

**Organizational Challenges of Community Associations: Applying Nonprofit  
Research to Real World Problems**

**Margaret E. Harris**

**Emeritus Professor, Aston University, Birmingham, England and**

**Visiting Professor, Birkbeck, University of London**

**Author's Contact information:**

**Regular Mail Address: 42 Meadway, London, NW11 6PR**

**Telephone: +44 7860 907 779**

**Email: [m.e.harris@aston.ac.uk](mailto:m.e.harris@aston.ac.uk)**

**Key Words and phrases:**

**Community associations; nonprofit research; voluntary sector research;  
organizational problems; real world problems; organizational crisis; research  
dissemination; application of research to practice; explanatory theory;  
organizational change**

## **Organizational Challenges of Community Associations: Applying Nonprofit Research to Real World Problems**

### **Abstract**

*Can voluntary and nonprofit research be helpful for local community associations (CAs) seeking to respond to organizational challenges and problems? This paper builds on a study of an organizational crisis in an English CA to explore this question. The events which precipitated and prolonged the crisis seemed inexplicable to outside observers. Yet the study found that much of what occurred could be explained in the light of earlier theories and research. The paper concludes that voluntary and nonprofit scholarship, as well as generic organizational theories, has the potential to be helpful for community association members and activists in anticipating and responding to organizational problems. But scholars need to do more to disseminate existing research findings; to make them accessible and to adapt them to the distinctive needs and real world problems of community associations.*

## **Introduction: Community Associations and their Organizational Challenges**

In many countries, including the UK, the US and Australia, there are high expectations that community associations (CAs), as key elements in grassroots civil society, will strive to respond flexibly to changing environments and improve their organizational effectiveness (Onyx et al, 2012; Sirianni, 2009; Turner, 2001). Can voluntary and nonprofit scholarship help CAs to do this? Can it be of practical help to those who run, and participate in, community associations and who have to respond to their organizational problems and challenges?

A paper published 30 years ago (Knoke and Prenskey, 1984) suggested that generic organizational theories could be used to analyze the features of nonprofit and voluntary organizations. Here we return to this suggestion and explore the possible application of earlier scholarship – not only organizational theories but also nonprofit and voluntary sector scholarship - to the organizational challenges faced by community associations: a particular type of nonprofit or voluntary organization.

Nonprofit and voluntary sector scholarship published since the Knoke and Prenskey piece provides a plethora of concepts and theories about the organizational features of groups and associations which work at the local level (variously called ‘local associations’, ‘grassroots associations’ and ‘community associations’); see, for example, Cnaan et al, 2007; Milofsky, 2008; Smith, 2000. A dominant conceptual framework sees such associations (here called ‘community associations’ or ‘CAs’) as subject to organizational

stress and tension (Taylor, 2011); pulled between opposing organizational models or features. Tensions have been identified between building ‘bridging’ or building ‘bonding’ social capital (Putnam, 2000; Wollebaek and Selle, 2002); between a civic ethos and managerialism (Skocpol, 2003; Walker et al, 2011); between serving members or responding to a wider constituency (Netting, 2007; Tschirhart,2006); between participation and advocacy (Rochester, 2006); between service delivery and advocacy (Cairns et al, 2010; Smith, forthcoming); between representative democracy and direct democracy (Stadelman-Stetten and Freitag, 2011); and between the personal or informal world and the formal bureaucratic world (Billis, 1993; 2010).

Can this broad idea of organizational ‘tensions’ be of practical utility for individual CAs as they struggle to respond to their environments and improve their organizational effectiveness? Can it help them to understand better why they face the challenges they have? Does nonprofit scholarship, or organizational scholarship, offer any additional intellectual ‘tools’ which might help CAs to understand better their environments and their organizational challenges? CAs are, by their nature, small, local, self-funding entities which are unlikely to have access to the kinds of tailored education, training and consultancy which is available to larger and more formal nonprofits. But perhaps, nevertheless, CAs could be empowered by being offered access to some ideas and theories from scholarship which respond to their distinctive features and challenges? This possibility is explored in this paper by building on data and analysis generated in a study of crisis and conflict in one English CA.

The next section describes the CA case example; providing sufficient background to enable the reader to follow the subsequent argument of the paper. The case description is stripped of unnecessary detail since the main purpose of the paper is not so much to present an empirical case study for its own sake but to *build* on the case to explore the paper's starting question about whether earlier scholarship can be helpful or useful for CAs facing organizational challenges.

### **The Case Community Association and its Organizational Crisis**

Hilltop Association (HA) is an unincorporated membership association of residents in an English suburb. The Association was formed 100 years ago when housing in the area was first being built. The population of Hilltop is now about 5,000 households, a high proportion of which (about 2,000) pay the annual subscription to HA; although all residents can benefit from HA's services irrespective of whether they are formally current members.

HA is constitutionally independent; it has no statutory or other externally-imposed functions. It organizes social events, publishes a quarterly newsletter and acts as a watchdog in matters of concern to local residents such as roads, traffic, street trees, planning and design. There is an elected 'council' which is the governing body or board, and several sub-committees including a Land Use Planning Committee (LUPC). The latter has no formal authority in relation to public planning matters but the standing

orders of the HA make clear that the LUPC is expected to keep a watching brief on major planning proposals and consult and inform residents as appropriate.

The Hilltop area has been officially recognized as an area of historical and architectural importance which requires special measures to preserve its character. A constitutionally distinct Conservation Trust (CT) regulates all matters to do with physical changes within the area, alongside the regular governmental planning and national conservation authorities. Since this is a relatively small geographical area, there is often some overlap between membership of the boards of the CT and HA and their respective sub-committees and advisory groups.

As Hilltop is a designated conservation area, residents are mostly not permitted to make changes to the external appearance of their homes; a restriction which makes them especially sensitive to any proposals by other property owners in the area to make any changes to the local physical environment. In fact, it was a proposed physical change in a public area which precipitated a major organizational crisis within HA.

A prominent building in classical style in the central area of Hilltop had for long housed a public (that is, government-funded) school. In August 2008, proposals to extend the school – by erecting two buildings in a modern design at either side of the existing classical building - were approved by both the local governmental planning authority and the CT. When the approved plans became public knowledge, a long period of contention amongst Hilltop residents was set in motion. This was expressed overtly in e-discussion

lists and the local press, as well as informally between acquaintances within the local area. Some of the contention was about the aesthetics of the new buildings and their suitability for the location, but much of it centered on the role of the HA in the period preceding, and immediately following, the granting of formal planning permission. It appeared that the HA Council had had no foreknowledge of the proposed development prior to the granting of planning permission. It was therefore not able to avail itself of the usual rights of local residents to lodge comments to the planning authorities.

Late in 2010, the hoardings which had shielded the building work while it was in process were removed and public criticism and vociferous opposition to both the buildings and the HA were reignited as local residents saw the physical reality of earlier plans. At the HA Annual General Meeting in March 2011, a resolution highly critical of the HA's role in the proposals for the school extensions was passed. It "regretted" the failure of the HA Council "to ensure that there was full public awareness at an early stage of this major project and that residents' views were actively sought and properly represented [to the CT and local governmental planning authority]".

In response to the critical AGM resolution and in the light of ongoing public discussion and criticism about the school extension 'affair', the HA Council decided to commission research which would, in the first place, record and analyze the role of the HA in the period from early 2007 (when plans for the school extension were known to have been first sketched out by the building architects) and August 2008 when planning permission was granted following submission of detailed plans to the governmental planning

authorities. The HA aim was to have an independently-researched record of what occurred which would help counter rumors as well as the ill-feeling perpetuated locally by those rumors.

In addition to wanting an independently researched account of what happened during the crucial period leading up to the granting of planning permission for the school extension, the HA Council wanted the selected researcher to use the descriptive findings as a basis for suggestions about improving HA working practices in the future. Thus the research was expected to provide first, evidence-based descriptive reporting of a sequence of events; and second, suggestions for organizational change within HA. The author of this paper was commissioned by the HA Council to conduct the research (1).

### **Research Approach and Method**

Given the twin aims, the researcher and the HA Council agreed a two-stage approach to the study. Stage One would be to ascertain as far as possible what happened between 2007 and 2008; as well as what should have or might have happened according to formal statements of HA and the commentators and critics of the events. Stage Two would be to build on Stage one findings; to try to tease out why things happened the way they did, with a view to suggesting organizational changes for the future.

The HA Council undertook to provide the researcher with copies of all relevant documents, to respond openly to requests for further documents, and to facilitate the researcher contacting those who had expressed views or who were thought to have played



key roles during the period under examination. Thus data was collected from the following sources: a search of HA Council and Committee minutes and other internal documents; a search of reporting and commentary in print and electronic media; and semi-structured interviews with 12 key actors in HA governance in 2007 and 2008. In addition, an open invitation to Hilltop residents to submit written and documentary evidence directly to the researcher was made in local media and 20 people responded. As with the interviews, the open call for written and documentary evidence elicited data relevant to both Stages One and Two of the study. (Further details of data sources are provided in Table One.)

[Table One here]

Given local sensitivities and the damage already done to social cohesion, all those who provided information to the researcher (orally, electronically, or in hard copy) were given assurances about anonymity and confidentiality. Data collected were not shared beyond the providers of that data, except in a synthesized and anonymized format in the final research report presented to HA Council members.

At Stage One data collected from all sources were used to build a time-line of what had occurred in the period under study, distinguishing between undisputed and disputed timings and event occurrences. Having achieved a draft time line, the researcher referred to HA's own internal documents (including constitution and standing orders) to compare what appeared to have happened with what should have happened – according to formal

statements. This provided a precursor to a wider examination of study informants' own views about what ideally *should* have happened from the beginning of 2007 forwards. The researcher used an open system of coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) interview transcripts and the submitted 'evidence' to identify points of agreement and disagreement about what should have, or could have, happened.

The HA Council wanted to move beyond analysis of what 'went wrong' in the past; they wanted the research to *build on* the findings about what happened and what should have happened, in order to provide suggestions for organizational change in the future. To achieve this, the researcher drew at Stage Two on the tradition of linking academic scholarship with the world of practice which is reflected in literature on 'action research', 'collaborative research' and 'engaged scholarship' (Keleman and Bansai, 2002; Milofsky, 2000; Van de Ven, 2007). In this tradition, the researcher does not stand as an observer who is totally detached from the world of practice, but stands *alongside practitioners* in the search for knowledge and understanding of practical situations, events and problems; adhering to the usual rules of systematic scholarly enquiry while also consulting with practitioners about emerging findings (Cairns et al, 2007; Nyden and Wiewel, 1992). The ultimate aim is for those experiencing specific problems to have 'tools' to tackle, even resolve, those problems (Berg, 2001).

Thus, the researcher took a 'problem-solving' approach; one which seeks explanation in theories, as a precursor to developing usable knowledge and practical responses to organizational problems (Billis, 1984; Lindblom and Cohen, 1979; Schuman and

Abramson, 2000; Van Wart, 2013). The knowledge generated in this way was presented to the HA Council in the researcher's report. That report, with no alterations, was then published by the HA Council and subject to in-depth discussions by the Council as well as to a local consultation process. From this basis, the HA developed a staged implementation plan for change.

In searching for explanations which could be usable by HA, initial boundaries to literature searches were set by focusing on bodies of theory broadly applicable to *organizational aspects* of community associations and other kinds of nonprofits and voluntary organizations. Within those boundaries, literature was sought which could help *to explain* the findings at Stage One. This reflects a 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) approach to knowledge-building in which appropriate literature and explanation is sought *after* data collection, rather than as part of initial hypothesis-generation or a deductive reasoning process. Within the time and resource limits of the study, this approach (as will be shown later in this paper) proved sufficient to provide the HA Council with a number of practical possibilities for future action from which they were able to choose those which they felt most appropriate for priority attention.

### **Stage One Study Findings**

Stage One of the study was mainly concerned with developing a time-line of critical events in the period under review. Additionally, and in order to provide a basis for Stage Two of the study – the search for scholarly explanations of what happened and possible

responses for the future – the descriptive and qualitative data collected about ‘who knew what and when’ was grouped thematically using a coding process widely adopted in ‘grounded theory’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) research methodology. Data texts were marked with a series of codes; the codes were then grouped into categories and themes.

Much of the data collected referred to the role and behavior of the HA Land Use Planning Committee (LUPC); as well as to the links between the LUPC and the governance structure of the HA (its Council). This section sets out the four themes which emerged from the analysis as being major contributors to the eventual organizational crisis (3). Illustrative quotes from interviews and written submissions are included in italics.

Theme One: Both formal and informal (unrecorded) meetings:

Between April and July 2008, the LUPC held three formally constituted committee meetings at two of which information was presented by the architects for the school extension. In addition, at least two other meetings took place in that period, variously described as “*informal*” and “*really just a chat with the architect*”. Three or four members of the LUPC were present at these latter along with a member of the architectural team. However no record of these informal meetings was kept by the LUPC members present because they “*were supposed to be friendly and people hate taking minutes*”. So the fact that the meetings took place at all was not formally recorded.

Whereas LUPC committee minutes were available to all members of the committee, what took place at the informal meetings was known only to the small number of people present. All the same, these unrecorded and informal meetings are alluded to in general

terms in the architects' planning application to the local governmental authority where they are included as part of the count of the number of "*consultations with the HA*".

When the proposals became public knowledge and questions were asked about who in HA had been involved in consultations with the architects, it was not possible to give a quick and clear answer. Confusion about accountability fostered rumors and local anger.

Theme Two: Limited sharing of information and consultation:

The architects commissioned by the school made contact with the LUPC in April 2008 and shared with them a broad outline of their proposal; yet the LUPC did not refer the matter to the full HA Council until August 2008 when full formal proposals had already been submitted to CT and the local governmental planning authorities. Some of the data indicated that some dominant members of LUPC were keen to avoid any public discussion of the proposals before they were submitted officially to the governmental planning authorities. Other data pointed to members of LUPC simply being unaware that it would be appropriate to inform the HA Council of the proposals for the school development at an early stage. One reason suggested for this was that they failed to anticipate the importance of the issue for residents: "*I don't think they realized what a big thing this would be.*"

However, several interviewees and submitters of evidence thought that the failure to share information was due to ignorance; that members of LUPC were not aware of what their formal responsibilities were as a committee of the HA. "*Although there are reporting requirements by the committees set out in the governing documents [of HA]*

*they were never followed.*” Nor were committee members conscious of the boundaries of their authority as a committee, nor of the fact that the formal goals of HA included an obligation to consult residents on major land use planning issues. As one interviewee put it: *“They were doing things and making decisions which involved the community without consulting the community.”* Indeed it was suggested in written evidence that the LUPC felt *“that it did not even have an obligation to report to the Council, that it was a separate committee with its own powers independent of the HA.”*

Theme Three: An uncritical approach to professionals:

Alongside the disinclination of LUPC members to share information, was a passive approach to the information which they themselves received from the architects; *“unchallenging and sycophantic”* in the words of one interviewee and *“respectful of the architects’ reputation”* in the words of another. The LUPC took an uncritical approach as they learned about the developing proposals; indeed they were positively supportive of the proposals, even before they had seen site plans or anything other than early outline sketches. In effect, it was conveyed early on to the school’s architects that LUPC would be supportive of any proposals to extend the existing building. It was also conveyed to the architects that, in consulting the LUPC, the architects could see themselves as having consulted Hilltop Association as a whole.

Theme Four: Emphasis on friendship and consensus:

The data suggested that the LUPC at the time of the school ‘affair’ was operating in a way which emphasized not formal roles but rather loyalty to longstanding friendships and

(related to this) consensus in decision-making. *“Most of the Committee members have long term personal relationships and that obviates most of the formal business.”* In addition, there was a reluctance amongst long-standing members (many of whom had been officers of the HA for many years) to cede their positions to new members. As one interviewee put it: *“According to standing orders there is supposed to be circulation of membership of committees and the Council. But it gets overridden by resolutions. There is a feeling that you cannot get rid of people.”* This combination of an emphasis on friendship and friendliness combined with a relaxed approach to rules, apparently made it extremely difficult for new or different ideas to permeate into the practices of LUPC and any challenge to long standing practices was heavily discouraged. Thus, pressures for change from the environment beyond the committee’s own meetings were largely screened out.

On the face of it, the findings about the events during 2007 and 2008 justified the concerns of those who had been highly critical of the HA’s role in the period leading up to the granting of planning permission in August 2008. There had indeed been no consultation with residents beyond the members of LUPC. Moreover the Council of HA had not been formally informed about the developing proposals by its own committee; even though that committee had itself been informed about the plans and had had several meetings with the architects – both formal and unrecorded. Equally, there had been no attempt to anticipate Hilltop residents’ viewpoints on the development and advocate on their behalf accordingly. In fact, the data suggested that the LUPC had taken a supportive and collaborative approach in its relationship with the architects, giving them

no indication that they (LUPC) might not be reflecting the views of local residents or the governing body of HA. Moreover, important information was, for whatever reason, not made available to the HA Council until the planning proposals were, in any case, in the public arena and very close to consideration by the formal planning authorities.

Thus a major organizational crisis within a community association had been, the data suggested, precipitated by a small group of people who, in formal terms, were members of a sub-committee of the HA board; that is, a group with delegated authority from the governing body and a responsibility to report to that governing body. As the formal governing body of the HA, the Council was subsequently called to account by the member residents at an annual general meeting. Yet that Council, as a collectivity, had had no knowledge of the events concerned until after the date on which they could conceivably have taken action on behalf of Hilltop residents. The small group of people who did have foreknowledge of the proposals had neither shared that knowledge with anybody beyond their own group, nor sought to consult beyond their own group. They had, nevertheless, felt able to support the proposal, and to convey to the architects that they were doing so on behalf of HA.

### **Stage Two of the Study: Explaining the Crisis**

The data, obtained from multiple sources, about what happened in the period up August 2008 (Stage One of the study) formed the basis upon which the second stage of the project was built. The aim was to *explain* the roots of the crisis in order to help the HA to



develop structures, policy and processes which would – as far as possible – prevent a similar organizational crisis recurring. As outlined earlier, the researcher sought - in academic literature - explanations for why events occurred in the way that they did.

The qualitative data indicated that many residents of Hilltop had found the various pre-research accounts of what had happened inexplicable. They could not fathom what had motivated the LUPC members - unless it was some kind of conspiracy to conceal information. Yet the literature search at Stage Two indicated that the behavior of the LUPC and other HA officers could indeed be explained by reference to earlier research and theory. It was neither unprecedented nor totally unexpected when seen in the light of the corpus of literature relating to community associations, to other kinds of nonprofit organizations and to organizations more generally.

This section, then, provides indicative and illustrative citations to bodies of theory and knowledge which emerged as having explanatory power; as throwing light on the organizational crisis experienced by HA and, therefore, offering HA some possibilities for organizational changes to prevent a similar crisis in the future.

Generic organizational theories:

As anticipated by Knoke and Prenskey (1984), some findings from the case study reflected generic literature on organizational behavior. It pointed to phenomena which are common to many organizations, irrespective of ‘sector’. Thus theory about oligarchical

tendencies (Michels, 1962) and the way in which organizational legitimacy may be undermined by limited member participation and informal decision-making (Enjolras and Waldhal, 2008; Rothschild and Leach, 2007) provided an explanation for the found tendency of LUPC members to hold themselves out as acting on behalf of the HA even though they were in formal terms a sub-committee of the governing body. Similarly, theories about centrifugal tendencies in organizations also had explanatory power for the case findings. Parsons (1956:79) suggested more than 50 years ago that sub-units of organizations seem to exhibit ‘an inherent centrifugal tendency’ which he attributed to ‘pulls deriving from the personalities of the participants, from the special adaptive exigencies of their particular job situations, and possibly from other sources’. The case study findings did indeed suggest that, over a period of years, the LUPC had become more and more organizationally distant, even detached, from the board of HA to which, in theory, it was directly accountable.

#### Organizational Features of Community Associations:

As outlined in the opening section of this paper, the idea of ‘tensions’ between opposing organizational features runs through much of the literature on community associations. This idea proved useful for explaining the study findings, although not in a directly causal fashion.

Whereas for many CAs, organizational tensions of the kind referred to in earlier literature may be a source of challenge, it seemed that HA officers had largely avoided these kinds

of tensions by operating on one side only of the various continua. It seemed from the data that until the crisis occurred, LUPC operated on the basis that informality (rather than formality), bonding (rather than bridging), participation (rather than advocacy) and individual (rather than group) goals were self-evident priorities. LUPC members did *not* in practice experience opposing pulls or tensions – contrary to the literature. Instead of having to meet the challenge of managing tensions, the tensions were simply avoided.

However, a tension between informality and formality, between bonding and bridging, between participation and advocacy, or between the interests of individuals and the collectivity – all of these were indeed experienced by key actors in and around HA *after* September 2008 when news of the planning proposals became public. They were at the heart of the organizational crisis which developed although prior to that, they were not readily observable within HA. Paradoxically, then, the earlier literature points to the possibility that the crisis could partly be explained by a drive to *avoid* the kinds of organizational tensions which earlier literature suggest are inherent in the very nature of community associations.

#### Volunteering and Volunteer Behavior:

The LUPC members were all volunteers and some of their behavior can be explained by reference to earlier literature on volunteer roles and behavior. The latter points, for example, to the limited capacity or willingness of volunteers to interact effectively with paid staff or those with specialist or professional expertise (Kreutzer and Jager, 2011).

Thus the LUPC's failure to engage critically with the architects' proposals could be explained by the fact that, as volunteers, they had neither the time, nor the professional experience, nor agreed procedures for monitoring effectively the architects' designs as they were developing over the summer of 2008. They did try to ensure that the architects attended the three regular meetings of the committee in April, May and July but they were dependent on the architects to present plans in a format accessible to lay people and to fully disclose the implications. Although the LUPC committee members were, formally, responsible for scrutinizing land use plans on behalf of the HA Council (and ultimately the local residents), their status as volunteers and non-experts meant that there were real limitations on how far they were able in practice to carry out these responsibilities when faced with a fast-changing situation in which they needed to interact with paid professional staff.

Another study finding which was explained by the volunteering literature was the emphasis placed by LUPC on satisfying their own interests and preferences. Volunteer management theories emphasize the necessity to ensure that the preferences and interests of individuals are satisfied in order to ensure their continued commitment to volunteering (Hustinx, 2010). Yet that body of research also points to the difficulties of simultaneously meeting the needs of individual volunteers and meeting the goals of the organizations which involve them (Taylor, et al, 2008). It seems that in the case association, a contributor to the eventual crisis was that the needs of individual volunteers were indeed given higher priority than the formal goals of HA.

Informal relationships in voluntary organizations:

Perhaps related to their status as volunteers, as well as to the fact that members of the committee knew each other as friends and neighbors and had long established links with other local organizations, was the found tendency for the behavior of LUPC members to follow the behavioral norms of informal relationships. Thus although the committee members were dealing with a large scale public project fronted by a professional architectural firm, they nevertheless behaved in ways which assumed mutual trust – even friendship - between the parties (Anheier and Kendall, 2002). They were averse to any possibility of confrontation or conflict or even probing questioning of the architects. And when it became necessary for the committee to meet with the architects between formal planned meetings of LUPC, a small self-selected group volunteered for this task and did not make a record of what took place as they did not, apparently, see the meetings as being anything other than an informal friendly chat.

This tendency within community associations to put a high value on ‘friendly relations’ rather than formal goals and responsibilities has been remarked on by earlier researchers (Billis, 1993; Bulmer, 1986; Milofsky, 2008) and it suggests that the LUPC was acting in line with other CAs, rather than intentionally avoiding responsibilities as had been thought by some observers. In the HA case this informality in relationships was to some extent organizationally functional because it facilitated the kind of flexibility and responsiveness to changing and challenging situations which has been noted in earlier

literature as a distinctive and valued feature of small local organizations (Smith, 2000). But it had disadvantages in terms of organizational effectiveness, as later became apparent, because it allowed members of the committee to lose sight of the fact that they were *not* simply a group of friends dealing with another group of trusted friends. They were also people charged formally by the governing body of a community association to take a strategic view of the interests of all residents of a local area and to safeguard the appearance of their neighborhood.

#### Social Capital Theory:

The found emphasis on meeting individual interests, fostering friendly relationships, and avoiding conflict also reflects, and can be explained by, earlier research which distinguishes between ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ behavior (Putnam, 2000). ‘Bonding’ of this kind can be functional for ensuring the ongoing commitment of volunteers but simultaneously dysfunctional when it inhibits the building of relationships and networks (‘bridging’) with others outside the inner group (Leonard and Onyx, 2003; Paik and Navarre-Jackson, 2010). Bonding, where it is – as it was in the case study – at the expense of bridging activity can run counter to the aspirations of community associations to build social cohesion and civic engagement at the grassroots (Schneider, 2007; Turner, 2001).

#### The Environment of Community Associations:

The case study findings seemed to echo in part the developing body of theoretical knowledge about the role of community associations within their social, economic, organizational and policy environments. Generic organizational behavior literature has provided us with extensive insights into the ways in which organizations interact with their environments; indeed it is now widely accepted that theories which treat organizations as self-contained ‘black boxes’ are insufficient for explaining practical challenges of organization and management (di Maggio and Powell, 1983; Granovetter, 1983; Hannan and Freeman, 1977). This generic insight has been built upon in recent years by authors who have argued that community associations, as particular kinds of organizations, are most usefully conceptualized as ‘embedded’ within their local social environments, social networks and organizational fields (Milofsky, 2008; Smith, 2000).

This ‘embeddedness’ concept helps to throw additional explanatory light on the case study findings. Although the researcher was asked to focus on the HA itself as an organization, it became clear in analysis that such an approach could not provide a full explanation of the behavior that precipitated the organizational crisis in HA (Chaskin, 2003). Indeed, much of the apparently inexplicable behavior of LUPC and other actors could be accounted for by the links of the committee members across the organizational boundary of the HA; that is, across the ‘organizational field’ or ‘social network’ of which HA was just one part. Most of the members of LUPC, although formally appointed by and from the HA Council, had one or more contemporary or historical links with other local organizations and interests (such as local schools, the local governmental authority and the Conservation Trust). This is to be expected in a local area where there is a

limited pool of residents with sufficient time and interest to take on voluntary roles; and where long-standing residents with a commitment to the area and to civic engagement are likely to move over time between a variety of local roles, and, indeed, hold several roles simultaneously, or serially (Paarlberg and Varda, 2009; Wollebaeck and Selle, 2002).

Yet although links across a community association's organizational boundaries are to be expected in a local area, it seems that in the HA example at least, the implications had not been fully faced. The LUPC minutes showed that there had been occasional attempts to discuss potential 'conflicts of interest' arising from – simultaneous or serial - dual and triple memberships of LUPC, CT, and the planning advisory group of the local governmental planning authority. But these discussions had ended with no decision on guiding principles. The fact that the interests of the HA, the CT and the local planning authority would not necessarily be in accord on local issues and, indeed, that part of the HA's role as an advocate for local residents would necessarily lead to disagreements with other local stakeholders, was not addressed overtly. Thus when the school extension plans were under development, LUPC members took a collaborative rather than a confrontational approach to the CT; a finding which is in line with Taylor's observations (2011) about power differentials between communities and institutions and hence the difficulties experienced by community activists who seek to participate in policy processes.

## **Conclusions**



This paper began by posing a question: can voluntary and nonprofit scholarship be helpful for local community associations (CAs) seeking to improve their responsiveness and effectiveness? Building on a period of organizational crisis in a case CA, the paper has explored this question and found that events and behavior which initially seemed inexplicable to observers, could indeed be explained in the light of earlier literature; literature from the voluntary and nonprofit studies field as well as generic organizational literature. Having *explained* some of the factors which led elected officers of the case CA to act in particular ways and so precipitate a crisis, it became possible for the CA to use those explanations as a basis for developing organizational changes which would minimize the chance of a recurrence of a similar crisis. After considering possible explanations for the events surrounding the school extension as set out in the researcher's report, as well as possible organizational responses, the HA Council adopted a multi-pronged and staged approach to implementing change.

One early response by the Council, for example, and one prompted by ideas around oligarchical tendencies, was to institute a determined and systematic push to recruit new members to the Council and its committees, whilst also encouraging long-serving members to think about standing down in the near future. It was decided that it would no longer be acceptable for formal rules about time limits and succession to be flouted because of a desire to keep friendly relationships and avoid causing offence.

Another early response – prompted by findings about the inhibiting aspects of friendship norms when dealing with outside professionals - was for the HA Council to consider

various means through which knowledge of formal (or ‘constitutional’) roles and responsibilities and knowledge of authority boundaries, could be embedded within the association, especially for elected officers. The desirability of maintaining a balance between formality (in the sense of adhering to formal roles) and informality (in the sense of keeping good relationships between people who are neighbors as well as office holders) was seen as a priority.

The Hilltop case example does, then, suggest, that teasing out of research-based and theoretically-based explanations for found organizational occurrences can open up opportunities for community associations. Such a process can also encourage the development of guiding principles for the future; to anticipate, and respond to, challenges of organizational practice.

In retrospect, it can be said that the crisis which hit HA could have been avoided or at least mitigated had the HA Council been aware of the known organizational features and tendencies of small, local associations, as recorded in earlier research and theoretical literature. Yet this kind of ‘usable’ knowledge about organizational aspects of community associations was not readily available to HA Council and committee members as volunteers prior to the research process. So one implication of the case study is that nonprofit and voluntary action scholars have not yet made sufficient effort to disseminate their findings and their theories; especially to those who run community associations as volunteers and whose practical and theoretical knowledge is mostly drawn from business, public management or large nonprofits.

A second implication is that scholars who are keen to help and empower practitioners and community activists by explaining and resolving their organizational challenges, may need to cast their explanatory and theoretical nets widely. The exploration in this paper suggests that apparently inexplicable situations may be explained – even anticipated – by reference to earlier scholarship but that there may be no single explanation of a problem or crisis event. In the case described in this paper, it proved possible to find in earlier organizational and nonprofit literature a *variety of explanations* for why things happened the way they did. But ‘sense making’ entailed drawing on a range of theories and research fields.

A major challenge for scholars now is to disseminate usable knowledge and to support CAs in identifying ideas which will be helpful for improving their organizational responsiveness to changing environments and demands.

## Endnotes

- (1) The letter of engagement requested that the research should answer the following questions: “(1) - Who knew what and when? (2) - Given 1, above, what should have been done with the information? (3) - What ... should be done to achieve a good provision of information and action for ... residents in respect of major issues in the future?”
- (2) In an attempt to seek additional explanations for the HA crisis in academic literature, work by the author and colleagues is currently continuing; for example, in the literature on individual and group psychology and in theories of democracy and representation.
- (3) A full account of the data used to develop the themes was provided in the research report submitted to the HA Council. In order to adhere to assurances about anonymity and confidentiality given to study informants, that report is not cited in this paper but further details can be obtained on request to the author.

## References

- Anheier, A. and Kendall, J. (2002) Interpersonal Trust and Voluntary Associations: Examining Three Approaches *British Journal of Sociology* 53,3 343-363
- Berg, B.L. (2001) *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* 4<sup>th</sup> Edition  
Needham Heights, MA: Pearson Education
- Billis, D. (1984) *Welfare Bureaucracies: Their Design and Change in Response to Social Problems* London: Heineman
- Billis, D. (1993) A Theory of the Voluntary Sector in Billis, D. *Organising Public and Voluntary Agencies* London: Routledge
- Billis, D. (ed) 2010 *Hybrid Organizations and the Third Sector* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Bulmer, M. (1986) *Neighbours: The work of Philip Abrams* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Cairns, B., Harris, M., and Carroll, M. (2007) Action Research: Professional Researchers in the Community in Cnaan, R. and Milofsky, C. (eds) *Handbook of Community Movements and Local Organizations* New York: Springer
- Cairns, B., Hutchison, R. and Aiken, M. (2010) 'It's not what we do, it's how we do it': Managing the Tension between Service Delivery and Advocacy *Voluntary Sector Review* 1,2 193-208
- Chaskin, R. (2003) Fostering Neighborhood Democracy: Legitimacy and Accountability within Loosely-Coupled Systems *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 32,2 161-189

Cnaan, R. Milofsky, C. and Hunter, A. (2007) Creating a Frame for Understanding Local Organizations in Cnaan, R. and Milofsky, C. (eds) *Handbook of Community Movements and Local Organizations* NYC: Springer

Di Maggio, P. and Powell, W. (1983) The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields *American Sociological Review* 48 147-160

Enjolras, B and Waldahl, R.H. (2010) Democratic Governance and Oligarchy in Voluntary Sport Organizations *European Sport Management Quarterly* 10,2 215-239

Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* Chicago: Aldine Publishing

Granovetter, M. (1983) The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited *Sociology Theory* 1 201-233

Hannan, T. and Freeman, J. (1977) The Population Ecology of Organizations *American Journal of Sociology* 82 929-964

Hustinx, L. (2010) I quit, therefore I am? Volunteer Turnover and the Politics of Self-Actualization *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 39,2 236-255

Keleman, M. and Bansai, P. (2002) The Conventions of Management Research and their Relevance to Management Practice *British Journal of Management* 13,2 97-108

Knoke, D. and Prenskey, D. (1984) What Relevance do Organization Theories have for Voluntary Associations? *Social Science Quarterly*, 65,1 3-20

Kreutzer, K. and Jager, U. (2011) Volunteering versus Managerialism: Conflict over Organizational Identity in Voluntary Associations *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 40,4 634-661

- Leonard, R. and Onyx, J. (2003) Networking through Loose and Strong Ties: An Australian Qualitative Study *Voluntas* 14,2 189-204
- Lindblom, C. and Cohen, D. (1979) *Isable Knowledge: Social Science and Problem Solving* New Haven, Yale University Press
- Michels, R. (1962) *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* New York: Free Press
- Milofsky, C. (2000) Transparent Research *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 29,1 61-80
- Milofsky, C. (2008) *Smallville: Institutionalizing Community in Twenty-First Century America* Lebanon, NH: Tufts University Press
- Netting, E. (2007) Including and Excluding Volunteers: Challenges of Managing Groups that Depend on Donated Talent in Cnaan, R. and Milofsky, C. (eds) *Handbook of Community Movements and Local Organizations* NYC: Springer
- Nyden, P. and Wiewel, W. (1992) Collaborative Research: Harnessing the Tensions between Researcher and Practitioner *The American Sociologist* 23,4 43-55
- Onyx, J. , Kenny, S., Brown, K. (2012) Active Citizenship: An Empirical Investigation *Social Policy and Society* 11,1 55-66
- Paik, A. and Navarre-Jackson, L. (2010) Social Networks, Recruitment and Volunteering: Are Social Capital Effects Conditional on Recruitment? *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 40,3 476-496
- Paarlberg, L. and Varda, D. (2009) Community Carrying Capacity: A Network Perspective *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 38,4 597-613

Parsons, T. (1956) Suggestions for a Sociological Approach to the Theory of Organizations-1 *Administrative Science Quarterly* 1,1 63-85

Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone* NYC: Simon and Schuster

Rizzo, J., House, R. and Lirtzman, S. (1970) Role Conflict and Ambiguity in Complex Organizations *Administrative Science Quarterly* 15,2 150-163

Rochester, C. (2006) *Making Sense of Volunteering: A Literature Review* London: The Commission on the Future of Volunteering

Rothschild, J. and Leach, D. (2007) Avoid, Talk or Fight: Alternative Cultural Strategies in the Battle against Oligarchy in Collectivist-Democratic Organizations in Cnaan, R. and Milofsky, C. (eds) *Handbook of Community Movements and Local Organizations* NYC: Springer 346-361

Schneider, J. (2007) Small Nonprofits and Civil Society: Civic Engagement and Social Capital in Cnaan, R. and Milofsky, C. (eds) *Handbook of Community Movements and Local Organizations* NYC: Springer 74-88

Schuman, C. and Abramson, A. (2000) Collaborating for Usable Knowledge *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 29,1 11-23

Sirianni, C. (2009) *Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance*. Washington, DC: Brookings Press

Skocpol, T. (2003) *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press

Smith, D.H. (2000) *Grassroots Associations* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage



- Smith, S.R. (forthcoming) *Accountability and the Nonprofit Sector* in Bovens, M., Schilleman, T. and Goodin, P. *The Oxford Handbook on Public Accountability* London: Oxford University Press
- Stadelman-Stetten, I and Freitag, M. (2011) Making Civil Society Work: Models of Democracy and their Impact on Civic Engagement *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 40,3 526-551
- Taylor, M. (2011) *Public Policy in the Community* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition
- Taylor, T., Mallinson, C. and Bloch, K. (2008) 'Looking for a few Good Women': Volunteerism as an Interaction between Two Organizations *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 37,3 389-410
- Tschirhart, M. (2006) Nonprofit Membership Associations in Powell, W and Steinberg, R. *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook* New Haven: Yale University Press
- Turner, B. (2001) The Erosion of Citizenship *British Journal of Sociology* 52,2 189-209
- Van de Ven, A. (2007) *Engaged Scholarship: A Guide for Organizational and Social Research* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Van Wart, M. (2013) Lessons from Leadership Theory and the Contemporary Challenges of Leaders *Public Administration Review* doi:10.1111/puar.12069
- Walker, E., McCarthy, J. and Baumgartner, F. (2011) Replacing Members with Managers? Mutualism among Membership and Nonmembership Advocacy Organizations in the United States *American Journal of Sociology* 116,4 1284-1337

Wollebaek, D. and Selle, P (2002) Does Participation in Voluntary Associations  
Contribute to Social Capital? The Impact of Intensity, Scope and Type *Nonprofit and  
Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 31,1 32-61

**Margaret Harris** is Emeritus Professor of Voluntary Sector Organisation at Aston University, Birmingham, England and Visiting Professor at Birkbeck, University of London. Before moving into academia, she worked in local government and in the voluntary sector.

**Table One – Data Sources for Case Study**

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Details</b>	<b>Contribution to Stage of Research</b>
Minutes of HA Council	Publicly available electronically	One
Minutes of Land Use Planning Committee Minutes (LUPC)	File of hard copies for period under review and earlier provided	One and Two
HA current Constitution and Standing Orders	Publicly available electronically	One and Two
Descriptive articles about the school extension and the process of consultation in HA Newsletters	Publicly available electronically	One
Descriptive articles in local newspapers	Searched for electronically and supplied to researcher by ‘evidence’ submitters	One
Critical letters in local newspapers	Supplied to researcher by ‘evidence’ submitters	One and Two
Planning application documentation submitted by	Publicly available electronically	One

architects to local governmental authority		
12 Semi-structured interviews conducted by researcher	Choice of interviewees made by researcher after review of all other data. Aim was to have a spread of key actors, objectors and critics. Contact details provided by HA Council on request from researcher	One and Two
Written and documentary 'evidence' from 20 local residents	Submitted direct to the researcher following an open invitation. Researcher provided guidelines (on request) about possible topics to cover. Many submitted documents and notes which they considered relevant to the research. All materials returned after the study end directly to the submitters.	One and Two