This theme explores the reconfiguration and re-articulation of local civil society in the context of contemporary social and economic change. Community studies have suggested that smaller or weaker communities, across a range of geographical contexts, are ‘encapsulated’ by patterns of mobility through intersections of inequality and marginalisation; while contemporary studies of migration and mobility have indicated profound consequences for social cohesion in small communities. Recent research however, also points to the emergence of a nuanced landscape of civil society, differentiated by class, gender, ethnicity and geography, creating new inequalities of opportunity and outcome both within and between communities. Moreover, challenges to conventional understandings of ‘local civil society’ have come from the restructuring of collective engagement around; ‘communities of interest’, participation at a distance and virtual associations (through social media and ICT); and a reorientation towards translocal concerns.

However, the effects of these various dynamics ‘on the ground’ within different kinds of locality, and the implications for the practice of local civil society, are not so well understood. This is not just a gap in social science knowledge, but also a political limitation at a time when government policy (both at UK-level and in the devolved administrations) emphasizes localist strategies for ‘empowering’ communities and promoting voluntarism and active citizenship. While this ‘localism in action’ is significant and the empirical developments currently taking place across England and Wales can inform wider debates on civil society, economic development, and the spatial organisation of economic and social life, the formulation of localist policies from outdated understandings of local civil society amplifies the risk of unintended exclusionary and polarising outcomes.

Research in the theme will be informed by conceptual developments in sociology and human geography that have highlighted the contingency and relationality of communities. In particular, the concepts of ‘encapsulation’ and ‘place-framing’ will be employed to understand the material and discursive fixing of places in contexts of migration, gentrification and economic restructuring; whilst Savage et al.’s notion of ‘elective belonging’, Staeheli’s work on citizenship and community, and Painter’s discussion of the politics of the neighbour, will be drawn on in investigating the engagement of individuals with local civil society. The research will build on contextual data collection, conceptual development and scoping research as part of the Localities programme in WISERD phase one, as well as on previous research on local civil society and on migrant communities.

Projects

- Researching civic participation in Wales, in place and over time Robin Mann & Howard Davis (Bangor); October 2014 – September 2017
- Redefining local civil society in an age of global interconnectivity Mike Woods (Aberystwyth) & Jon Anderson (Cardiff); October 2016 – September 2018
- Migrants, minorities and engagement in local civil society Rhys Dafydd Jones (Aberystwyth), Stephen Drinkwater (Roehampton) & Andrew Thompson (South Wales); October 2015 – September 2017
- Spaces of new localism: stakeholder engagement and economic development in Wales and England Martin Jones (Sheffield) & Ian Rees Jones (Cardiff); October 2014 – September 2017

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