rooted in a sense of trust and mutuality. This work requires late night and weekend meetings, one-to-one confidential discussions, welcome events, time for preparation, debriefs and reflection, as well as repeated text messages. Empty seats at meetings, mistakes, disappointment and the courage to talk to unusual/powerful/potential hostile audiences are also par for the course.

Engaging in Uncomfortable Conversations

Tom Godwin (Hope not Hate) offered learning drawn from the 'Deep Canvassing' approach developed by the LGBTQI movement in Los Angeles (USA) (thecampaignworkshop.com/deep-canvassing). The objective is to build rapport with, and figure out what's relevant for someone who disagrees with your position in an attempt to have a meaningful conversation and hopefully shift their thinking. This takes time and a genuine curiosity about what people think, and why. Hope not Hate held post-Brexit meetings across England with the aim of listening to people to gain a greater understanding of their opinions and priorities. It was found that local events are more effective if they are organized in partnership with a known local organization or group. Tom suggested that people generally appreciate the opportunity to talk freely about issues, and are open to changing their views, but discussion needs to be conversational in tone rather than hectoring or preaching a line. Research support can ensure an informed approach to local issues and anxieties, with organizers being well briefed in advance. Tom reflected – *"We can't kid ourselves about where people sit on immigration and Islamophobia. . . Being a bridge builder can be exhausting"*. However, positive stories carried in the local press are an effective way of countering negative narratives.



Rolling out Conversations on a National Basis

Hope not Hate is working with British Future (britishfuture.org) to roll out a National Conversation on Immigration across Britain and Northern Ireland over the current year. This initiative will complement the Westminster Parliament Home Affairs Committee Immigration Inquiry. Citizens' Panels are being organized in 60 towns and cities to ask people what they think about immigration and the immigration system. This is being supported by thematic conversations, as well as with an on-line survey and opinion polling. Sunder Katwala, CEO British Future, introduced his organization as a non-partisan think tank, that involves people in open conversations about identity, migration and integration. The objective is to engage with people who are anxious about cultural identity and economic prospects in Britain, as well as those who feel confident about the future, to identify workable solutions for Britain to be a country that its people want to live in.

Although immigration has always been a subject of debate in the UK, this was sharpened during the Brexit Referendum (2016) and honed by campaigners on the 'leave' side of the argument (often through deliberate misrepresentations) -



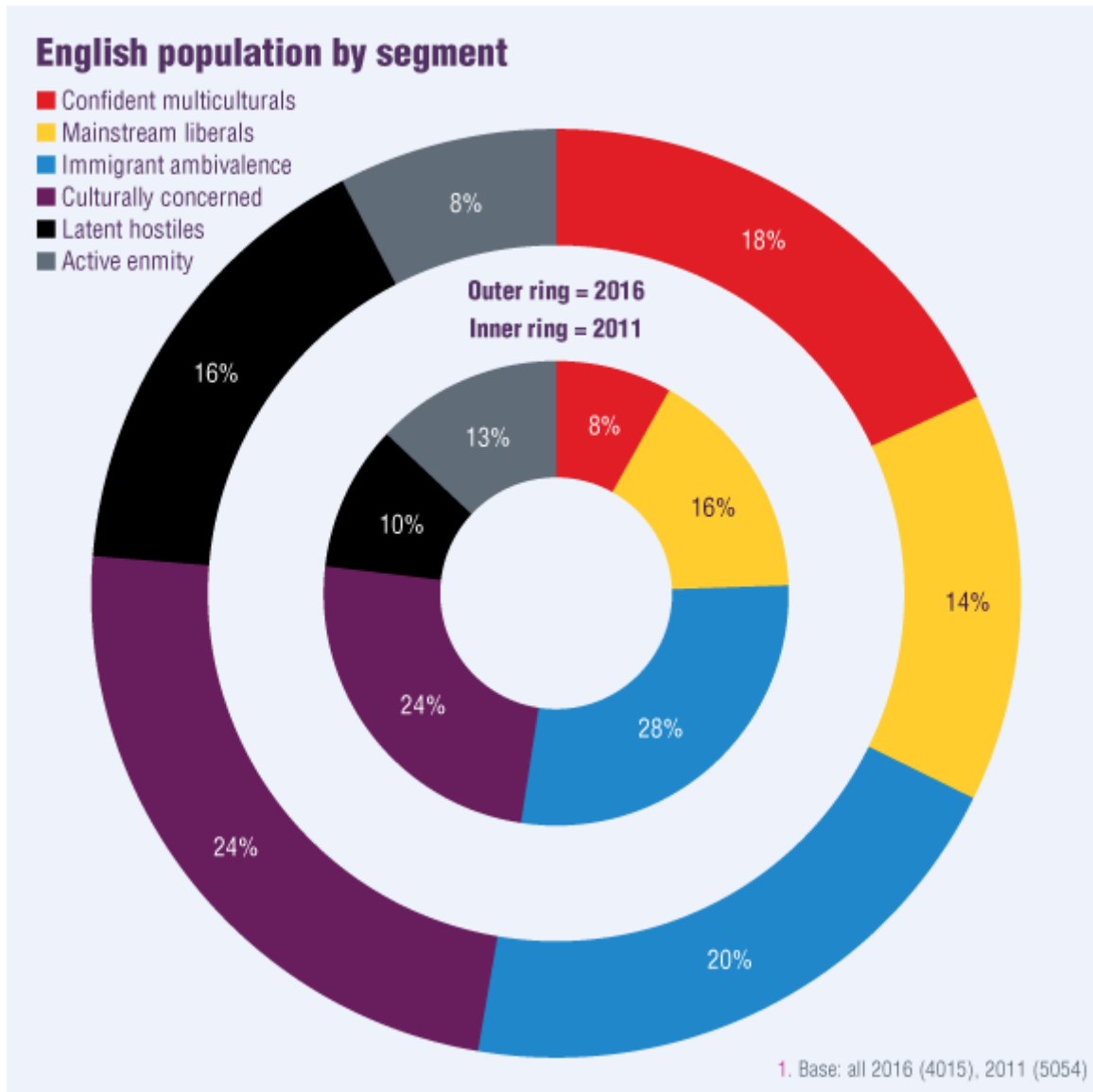
The poster warns against immigration by showing refugees in Slovenia in 2015 [UKIP]

British Future carried out polling in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum result which showed that 84% of respondents felt that the current EU-born population in the UK should be allowed to remain, although 66% wished to see a reduction in unskilled immigrants. The current drivers of anxiety over immigration in the UK were identified as political mistrust; economic anxieties and a sense of cultural fragmentation. The challenge is to replace a 'them' and 'us' perspective with a sense of the 'new us' – moving on together.

The importance of understanding the hopes and fears held by the 'anxious middle' was re-iterated, with reference being made to the segmented opinion polling that Hope not Hate supported in 2011 and 2016. This revealed a nation split into six 'tribes', expressing very different outlooks and attachments. Two 'tribes' – *confident multiculturals* and *mainstream liberals* – were positive about the impact of migration and social change, as well as about Britain's future. But they represented less than a quarter of the sample. At the other end of the spectrum, two other 'tribes' – *latent hostiles* and *active enmity* – held deep seated fears about the direction of change and the impact of immigration. The majority of people floated between these two extremes, again clustered into two 'tribes' – *immigration ambivalents* and *culturally concerned*. The former includes insecure working class people who are worried about the impact of immigration on their life opportunities; with the latter tending to be more affluent, but troubled about the impact of immigration on British culture and identity.

The 2016 survey results suggest that there is increasing optimism, with respondents being more supportive of action against racial and religious hate speech. Whilst there are still major anxieties, the vast majority of the British people believe that it is wrong to stigmatize a whole religious group, such as Muslims, for the actions of an extremist few. It is hoped that the National Conversation will provide greater opportunities for people to develop and express more nuanced positions towards immigration.



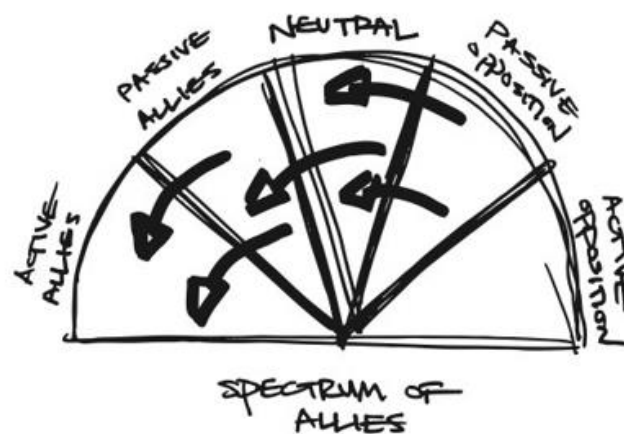


‘Calling People Out’ v. Starting Where They are At

The core values of community-based organizing are participation, social justice, equality, empowerment and full citizenship. Community development promotes social inclusion, seeking to identify the structural causes of disadvantage and exclusion (<http://bit.ly/2feYvze> and <http://bit.ly/2we0xUi>). Hope not Hate organizers explained the nature of their community-based work in the West Midlands, Wales and other priority areas. When intervening in a new area it is essential to map out the main issues; the nature of existing community organizing and current community leadership. Relationships need to be built and trust established on the basis of clarity and transparency about the contribution of Hope not Hate.

Outreach community contact is based on an awareness of the issues of interest and concern to local people, alongside openness to a multiplicity of activities. Music festivals and sporting events can be as effective in bringing people together as more formal discussions and training programmes. Examples were shared of working with young mothers around childcare issues and using community newsletters and social media to ensure communication. Building alliances with groups and individuals that share an inclusive community perspective is vital in establishing local credibility and reaching greater numbers of people. With a grounding of trust in place, it is then possible to develop activities that can 'bridge' with other communities that, in turn, may well entail having the 'uncomfortable' conversations about attitudes to refugees and migrants. Where there are existing relationships and a sense of mutual respect, there is more chance of effective listening and hearing what is being said.

Adopting the framing of a spectrum of allies, the aim is to move people from being in the passive opposition category in terms of inclusive communities, to being neutral – or where possible, to becoming initially passive, and then active, allies. This spectrum, however, is dynamic, and attention needs to ensure that the process does not reverse in a negative direction. This requires on-going assessment and reflection on community concerns and reactions. There is also the need to proactively identify those issues that can appeal to local communities on an inter-community basis; helping to develop campaigning around issues of a shared concern, where the outcomes can be seen as a 'win-win' scenario. Organizational networking with other allies will help to sustain inter-community relationships.



If the building of a progressive community consensus is the main objective, there is a need to balance this with 'calling out' and naming divisive elements in the active opposition category. Using its research capacity, Hope not Hate regularly exposes the illegal activities of extremist groups and the unsavoury messaging of extremist political candidates. It distinguishes between the anxieties and fears of local people and the politically motivated divisiveness of extremism.



Reflections from the US

Community organizing is a well-established tradition and approach in the USA, but was felt to be less data driven than is apparent from the UK work. A shared issue, however, is effective engagement with people at community level who may be antagonistic, or anxious, about the idea of inclusive communities. To counter this, it is important to celebrate what works in terms of making incomers feel welcome and ensuring effective community inclusion. In the words of one MLE participant – “*How do you lift up stories of impacted people to move the centre right?*” It was agreed that identifying shared issues is one strategy that has worked well.

The challenge of working with the ‘anxious middle’ should not blind activism to the importance of developing leadership and enhancing the visibility of immigrant and refugee groups themselves. This point was emphasized not only for the US, but also by Zrinka Bralo, CEO, Migrants Organise, UK (migrantsorganise.org), who advocated moving people from a charity model to a justice framing, with the emphasis on building collective power. Fears were expressed that both in the US and the UK there is a danger that those that are not white will always be perceived as the ‘*perpetual outsider*’; with this being even more acute in the case of Muslim communities. Migration needs to be seen as a natural phenomenon that applies globally; a point picked up by the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland when it linked the experience of undocumented Irish in the United States with undocumented foreign-born workers

in Ireland (<http://bit.ly/2urKINe>). The adoption of complementary approaches – building the leadership of new incoming communities; working with established communities and forging networks with progressive social coalitions – was agreed. There are models of progressive inclusion available from the Trade Union/Labor movement, with particular regard to thematic organizing which gives under-represented groups space, presence and voice. Insights can also be drawn from movements such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter. The intersectional value base of community organizing is vital, taking account of class, race, sexuality and gender as a means of “*advancing meaningful freedom for all*”. It is important to identify and build families of organizations around shared values and long-term vision. For this to work in practice there needs to be space and resources for experimentation and learning.

There was a recognition that the spread of nativism and regressive populism is a trans-national phenomenon, and as such, the question was posed “*What are the anti-hate models out there?*” Hope not Hate provides one important example that has potential for replication.

