



Article scientifique

Article

2021

Published version

Open Access

This is the published version of the publication, made available in accordance with the publisher's policy.

Public Community Organising: A Defence Against Managerialism

Grand, Jérôme

How to cite

GRAND, Jérôme. Public Community Organising: A Defence Against Managerialism. In: Ethics & social welfare, 2021, vol. 15, n° 2, p. 200–215. doi: 10.1080/17496535.2020.1831571

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:156479>

Publication DOI: [10.1080/17496535.2020.1831571](https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2020.1831571)

© The author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>



Public Community Organising: A Defence Against Managerialism

Jérôme Grand

To cite this article: Jérôme Grand (2021) Public Community Organising: A Defence Against Managerialism, *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 15:2, 200-215, DOI: [10.1080/17496535.2020.1831571](https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2020.1831571)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2020.1831571>



Published online: 21 Oct 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 40



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Public Community Organising: A Defence Against Managerialism

Jérôme Grand 

Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

Community organising is subject to several interpretations, and community practises have spread worldwide over the last three decades. This paper understands community organising as a distinct methodology adopted by very different actors under very different objectives and uses it as a critical concept to analyse the role of the voluntary sector in social services. Through an account of the social service of Geneva, Switzerland focusing on community organising between 2002 and 2017, I offer a defence against the managerialist justification relied upon by the city's municipal council when it shut down the unit. The argument is premised on an appeal to a liberally conceived right to equality of opportunity for freedom of association. It supports an orthodox view of community organising as a bottom-up way of working for certain social services of public administrations, which justifies an exceptional and circumstantiated deviation from public management core principles.

KEYWORDS

Welfare state; social work; community organising; political liberalism; freedom of association

Introduction

Community organising is subject to several interpretations, and community practices have spread worldwide over the last three decades (Mizrahi 2016; Tattersall 2015). Community organising has different theoretical accounts centred on different aims, actors, and organisations – for which several different classifications exist (Taylor 2019).

Fundamentally, community organising is a way of working that can be adopted by different types of actors and with varying objectives. In particular, private and para-public organisations and public administrations may adopt this work style. They may do so in the pursuit of different political objectives to constitute community or promote a sense of belonging, improve governance and the responsiveness of institutions, promote autonomy and empower the poor, equalise the democratic representation of interests, transfer responsibility, and reduce the state's budget. The mainstream approach, however, considers community organising as a politic of necessity (Zuern 2011) used by independent community organisations, such as the Industrial Area Foundation (Tattersall 2015), Green Peace (Staples 2012), or the NAACP (Ginwright and James 2002), to alter decision-making and power relations. The concept of

community organising should be understood in the wider context of the debate on the role of the voluntary sector in social services and within the historical development of particular types of welfare states (Harris 2010; Kramer, Kramer, and Wilensky 1981; Mowbray 2011).

Through an account of the social service of Geneva, Switzerland focussing on community organisation between 2002 and 2017, I offer a defence against the managerialist justification relied upon by the Municipal Council of the City of Geneva when it shut down the unit. On the one hand, I aim to offer a descriptive account of a public service that refers to community organising to qualify its practices and point to challenges raised for a public administration by this bottom-up way of working. On the other hand, I aim to provide a public justification for its necessity in public institutions to equalise the opportunity to associate without undermining equal respect for different conceptions of a good life, which justifies an exceptional and circumstantiated deviation from public management core principles.

I present my reasoning in the case of the *Unités d'Action Communautaire* (Community Action Units, hereinafter 'UAC') of the social service of the municipality of Geneva based on official documents of the city, external evaluations, five semi-directed interviews (2015–2018), four focus groups (2013–2015), and direct observant participation (2013–2015).¹ For 15 years – between 2002 and 2017 – the Geneva social service adopted community organising as a way of working without mobilising a strong rationale to justify it. It was strongly criticised by the Municipal Council of the City of Geneva in 2013 and by an independent audit in 2015 for being non-coordinated, inefficient, and providing unequal treatment. Subsequently, social service stopped using this methodology in 2017 and reoriented its actions towards social benefits in line with identified public objectives and clear criteria of evaluation. Against this backdrop, we may question whether UAC really applied the specific methodology of community organising. Additionally, if UAC applies this methodology, in combination with the principles that govern a public administration, how can a work style that justifies a deviation from the core principles of public management be publicly justified?

This paper's main contribution is threefold. *Conceptually*, I support the view that the concept of community organising is best understood as a methodology of intervention, a 'way of working' (Tattersall 2015, 382), which is defined as an intervention through intermediary groups and organisations (Lavoie and Panet-Raymond 2014), working with '..community themselves to foster skills, capacity and relationships for people to take action to improve their situation and tackle local issues' (Taylor 2019, 111). *Empirically*, through the case of the UAC, I underline how this way of working is applied in public institutions and the challenges it raises for public management. *Normatively*, I develop the argument that such a methodology is required by political liberalism, under the condition of being public and available to all, and as a way to equalise the opportunity to associate without undermining equal consideration of different conceptions of good life. Therefore, I present and support an orthodox view of community organising, a way of working carried out by a public administration, strongly rooted in a liberal-egalitarian ideal of equal opportunity; an orthodox view that certainly offers an alternative narrative for the social service of Geneva and its lack of coordination, efficiency, and equal treatment.

How to organise?

Based on the theory of organising developed by Moses et al. (1989) and Saul Alinsky (2010), Sabl (2002) examines the practices that characterise good organising. He contends that three principles inform the tradition of community organisation: (i) integrating the family, (ii) empowering grassroots people, and (iii) organising in context.

The principle of *integrating the family* refers to the fact that community organising leans on the 'relationship among people who are personally acquainted and who trust one another on personal level that does not require shared convictions or ends' (Sabl 2002, 10). Entering this personal level requires the organiser to negate the label of 'outside agitator' and proceed to an 'informal absorption', by invitation, to earn local people's trust (Moses et al. 1989, 425; Sabl 2002, 10). The principle of *empowering grassroots people* refers to developing local leadership, networks, and connections between different communities. In particular, none of the objectives of organising can be reached if the organiser 'acts as a top-down leader' (Sabl 2002, 11). Yet, Sabl explains, 'an educated, politically sophisticated organizer facing a group of uneducated political neophyte will face every temptation simply to take over, to make decisions in the name of those organized' (Sabl 2002, 11). Finally, the principle of *organising in context* means 'a willingness to find out and organize around the issues that the people being organized care about, rather than the issues that one cares most about oneself' (Sabl 2002, 13). Organising in context requires both a 'democratic attitude toward human imperfection and a tenacious suppression of the organizer's own moralistic and ideological wishes' (Sabl 2002, 12) and, therefore, 'a great deal of self-denial' (Sabl 2002, 13). Therefore, a good organiser proceeds by informal absorption in the community; he or she must encourage local leadership and connections and organise people around the issues they care about. These three principles together provide a 'normative criteria of good organizing', Sabl (2002, 13) contends, according to which 'people are good judges of their own interest'. This criterion is a condition of success of community organisation, and it implies a different standard of 'success' or 'failure' that empirical studies employ. Here, 'enabling passive citizens to defend their own interests and exercise their own judgment is an end in itself' (Sabl 2002, 13).

Sabl (2002) presents different examples of community organising that he criticises for 'abandoning in clear ways the goals of citizen independence. He provides many examples of community organisations in which 'political influence takes precedence over the development of independent viewpoints' (Sabl 2002, 14). The risk of community organising, Sabl concludes, is the 'politicizing of the organization that undermines the goals of citizen independence and social mixing, and with them the capacity to make prevail local interests' (Sabl 2002, 14). Allowing people to define for themselves where their interests lie is the ethos of community organising, the spirit of its methodology, and its primary condition of success. Whatever finality is pursued, regardless of the institutional context, we can expect a good organiser to follow such basic methodological requirements. This is the common denominator to the various approaches and multiple organisations claiming to belong to the family of community organising.

Why organise?

From a general point of view, most theorisations interpret community organising as a means to change, in the idea to ‘channel the vast resources of volunteerism toward social change’ (Marullo and Edward 2016). Nevertheless, the content of this change is neither univocal nor always clear (Hamington 2010).

In its radical interpretation, community organising has been understood as a means to obtain power. The Industrial Areas Foundation – which is the oldest and largest community-organising network in the world – defines community organising as having an aim ‘to build community power for the common good’ and support the reinforcement of civil society against the power of the state and the market (Tattersall 2015, 382). This definition is central to many community-organising networks and organisations seeing community organising as a ‘power struggle to gain right and privilege to marginalized community’ (Hamington 2010, 261). In this quest, conflict is not dissociable from community organising, the alternative being the consensus for the status quo (Alinsky 2010) and the aim of community organising ‘to equalize the political bargaining in creating and empowering organization capable of mobilizing community resources into an effective interest group’ (Reitzes and Reitzes 1982, 54). This is the *power approach* of community organising, an instrumental function based on power relations, aiming to build ‘grassroots organizations that democratically leveraged power to address social inequalities’ (Hamington 2010, 261). Nonetheless, feminists have long contested Alinsky’s dominant model. Stall and Stoecker (1998) contrast it with what they call the women-centred model, aiming to organise relationships to build community. According to them, this alternative tradition goes back to Addams (1899) and to the idea of *social settlement* that ‘intended to facilitate education and connection’ (Hamington 2010, 262). Contrary to Alinsky, Addams ‘emphasized cooperation devoid of antagonism’, and ‘her interest was in widening the circle of those actively engaged in any particular issue’ (Hamington 2010, 262). This is the *community approach* of community organising, based on the idea of ‘community building’ as the activities that ‘support and foster positive connections among individuals, groups, organizations, neighbourhoods, and geographic and functional communities’ (Weil 1996, 482). The objective is not anymore to give the organisations the capacity to define and defend their own interests collectively, but rather, in a building community perspective, to give the communities the value of autonomy, self-help, and solidarity (Stall and Stoecker 1998).

Moreover, community organising cannot just be seen as a form of empowerment or community building, as it has often been associated with paternalism and containment. This tension clearly appears in the literature related to British and American housing settlements (Addams 1899). The same evolving tension nurtured the debate on community activism and state-sponsored community work in the 1960s and 70s (Alinsky 2010; Burgess, Lohman, and Shaw 1937; Harris 2010).

The purpose of community organising should be understood in the wider context of the emergence and transformation of the welfare state and the evolving role of the voluntary sector in social services. Particularly, decentralisation and marketisation in social policy, combined with budgetary pressures, have opened up a space for the voluntary and private sectors, including regional and local authorities, for-profit corporations, and non-profit actors. Voluntary organisations’ role in the provision of social services is not to ‘merely add something extra to the framework of services provided by government’,

in providing parallel services to different clientele, but to ‘supplement the basic statutory services that provide a minimum standard of life for all’ (Kramer, Kramer, and Wilensky 1981, 39; Webb 1914). For this reason, since the shift of the 1990s towards welfare pluralism, the practises of organising have spread throughout the world, and community organisations have become increasingly involved in public sector contracts to provide services (Cockburn 1977; Craig and Mayo 1995; Mowbray 2011). New organising approaches have tended to see organising as a means to facilitate collective problem solving and to realise public objectives (Craig and Mayo 1995), as a toolbox of practices rather than as having an underpinning political philosophy or objective, leaving aside the fundamental question of ‘what are they organising for’ (Simms and Holgate 2010). This is what I call the *governance approach* of community organising seeking ‘to work with the institutions and systems that affect people lives and make them more responsive’ (Taylor 2019, 111).

To be sure, the distinction between community organising for power, community, or governance is far from clear, and the intermediary role of community organisations may serve the pursuit of various political objectives (Berner and Phillips 2005). Likely, there are as many theoretical reasons to value community organising as there are reasons to value secondary associations.

Who organises?

Community organising, defined as a way of working, is a methodology that can be adopted by very different actors – not only by independent community organisations such as the IAF, Green Peace, or the NAACP. In particular, para-public organisations, as well as public administrations, may adopt this way of working. It is important to note that important national variations exist in the types of institutions/organisations to which it applies.

Perspectives adopting this approach for public administration are rare, and the few attempts to apply community organising to public institutions are centred on contestable public conception of the good which hardly respects the core standard of the prevalence of interests of the organised (Blond 2010). According to Sabl, the great risk of community organising is the instrumentalisation of the action that undermines ‘the assumption that people are good judges of their own interest’ (Sabl 2002, 13). A public service ethos and the political neutrality of administration seem a priori adequate to constitute a relevant framework to avoid such instrumentalisation, at least understood as politicisation. Nonetheless, this institutional context has its own burdens, and politicisation is not the only risk that can undermine the ethos of community organisation. Public policies can resolve a problem politically defined as collective and requires a chain of intentionally consistent decisions and activities (Knoepfel et al. 2015). Public policies, whatever the type of actors involved in their definition, realisation, and evaluation, are intended to fulfil political objectives and answer problems politically defined as collective (Varone, Ingold, and Fischer 2016). These objectives are legitimate because they are politically defined, they directly or indirectly originate from a democratic procedure, and they are intended to answer to what has been collectively defined as a public problem. From the perspective of community organising, however, these public objectives might undermine people’s particular

Community action unit of the social service of Geneva

Geneva is the second largest city in Switzerland, even though there are more than 200.000 inhabitants. Characterised by 40% foreign residents, but also home to around 20 international organisations, Geneva is a small multicultural and international city, with importance for immigration and the highest rate of unemployment in Switzerland (Office Cantonal de la Statistique 2018). Owing to executive federalism and the superposition of different levels of government which are in charge of specific fields in Switzerland, the Genevan welfare state is the main provider of social benefits and composed of a myriad of institutions and social actors (Bonvin and Dahmen 2017). Many of them are focussed on social benefits deliverance, and those who work 'with' their customers, and not 'for' them, do not necessarily adhere to the criteria of good organising described above. The social service of Geneva is an exception.

The Department of social cohesion and solidarity of the City of Geneva aims to strengthen social solidarity and improve well-being of the population (Ville de Genève 2014, 1). This last general objective especially relates to UAC – composed of four units that have the mission to 'support the capacities for collective action of the inhabitants and the initiatives of local residents, associations and informal groups' (Horber-papazioni et al. 2015, 2; *my translation*). In addition, two neighbourhood centres (Espaces de Quartier, hereinafter 'EdQ') provide residents and neighbourhood associations with spaces so they can organise events and meetings (Ossipow Wüest and Bozzini 2013).²

Active since 2002 in Geneva, UAC supports any type of group that pursues a non-profit purpose, associations as informal groups, for elders, strangers, neighbours, caregivers, or young moms (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015). Their main mission, through initiation or support of projects, is to meet the needs of the population. Therefore, the UAC is asked to 'adopt a meta-role that is not explicitly based on specific issues or target audiences' (Horber-papazioni et al. 2015, 23; *My translation*). The role of UAC in solving problems is therefore indirect, and its beneficiaries are the inhabitants, the informal groups, and the associations of the neighbourhood that they help create or support (Horber-papazioni et al. 2015).

Bottom-up approach

While some projects are realised at the request of the head of the department (elderly's international day, neighbours' day), half of the UAC actions arise from residents' demands (Horber-papazioni et al. 2015; Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015). These demands situate UAC in a position of facilitators, a position in which the methodological document explains, 'the social workers should facilitate the realization of the group's purpose if they are asked for' (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015, 8; *my translation*). In this situation, the UAC position themselves as external resources for the group, acting on its request and providing organisational and technical advice (for example, how an association works, or where to apply for authorisation). Community Action Units is thus 'in the background and check if the local actors are in situation to plan, to lead and to evaluate the project' (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015, 16; *My translation*). Social workers are not responsible for the development of the projects and for the activities, the document insists,

but for the support and for collective learning (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015). In general, it is noted,

the fewer personal resources the individuals in the group have, the more active the social worker will be. And if they may be called upon to carry out administrative tasks in certain circumstances, they must be able to show what the priority and essential activities for the group to be empowered. (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015, 4; *My translation*)

As a facilitator, the UAC also brought administrative support and logistical assistance to associations. Rooms for regular or occasional uses may be provided by UAC; it may take in charge of small expenses and provides micro financing on a project basis (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015). Social workers may act as mediators between individuals within the group, they may help the association to communicate its activities and to easily find new volunteers and members (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015). By giving groups rooms and logistical support (offices, multi-purpose halls), EdQ play an essential role. Beyond this material support, the community actors also play an important role in enhancing actors' network and connecting them with similar groups, existing coordination, and networks, at the district or city level (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015). Finally, the UAC may bridge the gap between public administration and associations in demand for authorisation and information related to regulations (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015).

***Martina and Mustapha*³**

During my participant observations, two cases had particularly occupied the team I followed. In the first case, UAC helped a young woman to set up an association for young mothers. A nurse of the home care service of Geneva (IMAD), which offers medical follow-up for new-borns and their parents, was concerned about the psychological health of certain mothers (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015). In 2013, she put the UAC in touch with Martina, a migrant mother who had arrived from Italy two years previously following her husband for a position with the IRCC in Geneva. Martina felt lonely and depressed, and she wanted to undertake something for herself and other people in a similar situation. Martina and social workers discussed and arrived at the idea of a monthly meeting where new mothers and their spouses could freely come and join the group for coffee or tea with their babies. The UAC provided a room in EdQ Eaux-Vives, some financial help, and handled communications. Thus, the association '*Mom looking for mom*' was born. Parents attending the meetings – between 5 and 15 – were mostly expatriates, of different nationalities, and financially comfortable, but spoke limited French and had minimal social and familial networks in Geneva. After several meetings with the UAC, in 2014, '*Mom looking for mom*' became the name of a non-profit association aimed 'at supporting new mothers and their spouses in the early days following the birth of a child, offering activities to facilitate socializing and meeting among peers' (Maman cherche maman 2019). In 2016, Martina left for Myanmar with her family, and the association was dissolved in July 2016.

In the second case, the UAC was solicited by Mustapha, who created a social assistance endeavour as a by-product of the Islamic Centre of Geneva (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015; Service d'Aide Sociale Islamique, 2015), one of the two cultural places for

Muslims in Geneva. Mustapha wanted to develop a food bank (the *Epicserie Sociale*) to meet the increasing demand of people of various religions who attended the Islamic social service. At his request, the UAC accompanied Mustapha in 2010 and 2015, introducing him to sociocultural networks and orienting him towards an adapted, independent, and secular association. Retrospectively, Mustapha underlines that, at this time, he did not know how to create a formal association and that the group did not have the trust, resources, or competence to create an independent association on its own. It was through the social workers of the UAC and by forming an association that they learned how to ‘emancipate’ themselves from the Islamic centre. According to the president of the association, this official structure has improved the social recognition of the association by social partners and strengthened its independence from the Islamic centre. Until 2018, UAC remained in contact with the association for regular projects and occasional administrative tasks.

In both situations, the UAC acted at the request of an informal group to create a formal association. In both examples, the undertaking requires a formally recognised organisation to autonomously organise their activities, be credibly distinguished from other entities, or be recognised by actors and institutions in the field. These are also two cases where the creation of a formal association required external help, but for different reasons. In the first case, the lack of social connections between lonely moms is associated with the lack of familiarity with local institutions, which made Martina’s project difficult to realise. In the second case, social connections are pre-existent, but the group’s lack of knowledge and skills related to the creation of an association, along with a general mistrust in state institutions, could have prevented Mustapha from realising his vision.

Both cases reflected practical support for the creation of an association with financial, logistical, and methodological help. They both represent a real bottom-up approach that does not attempt to impose external objectives on the group, but which supports the initiatives of citizens without preventing them from pursuing their own objectives with their own organisation. The UAC positioned themselves as facilitators, supplementing the lack of knowledge, skills, and resources, without interfering with people’s interests and conception. However, the city of Geneva knows many similar associations and institutions aimed at answering these types of social needs, and these projects are certainly not coordinated in a coherent manner with other decisions and activities. In contrast, the city of Geneva might focus on implementing a coherent social policy. If the UAC, attached to the department of social cohesion and solidarity (in charge of social help and early childhood), is considered part of this public policy, nothing would directly justify supporting such micro-local initiatives. The personal objectives of Mustapha and Martina would have been ignored, or worse, manipulated in favour of the realisation of such policies. In this regard, in Geneva, the material support provided by UAC has no equivalent.

Therefore, UAC adopts the formal purpose and method of community organisation and applies it in their daily work. Evidently, this methodological concern that nurtures UAC references and interventions strongly echoes the core principle of community organising, according to which the interests of the organisation should prevail. UAC, as a good organiser, should proceed by informal absorption in the community, encourage local leadership, and attempt to organise people around the issues that they care about.

Making the interests of the organised prevail in public policies

The examples of support I have given, as well as UAC's interventions generally, avoid all phases of the cycle of public policies, agenda setting, operationalisation and programming, and implementation and evaluation (Knoepfel et al. 2015). Obviously, there is a tension between the methodological requirement to respect the interest of the people organised and the public management requirements of consistency, equal treatment, and accountability.

This is why on Wednesday, 13 November 2013, a majority of members of the Finance Committee of the municipal council of the city of Geneva proposed discontinuing community service during the debates preceding the approval of the city's 2014 budget. The commission demanded a CHF 20.9 million cuts to generate additional savings on the 2014 budget and the deletion of two services: the UACs and the Service de l'Agenda 21 (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015; Ville de Genève, 2017). The municipal parliament refused this budget amendment with a small majority, but this event produced a long and profound questioning of the municipal social service. The UAC's way of working has been successfully criticised as generating inconsistencies with public policy objectives, unequal treatment between different districts, and low accountability and visibility of the actions (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015). In the public debate as well as in the debates preceding the budget approval, the usefulness of the UAC intervention has been questioned. This resulted in the tabling of motion 'for an audit of the functioning and efficiency of UACs' (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015). At the request of the department of social cohesion and solidarity, the Institute for Higher Education of Public Administration performed the audit in 2015 (Ville de Genève, 2017).

The lack of visibility and the difficulty of identifying the UAC is a recurrent theme in the audit (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015). The specific mode of intervention of UAC, and its disjunction from public policy objectives, the Audit explains, leads to a lack of understanding of the methods of intervention by the vast majority of the actors in relation to UAC (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015; *My translation*). Importantly, the audit notes, this misunderstanding is associated with a lack of frame of reference and the absence of legal bases.

The audit clearly puts in relation the lack of visibility with the mode of intervention of UAC. The report underlines that their missions are too broad and not prioritised, some of them located at different levels. The report highlights that the mode of action of UAC can lead to the treatment of unequal situations (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015, 25; *My translation*). As projects arise from residents' demands, depending on the willingness of the inhabitants and associations to mobilise for specific themes and the ability of UAC employees to motivate and support them, entail a 'very great risk of unequal treatment for the same problem from one neighbourhood to another' (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015, 24). They explain this state of affairs by choosing the Department's management to give the UACs the greatest autonomy in defining priorities according to the demands of the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015, 53; *My translation*). The audit therefore questions the operating procedure, coordination, and piloting of UAC:

(...) the flexibility given to the UACs in the choice of projects to be supported leads to inequalities in the treatment of problems similar from one quarter to the next. (...) The management of all public action requires that clear priorities be established among the missions

selected, that a strategic reflection takes place on the operationalisation of these and that targets be defined. At present, the actions are carried out at the request of the population (...) (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015, 3).

The report concludes: 'Are we going to ask them to continue to do what they have done to date, without a clear frame of reference, or are we going to ask them to put their action in the context of public policy?' (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015, 80; *My translation*). The evaluation team clearly favours the second option and contends that 'their role can no longer be reduced to that of supporting the emergence of new ideas, needs or desires, or of creation or actions of associations' (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015, 83). They therefore recommend that the primary mode of intervention for the community sector should no longer be bottom-up, but rather should be top-down (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015, 83). They recommend framing UAC's actions in terms of public policy and to adopt a 'social policy of proximity', strengthening the role of the leader of UAC and improving the management of their interventions through monitoring tools based on indicators (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015, 80; *My translation*). They recommend for each mission to define clear objectives, targets, and beneficiaries and to define measures to evaluate the intervention to ensure that the public policy objectives are achieved.

Since this Audit, social services are undergoing deep transformations. Based on the recommendations of the Audit, the reform aims to address 'deficiencies' and to improve the 'understanding' of the action of the social service (Tribune de Genève 2016). The UAC were replaced by what the municipality calls 'Antenne sociale de proximité' and by four 'Info-Service Points' launched as pilot projects between 2014 and 2015 – having the mission 'to orient and support the inhabitants in their administrative procedures' (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015, 65; *My translation*).

The audit highlights the tension between the logic of community organising and the logic of public administration. The bottom-up approach and the flexibility given to social workers, that are necessary conditions of community organising according to my definition, are in tension with public management principles requiring clear priorities, strategic reflections, equal treatment and a top-down approach. The UAC faced a constitutive tension between the classic rational of public management and the core principles of community organising methodology.

On public justification

At this point, we can say that if community organising has to be practised successfully, it has to make the interests of the organised prevail. To do so in public administration, this way of working must rest on a clear rationale, strong enough to justify a different measure of success (Sabl 2002, 13), and morally and politically compelling to outweigh other moral and political considerations. However, in the case of the social service of the Geneva municipality, no strong rationale has been mobilised to support this way of working. We have seen that various objectives can make sense of community organisation. There are many reasons to support the idea that it is important and necessary for public institutions to help people to organise.

Adopting the idea of community organising for power, it could be argued, for instance, that the main purpose of the social service of Geneva should be to fight political

inequalities and to organise and defend marginalised groups, and that such imperatives outweigh public management requirements. It should be noted, first, that this rationale does not fit with the actual work of UAC with associations. If the general mission of social service is focussed on the most vulnerable and the financial situation of those of modest conditions, the community sector supports any type of group that pursues a non-profit purpose; the UAC is not based on specific issues or target audiences (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015). Moreover, their mission is strictly limited, in theory and practise, to the non-political domain (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015). What UAC does is actually closer to a feminist conception of community organising, organising as building community, widening the circle of those actively engaged in any particular issue, supporting positive connections among individuals, and fostering the value of autonomous organisations and self-help (Addams 1899; Hamington 2010; Stall and Stoecker 1998; Weil 1996). Second, UAC is not an independent organisation privately funded; it is a part of the state, which is, in a classical liberal democratic conception, the guardian of citizens' interests. Yet, as Sabl contends, 'an organising struggle tends to favour the claims of some people or groups at the cost of the economic, social, or political claims of others' (Sabl 2002, 17). This is why, Sabl argues, the 'organizers should have to justify their actions in terms that transcend the groups that they organize' (Sabl 2002, 17). In particular, if we consider that citizens are free and equal moral persons, then coercive power and indirect use of public resources require justification to others (Rawls 2005b).

From this perspective, I will argue that the methodological requirement of community organising, making the interests of the organised prevail, is well suited to a liberal political perspective that has for core principles the equal consideration for different conceptions of the good life and the fair opportunity to exercise a defined set of liberties.

In *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls (2005a, 440, 2005b, 319) insists on associations as places where citizens see the 'activities that are rational for them respected and publicly affirmed by others' and where they can 'develop of a sense of their own worth'. This is why Rawls (2005a, 441–442) thinks, 'there should be for each person at least one community of shared interests to which he belongs and where he funds his endeavours confirmed by his associate'. Martina and Moustapha join people with the same desires, the same needs, and perhaps the same vision, they carry out activities that are rational for them to undertake, and these activities are recognised as rational by the other members, which gives them the confidence to pursue their conception of a good life. This is what I call the fundamental associative interest in self-respect.

However, freedom of association requires particular social resources beyond income and wealth that Rawls uses as a proxy (Cordelli 2015). Among those who do not associate, some individuals have the opportunity to associate and not, but others are simply segregated from the arenas where we are recruited into associations and are without resources for creating associations of their own (Rosenblum 1998).⁴ They have no place where they can live out their conception of the good, and where their activities that are rational for them are respected and publicly affirmed by others (Rawls 2005a). They have a symbolic room free from coercion and governmental interference where they can pursue their own conception of the good beyond the principles of justice, but it is an empty room. If the duties generated by the freedom of association are often reduced to a (non-absolute) negative duty of non-interference for the state and the third parties (Gutmann 1998),

considering the associative interest we have in self-respect has to extend the type of duties that these interests generate. As explains Cordelli, ‘one of the reasons that ground freedom of association as a basic liberty, i.e. its importance as a basis of self-respect, is the same reason that warrants moving beyond the language of negative liberty’ (Cordelli 2015, 104). From this perspective, I argue that public community organising is justified as a means to ensure a fair share of resources required to exercise freedom of association and to ensure every citizen the effective opportunity to develop a sense of his/her own worth.

Regarding the conditions on which such a right may be exercised, Fleischacker (1998, 290) supports that it is possible and desirable for the liberal state to support ‘insignificant, particle communities’ which are based on weak ties and are easy to exit. He argues that ‘a liberal government may provide the space in which communities can form, reflect on themselves, and develop’, but it ‘must take care at the same time to leave every individual ample room to exit community’, and it should do so without favouring some associative interests over others (Fleischacker 1998, 290–291). Therefore, the state can foster ‘communal structures that have no high-level purpose’ and ‘no purpose that dominate the participant’s activities’ (Fleischacker 1998, 293). He insists that by doing so, the state would not violate its duty of neutrality, because ‘there is no intrinsic conflict between supporting community and retraining from telling people how, overall, they ought to live’ (Fleischacker 1998, 303). Fleischacker’s proposal regarding the background conditions to freedom of association actually joins what liberal neutralists have called ‘generic entanglement’, as the idea that ‘the state provides goods and services that figure in, or are “entangled” with, all conceptions of the good’ (Martin 2017, 158). Patten illustrates this idea of entanglement with the example of a fire service that does not violate the neutrality of treatment in assisting a religious building in fire, whatever its religious affiliation because it provides the same service to the facilities of all conceptions of the good (Martin 2017; Patten 2012). As Martin highlights, for being a generic entanglement, it must ‘be available for any conception of the good’, and it is therefore a ‘necessary condition for it to being public’ (Martin 2017, 158).

In Geneva, many individuals are not able to live or develop a collective conception of a good life. Some do not have cultural and institutional knowledge to know how to form and rule associations, others have a specific associative interest that is too dispersed and not well represented, while others do not have the infrastructure necessary to exercise collectively their conception of a good life. Interviewed on this point, the Delegate to Integration of the Canton of Geneva made explicit this last concern: ‘

There’s a lot of demand, there’s a lot of communities that are not able to exercise their beliefs. Why? Because they cannot get rooms because they cannot get this group together because we are throwing them out. I found myself in impossible situations where communities were actually not able to live their beliefs. (Interview BIE, 2017, 9)

Mustapha and Martina could have been one of them. From this perspective, we can think of UAC as a public service providing to organisational facilities, infrastructures, material support, and methodological advice (Sa Barretto, Grand, and Pedrazzini 2015) to equalise the opportunity to associate and to enable all citizens to exercise their formal right to freedom of association. Importantly, according to my argument, UAC does so without undermining equal consideration between different conceptions of the good life, both

because in respecting the interests of the organised it only supports low-level activities, but also because the all-purpose goods necessary to associate are available through a universal public service.

In both examples of Martina and Mustapha, there is an obvious welfare dimension (parental help and food help) that certainly have an indirect relieving effect for public institutions. Nevertheless, Martina's and Mustapha's actions emerge for reasons other than delivering services. Their association is a way for them to look out for each other and to do things together, not because the government promotes them, but as part of their conception of good life. In short, public community organising could be valued in the liberal political perspective – not because it 'empowers' citizens, helping them widen their sense of interest, influence public deliberation, to make them better represented, but because it ensures an equal access to freedom of association and protects a fundamental individual interest in the capacity for the good.

Conclusion

Assuming an equal consideration of free and equal citizens, I have argued that community organising could be associated consistently with political liberalism, in the idea of providing background conditions to ensure that each citizen has access to freedom of association. Such background conditions should be ensured by a public service to be available to all, and justifies as such proportional discrepancy to public management principles of equal treatment, consistency, and accountability.

In particular, UAC clearly adopts and applies the methodology of community organising and is attentive to the prevalence of the interests of the organisation. As a unit of public administration, UAC is subject to political objectives and public accountability, and this fact is hardly compatible with its mission to offer practical support for citizens' initiatives with a bottom-up approach. Having no beneficiaries nor targets, the UAC does not deliver benefits or clear service, and its actions do not have independent visibility. It is a certain that such a service is rare in the field of public management. I have argued that such an intervention is required to ensure an equal opportunity to associate as a fundamental element of a political conception of justice. From this perspective, my position suggests that UAC does not need to better connect their action with defined objectives of public policy or to better communicate their actions; they need to better understand the reasons why they do what they do.

My argument suggests that there is, in the context of UAC, another narrative than public accountability and a different rationale at stake than public management. To the idea of taking support of communities to realise public objectives, and to the idea of organising for power, we can oppose the idea of the *equal opportunity* approach of community organising, as the idea to support collective action to equalise the conditions of an effective right to freedom of association. From this perspective, association has an intrinsic value, a value that does not answer a functionalist logic of needs and has not to be judged on its results, a value that we may call self-respect, and for which we must ensure fair access. Public institutions should support the creation of associations even if it considers them pointless and useless because people have just the right to develop a sphere of autonomy beyond the principles of political justice – doing so will affect their sense of worth and capacity to pursue a conception of the good life.

This deontological alternative justification of community organising is strong enough in the context of my view to reconsider the weight of public accountability. However, it appears incontestable that the entire social service of Geneva cannot work counter to the current system of public management: the use of public resources must be publicly justified and expenses should be prioritised. The challenge is, therefore, to think of a public device able to meet local needs, while answering the classical logic of public management. At least, such a dilemma must be explained and expressed in the public forum, not like Geneva in 2013, where the fundamental purpose of community organising and its liberal meaning have escaped public debate leaving only a focus on efficiency and consistency.

Notes

1. Between September 2012 and September 2015, I was employed by the social service of Geneva in the district of Eaux-Vives/Champel. In this context, I participated in a research group that realised a study on the methodology of UAC and the support it provided to associations. I thank the city of Geneva and the head of social service for agreeing to make these documents available.
2. In 2014, the community sectors represented approximately 40% of the whole staff of the social service and their budget was close to 7 million CHFS (Horber-papazoni et al. 2015).
3. These are the original names of the interviewees. They were provided with the option to stay anonymous, and they have chosen to have their identity revealed.
4. Women, foreigners, and people with lower training tend to less associate with one other. In a country such as Switzerland, the typical profile of a member of an association is a male, of Swiss nationality, with tertiary education.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the participants of the methodological seminar of Cevipof, IEP Paris, on 9 December 2019 for their helpful comments on a previous version of this paper. I am especially grateful to Friederike Richter and Camille Collin for their careful reading of the manuscript. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editors for their helpful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Schweizerischer Nationalfonds zur Förderung der Wissenschaftlichen Forschung (Swiss Science National Foundation) under [grant number P1GEP1_187873].

Notes on contributor

Jérôme Grand is a Teaching Assistant at the Department of Political Science and International Relations of the University of Geneva, Switzerland and Ph.D. student in Political Theory at Cevipof, Sciences Po Paris, France. He is a long-time third-sector activist and worked for the social service of the City of Geneva as a community organiser for several years. He is currently deputy mayor of the municipality of Puplinge, Switzerland and in charge of social cohesion.

Institutional address: Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Geneva, 40, bd du pont d'Arve; CH, 1211 Genève 4. Email: Jerome.grand@unige.ch.

ORCID

Jérôme Grand  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8848-1077>

References

- Addams, J. 1899. "A Function of the Social Settlement." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 13 (3): 33–55.
- Alinsky, S. 2010. *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*. Chicago: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Berner, E., and B. Phillips. 2005. "Left to Their Own Devices? Community Self-Help between Alternative Development and Neo-Liberalism." *Community Development Journal* 40 (1): 17–29.
- Blond, P. 2010. *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How we can Fix It*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Bonvin, J.-M., and S. Dahmen. 2017. "The Swiss Welfare State System." In *The Routledge International Handbook to Welfare State Systems*, edited by Aspalter Christian, 274–290. Abingdon-on-Thames: Taylor & Francis.
- Burgess, E. W., J. D. Lohman, and C. R. Shaw. 1937. "The Chicago Area Project Section I: Community Cooperation for Social Welfare." *Yearbook* 1937: 8–28.
- Cockburn, C. 1977. "The Local State: Management of Cities and People." *Race & Class* 18 (4): 363–376.
- Cordelli, C. 2015. "Justice as Fairness and Relational Resources." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 23 (1): 86–110.
- Craig, G., and M. Mayo. 1995. *Community Empowerment: A Reader in Participation and Development*. London: Zed Books.
- Fleischacker, S. 1998. "Insignifiant Communities." In *Freedom of Association*, edited by A. Gutmann, 273–313. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ginwright, S., and T. James. 2002. "From Assets to Agents of Change: Social Justice, Organizing, and Youth Development." *New Directions for Youth Development* 2002 (96): 27–46.
- Gutmann, A. 1998. "Freedom of Association: An Introductory Essay." In *Freedom of Association*, edited by A. Gutmann, 3–34. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hamington, M. 2010. *Feminist Interpretations of Jane Addams*. University Park: Penn State Press.
- Harris, B. 2010. "Voluntary Action and the State in Historical Perspective." *Voluntary Sector Review* 1 (1): 25–40.
- Horber-papazoni, K., N. Keuffer, J. Klaus, and D. Wirths. 2015. *Evaluation du secteur communautaire du service social de la Ville de Genève*. Lausanne: Université de Lausanne IDEHAP.
- Knoepfel, P., C. Larrue, F. Varone, and J. F. Savard. 2015. *Analyse et pilotage des politiques publiques*. France, Suisse, Canada: Presses de l'Université du Québec.
- Kramer, R. M., R. M. Kramer, and H. L. Wilensky. 1981. *Voluntary Agencies in the Welfare State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lavoie, J., and J. Panet-Raymond. 2014. *La pratique de l'action communautaire, 3e édition actualisée*. Montreal: Presses de l'Université du Québec.
- Maman cherche maman. 2019. <https://mcmgenève.wixsite.com/mamancherchemaman>.
- Martin, N. 2017. "Conceptions of the Good, Rivalry, and Liberal Neutrality." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (2): 143–162.
- Marullo, S., and B. Edward. 2016. "From Charity to Justice: The Potential of University-Community Collaboration for Social Change." *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (5): 895–912.
- Mizrahi, T. 2016. "The Status of Community Organizing in 2001: Community Practice Context, Complexities, Contradictions, and Contributions." *Research on Social Work Practice* 11 (2): 176–189.

- Moses, R., M. Kamii, S. M. Swap, and J. Howard. 1989. "The Algebra Project : Organizing in the Spirit of Ella." *Harvard Educational Review* 59 (4): 423–444.
- Motion PR-1035 pour un audit de fonctionnement des UAC. 2017. Ville de Genève. <https://www.ville-geneve.ch/conseil-municipal/objets-interventions/detail-objet/objet-cm/1116-171e/>.
- Mowbray, M. 2011. "What Became of The Local State? Neo-Liberalism, Community Development and Local Government." *Community Development Journal* 46 (1): i132–i153.
- Office Cantonal de la Statistique. 2018. Bilan et état de la population du Canton de Genève. https://www.ge.ch/statistique/tel/publications/2018/informations_statistiques/autres_themes/is_population_06_2018.pdf.
- Ossipow Wüest, L., and D. Bozzini. 2013. "Etude ethnographique des espaces de quartier : Relations sociales et engagements au sein de l'espace 99 à Genève." *Les cahiers de la cohésion sociale* 1: 8–58.
- Patten, A. 2012. "Liberal Neutrality : A Reinterpretation and Defense." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 20 (3): 249–272.
- Rawls, J. 2005a. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, J. 2005b. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Reitzes, D. C., and D. C. Reitzes. 1982. "Saul D. Alinsky: A Neglected Source but Promising Resource." *The American Sociologist* 17 (1): 47–56.
- Rosenblum, N. L. 1998. *Membership and Morals : The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sa Barretto, A., J. Grand, and D. Pedrazzini. 2015. *Soutien aux organisations collectives. Méthodologie et analyse de pratiques du secteur communautaire* (Ville de Genève).
- Sabl, A. 2002. "Community Organizing as Tocquevillian Politics : The Art, Practices, and Ethos of Association." *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (1): 1–19.
- SASI. 2015. *Présentation de l'association Service d'Aide Sociale Islamique*.
- Simms, M., and J. Holgate. 2010. "Organising for What? Where Is the Debate on the Politics of Organising?" *Work, Employment and Society* 24 (1): 157–168.
- Stall, S., and R. Stoecker. 1998. "Community Organizing or Organizing Community: Gender and the Crafts of Empowerment." *Gender & Society* 12 (6): 729–756.
- Staples, L. 2012. "Community Organizing for Social Justice: Grassroots Groups for Power." *Social Work With Groups* 35 (3): 287–296.
- Tattersall, A. 2015. "The Global Spread of Community Organizing : How 'Alinsky-Style' Community Organizing Travelled to Australia and What We Learnt?" *Community Development Journal* 50 (3): 380–396.
- Taylor, M. 2019. "The Potential of Community Development." In *Whose Government is it ? The Renewal of State-Citizen Cooperation*, edited by T. Henry, 109–125. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Tribune de Genève. 2016. *La politique sociale de proximité est remaniée*. <https://www.tdg.ch/geneve/politique-sociale-proximite-remaniee/story/25060214>.
- Varone, F., K. M. Ingold, and M. Fischer. 2016. "Administration et réseaux d'action publique." In *L'acteur et la bureaucratie au XXIe siècle*, edited by D. Giauque, and Y. Emery, 115–140. Laval: Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Ville de Genève. 2014. *Document de Référence du Service Social de la Ville de Genève*. Genève: Ville de Genève.
- Webb, S. 1914. "The Extension Ladder Theory of the Relation Between Voluntary Philanthropy and State or Municipal Action." *The Survey: Social, Charitable, Civic : A Journal of Constructive Philanthropy* 31: 703–707.
- Weil, M. O. 1996. "Community Building: Building Community Practice." *Social Work* 41 (5): 481–499.
- Zuern, E. 2011. *The Politics of Necessity: Community Organizing and Democracy in South Africa*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.