Charlotte Millar, 17th September 2024

Background

The Hunter Foundation, in collaboration with The Robertson Trust, hosted an all day event on 4th September 2024 to explore what voice led systems change looks like in practice, and the potential for collective action to catalyse more of this kind of work in Scotland. There were approx. 45 leaders from across Scotland's third sector, public sector and government in attendance. Charlotte Millar, an independent strategist, provided input on strategies for voice led systems change and facilitated the day. This report sets out the major themes that arose from discussions on the day and also points to some fruitful ways forward to achieve the purpose of the event: catalysing voice led systems change in Scotland.

Understanding the systemic drivers of injustice in Scotland

There was widespread acknowledgement that the organisations in the room are now having to grapple with the consequences of the "polycrisis" that communities in Scotland, and beyond, are experiencing. Growing levels of inequality, poverty, the climate and nature crisis, rising racism are all impacting the communities they care about.

Participants were invited to apply the "iceberg model" (a systems thinking tool) to the issues they are working on. This model provides a set of prompts to understand the deeper drivers of problems, these drivers include: the system goals, "rules of the game" and the deeper values and narratives which perpetuate the problem.

Through interrogating their own thinking and analysis, participants noted the deep need for their own organisations to reflect the values of the systems that they wanted to see in the world. They wanted to see more **trust-based and relational ways of working** in their own practice and to challenge themselves to **break down divisions** within and between their organisations and to **work across silos and professional "tribes"**. They also noted working on voice led systems change means **shifting power** away from their organisations and into communities, and that traditional models of accountability would need to change. Participants noted the challenges of working for systems change, that it was **not a linear, planned process.** Rather it requires thinking of work more like **scientists** - having a hypothesis, testing it out and adapting based on what works and what doesn't. Finally, participants saw that systems change requires **multi-actor, multi-level strategies**, with some strategies more about providing support to communities and some more about challenging rules, policies and narratives that perpetuate the problems facing communities in Scotland.

Building community power

In line with What Matters To You's own observations in their Codifying Report, systems change requires building not only community voice, but also **community power**. It is only by building power that communities, and the organisations supporting them, can **challenge the deeper drivers of injustice**. Participants were offered a framework - The Three Faces of Power - to challenge themselves to think about the kind of power they were building with communities and where they needed to do more.

It is clear that whilst important steps have been made in building community power across these three areas, much more remains to be done. This includes more effective strategies for building community power, such as through **community organising** and **movement building** and shifts in participants' own practices, such as **resourcing the long-term support** communities need to build their power and lead change. Here is a snapshot of discussions:

Types of power	How are they already building this power?	What more could they do to build this type of power?
The power to win demands (e.g. from decision makers)	- Telling stories of lived experience in dignified ways - Community participation in funding decisions - Young Women's Policy Bank - Bringing communities and decisions makers together	- Conceding power to communities - Support communities to demand power from elites - Support communities to develop solutions and to advocate for these - More community organising
The power to drive the agenda (e.g. through forming alliances / coalitions with other actors demanding change)	- Funders working more closely with impacted communities to design new funds - Existing coalitions, joint campaigns, e.g. End Child Poverty Scotland - Combining different sources of insider / outsider power	- Requires more flexible core funding - More power sharing amongst allies - More space for movement building - Has to be political, not just about inviting more people in
The power to shape the common sense (e.g. influencing / changing the narrative)	- Lived experience accepted as a source of evidence - Citizen powered accountability frameworks - Space for dialogue and conversation to shift decision makers' mindsets	- Complement lived experience with other opinion leaders' voices - As well as building voice, empower communities to lead change - Reframe the problem to include deeper drives of injustice - More acceptance from funders that

	- Human rights led approaches - positions communities as rights holders and not victims	this valid strategy for change

Growing the field of voice led systems change in Scotland

In the afternoon participants turned their attention to the major purpose of the day - what they can collectively do to drive more voice led systems change in Scotland. As inspiration for these discussions, the hosts shared three case studies of voice led systems change from their own work: the "Wee Night In" in Charleston, which provides an opportunity for community members to be heard about the issues that matter to them; Conversation Cafes in Menziehill that provide a space for community members to share with decision makers what is good and what can be improved in their local area; and End Poverty Edinburgh, a group of independent citizens that raise awareness of poverty in Edinburgh, influence decision-making, and hold the city to account.

Inspired by these case studies, participants then discussed two concrete options for collective action. Most support was shown for the first option, building a "**community of practice**" for practitioners leading voice led systems change in Scotland. Many participants noted that this could be a **galvanising force for change**, allowing community members to **learn from real-life successes and failures** and **gain skills** for acting as **change agents** within their own organisations. However, there were some risks noted, not least ensuring that a community of practice didn't become an **exclusive talking shop**, that is more focused on support for members, rather than **driving external change**.

Here is a summary of the pros and cons of the two options suggested, as well as a list of alternative options for collective action.

Option	Pros	Cons
1) A practical network of organisations committed to voice led systems change and space to learn and plan together	- Communities of Practice seen as legitimate and influential - hard to ignore - Could help members gain skills in organisational change - enabling them to become change agents within their own orgs - Being part of a community of like minded peers - supportive and provides air cover for bold action - Protected space to learn and share, esp about failures	- How to secure enough seniority in group that changes stick? - Too casual, not enough commitment? A talking shop? - Would it change enough people outside of the community of practice? - How to create shared goals? - Would need to be thematic to add value - Too many networks already!

		- Lots of commitment in this room - Could work towards having an external facing collective voice, shares the risk	- Could become too exclusive
2)	A transformation Innovation pooled fund to enable this type of work to take place within organisations	- Useful for initiatives that don't fit into existing funding - Good to couple this with building evaluation capabilities, to evidence what funding achieved	- Hard to secure trustee approval for this kind of funding - Pooled fund may mean fewer options - Hard for government to engage in this - Risk of it being "new shiny thing" funding - Could increase funding competition
3)	Something else?	- Communicating voice led systems change that is already happening, e.g. through a model like the Social Action Inquiry - A network of community activists engaged in voice led systems change - Experience of working together on an actual systems change - Listening network - Invest in learning from voice led systems change work in the Global South - Learning from the leadership role of human rights orgs in advancing voice led systems change	

Closing thoughts

There is a clear commitment to drive more voice led systems change in Scotland. People in the room were hungry for change and are ready to try out new strategies that address systemic injustices and build community power. They are also ready to act as change agents within their own organisations to enable more of this kind of work. This includes addressing internal cultures that create silos and competition, rather than collaboration, shifting to trust-based, flexible funding and changing the way they evaluate impact, amongst other changes.

There was a real appetite to explore the potential for a community of practice that can support leaders of voice led systems change with a sense of community and new skills. Importantly this should not become an exclusive talking shop but should have a clear focus of driving change across Scotland's third sector and beyond, to catalyse the wide-scale implementation of strategies for voice led systems change.