Background to the Study

The research has involved a mixture of methods including analysis of large datasets, a questionnaire survey, in-depth interviewing and active participation in the campaign. In total the research has involved 130 interviews, 2 focus groups and many hours of active participation. Interviews were conducted with a small number of experts who have an overview of the contract cleaning industry and the living wage campaign, with a sample of contract cleaners, with a number of the workplace leaders in the campaign and with some of the key leaders in London Citizens.

Publications Include


Please see the project websites for more information:
www.geog.qmul.ac.uk/livingwage/index.html  
www.geog.qmul.ac.uk/cleaners/
To which leaders from very different institutions can affiliate. In addition to being a church, a school or a trade union branch, such institutions can simultaneously belong to London Citizens. This process of identity-linking gives institutions additional weight through collective size and scale, it provides a mechanism to empower their members and a means to convey pressure in the wider world. For some institutions, it is a means to act on their values (demonstrating faith in the world, creating active citizens) and for others, it is a means to secure power they otherwise lack (pursuits, control of pressure on the clients for cleaning services, doing deals with London's politicians). All benefit from working across difference, and the mobilisation of diversity is itself a powerful act.

Being a member of London Citizens is an identification which costs very little. Beyond being respectfully quiet about any differences (which usually involve matters of race, gender, and sexual politics), it is relatively undemanding to join. Institutions are expected to pay annual membership dues in relation to their size, to take part in the annual change in leadership and to send interested members on training. Although a minority of the local leadership may choose to take part in the campaign, or to remain largely passive in relation to the alliance, London Citizens can capitalise on the strength of civil society in the city while only occasionally mobilising large numbers to achieve particular ends.

This is a very different model of doing community politics to that practiced in the past. During the twentieth century, political organisation was generally prosecuted through the party (with a programme to which you affiliated) or the single issue campaign. The latter would involve finding commonality around a shared issue (war, peace, racial justice, gender justice etc) and/or a shared identification (the labour movement, the women’s movement, the peace movement etc). In contrast, London Citizens prosecutes politics on multiple fronts at once, embracing a divergence of actors, issues and ideas at any one time. The organisation also seeks to develop working relationships with elected politicians and to hold them to account, rather than organising in confrontation with them.

The model is effective in mobilising the civil society and putting pressure on the corporate and political structures that already exist. It is less effective at dealing with the absence of civil society in many of the poorest communities in Britain and it does not provide an alternative to the political establishment. However, the living wage campaign has shown how London Citizens can help strengthen and create civil society organisation around the corporate and political sectors. In this case, London Citizens has both created a new organisation as well as supporting existing groups that are looking to grow. Campaign leaders identified a need for a new association for workers who were not able to join a trade union at their work as well as providing ongoing support for more traditional union organising campaigns.

It is widely known that levels of trade union membership have collapsed since their peak in 1979. The labour movement has been negatively impacted by economic recession, globalisation, privatisation and subcontracting as well as political legislation and shifts in the wider society. Despite a recent investment in re-organising, many are now struggling to recruit in Britain’s burgeoning service economy and the prevalence of subcontracted employment is a key part of this challenge.

Contract cleaners are often overlooked as they are no longer employed by the organisation for which they are doing the work. Moreover, if they were to organise for improvements in their terms and conditions of work, they would price themselves out of the market. Recalibrating cleaning thus depends on organising across a labour market as well as securing more money from the ‘real employers’ at the top of the chain. The trade unions UNISON and UNITE have successfully worked with London Citizens to do this, organising cleaners into a trade union branch which is mobilising community pressure on the ‘real employers’ in the banks, hospitals, hotels or universities to pay more for their cleaning. The research has highlighted the extent to which subcontracted capitalism demands forms of labour organisation that can link workers to clients, consumers and co-residents in order to put pressure on those at the top of the chain. The living wage campaign thus demonstrates the power of a new model of labour organisation in which workers are one part of a coalition articulating their interests in tandem with the wider community. Just as the trade unions created the Labour Party in the early years of the twentieth century to fuse the benefits of economic and political power, London Citizens is doing the same for workers today.

The success of the living wage campaign has made it easier for trade unions to organise cleaners. Workers have joined UNISON or UNITE to improve their wages and conditions but they have done so in the knowledge that they are part of a bigger community-wide campaign. London Citizens has helped to take the risk out of trade union organisation and the link to religious organisations is often welcomed by their local trade union workers.

Those cleaners that have become active in the campaign often report strong personal motivations for getting involved. Interview respondents variously describe powerful experiences of political organisation in their ‘home’ countries and highlight the fortitude they needed to travel to the UK. Others can see a direct role for their trade union in helping them to stand up to injustice, and yet others use the language of religion to explain their decisions. For many workers, faith reinforced the sense of self worth and alternative moral economy needed to stand out as a political leader in the campaign.

The research has thus highlighted the extent to which successful worker organisation depends on a political strategy. London Citizens facilitates identity-linking whereby contract cleaners are simultaneously trade unionists and members of London Citizens with much greater power. In line with doing, the campaign has also engaged in identity-making, fostering people’s identification as a London Citizen with values, issues and interests that are common across different identity groups.

Policy Implications

The work of London Citizens tells us a story of efforts to foster community cohesion. The alliance demonstrates the extent to which very different institutions can find commoncause, and the benefits that come from working together on shared political campaigns. In this case, unity has been fostered through joint endeavour. This campaign tells the creation of strong public and civic relationships that are not necessarily based on ‘deep’ understanding or friendship.

The experience would suggest that existing community organisations (however narrow their membership base) can be brought into meaningful relationship with each other. Doing so, however, demands respect for different traditions, and a focus on what is common, not what divides. It also demands a shared agenda for action and will necessarily involve a healthy challenge to the existing power structures.

The research also has implications for enabling workers’ voices in the wider polity. Given the widespread nature of subcontracted employment, it is clear that trade unions need to

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**Finding common ground**

“There is a lot of commonality. Stratford is a mix. Stratford has mosques, a Hindu temple, a synagogue, whatever is its place. And if you are looking to improve the quality of life in Stratford, we all hope as a city together that’s what we have in common. We want to make the neighbourhood a better place. Because crime, fear of crime, the local hospital... that affects everybody, it’s not just Methodists or Catholics or whatever that go to that hospital, it’s everybody, that’s one thing that we share in common, because we want our environment to be a better place too... The quality of life that you lead is also necessarily dependent on the quality of life of people around you. If you have quality of life that will enhance you, you’re all in it together.”

Tony Ogunkunle, Bryant Street Methodist Church, Stratford

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**What if we had the kind of respect that we should have... it will be better.**

Male cleaner from Nigeria