POLITICS, RACE AND CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

A CASE STUDY OF BRENT CDA

BY RICHARD MACFARLANE

CASE STUDY No 7
Co-operatives Research Unit.
THE OPEN UNIVERSITY
POLITICS, RACE AND CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT: A Case Study of Brent CDA

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The Co-operatives Research Unit

MARCH 1987

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ISBN 0 335 155308
Preface

This report was originally commissioned by CRU as part of a three year research project which aimed to identify and examine the factors and processes affecting the successful development of worker co-operatives. As local co-operative development agencies are playing a vital role in the development of the worker co-operative sector we felt that it was important to include them in our study. In addition to carrying out our own research we felt that this would be a good opportunity to get a practitioner to reflect on their experiences of co-operative development. The result is this study by Richard Macfarlane of the early years of Brent CDA. The report examines the problems and constraints experienced by Brent CDA in trying to help disadvantaged groups, in a multi-ethnic environment, to create their own co-operatives.

We believe the study raises some important lessons for improving the effectiveness of local CDAs, and other forms of community and voluntary action, working in an 'inner-city' context. However the study also raises many important questions that remain unanswered. We hope that these will encourage a debate on the role of CDAs and other forms of voluntary action in the inner city, and encourage others to reflect on this important practice. Nevertheless, as with all CRU publications, the views expressed are those of the author alone.

The project of which this study forms a part was funded by the Leverhulme Trust. We gratefully acknowledge their support.

Chris Cornforth
February 1987
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**The Author**

Richard Macfarlane is a freelance researcher and consultant operating in the fields of co-operative and collective management, and local economic development.
1. INTRODUCTION

This study provides a description and an interpretation of events in one 'inner-city' co-operative development agency in the years 1981-84. It focusses on key issues for co-operative development like the working practice in the agency - but also on issues relevant to a wide range of community based organisations, like collective and community management, working with disadvantaged groups, working in a multi-ethnic environment, and voluntary sector relationships with the local authority.

The author of this study was one of the original staff appointed to the Agency and this study is based on his four-years contact with the Agency's work. It is based on personal observation and all the interpretations and analysis are his alone: they cannot be ascribed to Brent CDA or other participants. It is hoped that the material presented here is historically accurate. However, the primary focus is on interpreting the material and here the authors perspective is important in providing the framework. To overcome some of the subjectiveness of this approach opportunities have been given to several of the other participants in the Agency to comment on the material and the interpretations made. Necessarily, it remains a largely personal interpretation, however, it is hoped that the author's insights on the Brent CDA experience will provide a basis for debate, and are valid (at the very least) in this context.

The study aims to provide a critical analysis of the Agency. It doesn't attempt to catalogue and evaluate the great deal of excellent work done by the Agency and its staff. The aim here is to use the 'case' to detail some of the organisational issues that arose in the implementation of this innovative community-based initiative as a way of learning from the experiences and so being able to improve the organisational functioning of comparable agencies in the future.

There is, of course, an inherent danger in critical studies of innovative organisational and social projects - that they can be used to argue for a conventional administrative approach rather than improvements to an innovative approach. In this way progress towards new and effective organisational forms is blocked. Clearly the author cannot dictate how material is used when it is published. However, it is perhaps important to state that the intention in making this critical study available, is that discussion of the issues raised will lead to improved ways of working in collective and community-based organisations. The strength of these organisations is that they can harness the energy and ideas of people in the communities, to tackle problems they identify. Given the scale of the social and environmental problems facing many inner-city areas it is only by harnessing these energies that sufficient resources can be brought together to overcome the problems. For this reason it is considered important that better participative (co-operative) structures and processes be found for encouraging and supporting community initiatives.
2. THE ORIGINS OF BRENT CDA

The Borough of Brent

The London Borough of Brent covers a segment to the north west of the Metropolitan area running from the "inner city" close to central London, to the suburbs of Wembley.

The inner city areas of Kilburn, Harlesden and Willesden developed at the end of the nineteenth century and have districts close packed with small terraced houses with small back yards and little open space. In some areas of Kilburn and Harlesden post-war re-development schemes have replaced these terraces with housing erected by the Local Council consisting mainly of flats in low-rise or high-rise blocks. In sharp contrast to what existed before these areas are characterised by open space and, despite the inclusion of local shopping arcades, they lack a community focal point. There are also districts with significant amounts of 'middle-class' housing - large terraced and detached houses with large gardens, in tree-lined streets. These exist in the south of the Borough, mixed in with the close packed and re-developed areas, but are especially characteristic of the outer London areas of Wembley, Neasden, Kingsbury and Queensbury which have developed during this century.

A significant factor in the growth of the districts now included in Brent was the development of the large industrial Park Royal Estate and significant manufacturing sites along the arterial roads at Cricklewood, Collindale and Wembley. By the 1950s Brent had the largest concentration of engineering employment in Britain, and very significant employment in food processing and other industries. These industries provided a high proportion of semi-skilled and unskilled jobs and, during periods of full employment in the 1950s and 1960s they were pleased to recruit immigrant workers. This (together with some other factors like housing) has resulted in Brent now having a very high proportion of ethnic minorities amongst its population - over 30% for the Borough as a whole, and much higher concentrations in some inner city districts.

Since the early 1970s the restructuring of industry has resulted in rising unemployment - especially in the more crowded inner city areas and amongst the ethnic minority residents. This economic restructuring has had wider implications however. The demise of employment has been especially significant in the engineering industry so that there has been a loss of skilled and semi-skilled employment and for those made redundant a process of de-skilling has resulted: if they found new employment it was most likely to be a low skill (and often low wage) job in the service sector. Furthermore, there has been a decline in the opportunities for young people to obtain skill training and develop these skills through employment.

The outcome from this environmental, social and economic history of Brent was that, by the end of the 1970s, the inner city districts had
many social problems including unemployment, poor housing, over
crowding, a declining physical environment and a high incidence of
crime and vandalism.

The Borough of Brent was only created in 1964, as an amalgamation of
the Boroughs of Willesden and Wembley. Politically, Willesden had
traditionally been Labour controlled and Wembley Conservative. In the
1970s the Borough of Brent was controlled by the Labour Party
councillors, but this situation was not totally secure; the
conventional wisdom is that control of the Borough is decided by the
voting decisions of the Indian communities - which are somewhat
volatile. At the time the Co-operative Development Agency (CDA) was
formed the Labour Party had a clear majority on the Council, but
currently the Labour administration doesn't have a clear majority over
the Conservative and Liberal councillors.

By the late 1970s Brent had a well-developed "community sector"
providing advice and support for a range of communities and special
needs. However, some of the community sector groups were more
politically aware than others, and these tended to form close links
with the 'ruling' group of Labour councillors. The focus for these
political links was the Brent Community Law Centre whose personnel
provided important services to the more 'radical' community sector
organisations like The Trades Council and The Federation of Tenants
and Residents Associations and had good working relationships with
many other local support and campaigning organisations. It was the
Law Centre which effectively created the Brent Co-operative
Development Agency.

The Formation of Brent CDA (BCDA)

The idea for a CDA came to Brent with a law centre employee who had
previously worked in South Wales and there encountered community
coopertives which aimed to create employment and meet community
needs. At this time the majority of community sector schemes aimed at
mopping up the social consequences of the economic and social
environment in which local residents existed. The CDA was seen as a
way of tackling the causes of the distress not just the consequences.
It was to be the economic arm of the radical community sector in
Brent; able to intervene to create and save employment by assisting
projects which would also supply the services identified as being
needed in the local communities.

The formation of a CDA was progressed by The Law Centre agreeing for
its employee to spend some time on the promotion of the Agency. The
employee then obtained the support of The Trades Council and The
Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations and some local Advice
Centres - and put together a community-based steering committee. At
this time there were no worker co-operatives operating in Brent.
There were three active housing co-operatives and one credit union.
Two of the housing co-operatives refused to participate in the
steering committe because they felt it to be undemocratic in its
proceedings. The remaining housing co-op and the credit union were participants, as was a local skill training scheme that had a co-operative ethos.

The development of the CDA was done by the Law Centre employee who consulted from time to time with the steering committee. This process is perhaps best seen as one person harnassing the support of influential community-based organisations, rather than a process that was generated by those community organisations.

It is significant that the founders of BCDA had no links with the other CDAs that existed in Britain, no links with the Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM) and no close liaison with the National CDA. For the founders this lack of contact was not problematic because their concern was more with community-based economic activity than with the development of worker co-operatives. Indeed, some members of the founding group considered worker co-operatives to be neo-capitalist and criticised the concept of these co-operatives because they didn't give sufficient control to their customers or to the community in which they were based. The approach of the founders of the Agency can be seen in their application for funding and projects that the steering committee founded or supported prior to the CDA staff being appointed.

The funding application states that the CDA aims to "tackle inner city deprivation by co-operative means". This indicates that the Agency was expected to make a contribution to the amelioration of the social problems in Brent - unemployment and training, housing and environmental decay. A variety of co-operative forms could be envisaged including worker and community co-ops, housing and tenant management co-ops, credit unions and other hybrid structures. The focus was on 'social problems' and co-operation was a tool for their resolution. This was very different from having a moral commitment to worker democracy that underlies the principles of worker co-operatives.

The ideas of the steering group were 'fleshed out' in a project to create a multi-lingual community printing facility. The management proposals for this 'co-operative' were for a management committee including representatives of the workers, asian community groups and Brent Council; representing producers, consumers and community.

So, the aims and the approach intended for BCDA were significantly different from those of other CDAs that existed in 1980 and the many that have been created since. However, the intentions of the founders became less important once the Agency started operating. Four factors influenced this:

* the expectations of some staff members about what a 'co-operative' was and what a CDA should do;

* the experience of the staff in working with the hybrid and community projects that the Agency was supporting;
* the demands of client groups;
* the redefinition of the objectives by Brent Council and the DoE - giving priority to job creation as the basis of assessing the CDAs performance.

By 1984 the CDA worked primarily with worker co-operatives.

Funding and Foundation

The Brent CDA steering committee submitted an application for funding to Brent Council, under the 'Urban Programme' for 1978. This was rejected, but an application under the 'Industrial and Commercial Urban Aid Programme' in 1979 was successful. This funding enabled a high street shop in Willesden - actually the closed Co-operative Retail Services butcher shop! - to be converted into an office and for this to be furnished and equipped with a new typewriter, photocopier, telephone system etc. The approval for the CDA was given by the Department of the Environment in February 1980, and the capital expenditure had to be made by the end of March 1980! Revenue expenditure commenced in the following financial year, 1980/81.

The staffing of the Agency was three full-time and one half-time workers. The posts were conceived as being essentially professional. The half-time job was for a lawyer; an accountant was to be employed as Financial and Systems Adviser, and two 'development workers' were proposed. To attract employees with the necessary experience the steering committee wanted to receive funding for salaries in the 'professional officer' grades of the local government officer salary scales: much higher than the pay scales in the other four CDAs that then existed. It is likely that the desire for 'professional' salaries in the CDA was linked to a wider campaign to get salaries in the community sector raised so that they became more comparable with salaries obtained by local authority employees doing similar work. To facilitate the professional salaries the steering group paid a consultant to write a job description for each post in such a way that the Council's job evaluation procedures would result in a 'professional officer' grading. This manoeuvre was successful and all jobs were graded at PO1A; the lowest point on this scale. However, the job descriptions were very long, impossible to fulfil, and a source of considerable confusion for the staff that were eventually appointed.

It should be noted that considerable care had been taken to ensure that all jobs were graded the same. This involved throwing all sorts of tasks into the Finance and Systems Adviser post which was originally conceived of as 'administrator' and of a lower level. However, since each employee was entitled to increments for length of service (normal L.A. conditions) over time the equal pay ideal was undermined.

The budget for the first year's operation (1980-1981) included several thousand pounds for advertising the posts. Adverts appeared in
national and local newspapers in the early summer of 1980 - at least four months after DoE approval - but because of summer holidays, interviews were not held until September 1980. These interviews were conducted by the full steering committee, plus a council member - a group of about 12 people. A lot of emphasis was placed on the appointment of 'a team' of compatible people who would work together. It appears that this could not be achieved from the first set of interviewees, and the steering group therefore decided to readvertise the posts. However, one of the applicants was offered a temporary appointment to prepare a feasibility report on Brent Multi-Lingual Community Printers and he was appointed to a full-time post prior to the second interviews.

The second interviews were held in November 1980 - nine months after DoE approval. The remainder of the staff were then appointed. Two commenced work in December 1980, and two in January 1981. All of the staff were white and male and none lived in Brent or had any local knowledge or contacts. (Later a woman was appointed to the part-time post.) One person had worked in a co-operative in Lambeth and had contact with the Lambeth CDA - and therefore some expectations about what a co-operative was (the ICOM model) and what a CDA should do. The other three had no contacts with UK co-operatives but one had helped establish co-ops in Australia. One development worker had never worked in a trading concern. In short the staff came from very different backgrounds and had very different expectations about what the CDA would be doing. This presented problems which are discussed later under 'collective management'. The lack of sensitivity about the ethnic composition of the staff had a significant impact on the operation of the Agency after 1981. These will be discussed later in Section 5 'Working with Disadvantaged Groups'.

It might be noted that it was not until mid-January 1981 that BCDA became fully operational. In part this reflects the delays in appointing staff and perhaps in retrospect, this process should have been short-cut - especially as the aim to appoint a team was not successful. However, the premises for the CDA were not ready until mid-January 1981 and the legal framework for the Agency was not completed until after this date. In effect 20% of the initial 5 year life of the CDA was spent in establishing and staffing the organisation. This is not an unusual length of time in community projects and reflects in part the number of consultations that are necessary, and in part the lack of executive resources for implementation.
3. MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL

The Constitution

The Agency was eventually registered as a company limited by
guarantee, although this formal registration was not completed until
1983. The constitution of the company attempted to ensure that the
interests of community organisations could balance those of
co-operatives. Membership was therefore in different categories:

* Producer co-operatives (represented by named individuals);

* Nominees of the Brent Trades Council: one for one with the number
  of worker co-operative members;

* Housing co-operatives (represented by named individuals);

* Nominees of the Brent Federation of Tenant and Residents
  Associations: one for one with the number of housing co-op members;

* All members of staff: originally only one staff representative
  was proposed but this conflicted with the 'worker co-op'
  orientations of some staff members;

* A member nominated by Brent Council (usually the chairperson of
  their Employment sub-committee);

* One person from local industry nominated by Brent Council (such a
  person was never nominated);

* Other individuals invited by the members because of their special
  interest or knowledge.

Community co-operatives and other projects were not specifically
mentioned but were subsequently treated as in producer co-operatives.

Since the constitution was not finalised until 1983 - there was a hold
up because the Registrar of Companies could not approve a company with
the word 'co-operative' in its title and the matter had to be referred
to the Secretary of State for Industry! - the CDA was formally run by
a continuation of the steering committee consisting of:

* three representatives of worker co-ops - very broadly defined;

* three Trades Council nominees;

* three housing co-op representatives;

* three Tenants and Residents Association nominees;

* a Member of Brent Council - the Chair of the Employment committee;
  sometimes represented by a council officer;
* one nominee of the Community Relations Council;
* all staff members;
* other interested people.

The Management Committee

The 'model' of a Management Committee (MC) used for the CDA was basically that of the Brent Community Law Centre. The ultimate authority was to be representative of users (the co-ops) and the community. The workers were to have one representative and were expected to prepare written reports on their work, and reports on issues that the MC should decide upon. This model carried the ethos of worker, user and community representation. However, it relied very much on acceptance, by the staff, of the sovereignty of the MC. This was challenged by the staff.

The issue that brought into focus the question of control arose in discussion of the constitution of the Agency. One of the four staff members had previously worked in a co-operative and considered it a denial of co-operative principles for all staff not to participate in the MC. Other staff were not so committed to this principle, but felt that they should support their colleague. The proposed constitution was duly amended. At the time it seemed a small point since the staff would be a small minority of those attending MC meetings - at that time 12 to 15 people. The main concern was what happened when the number of staff expanded. However, the long-term impact was great.

The dispute over staff 'membership' was really the point at which the dominant force in BCDA moved from the founders - especially a core group based in The Law Centre - to the staff. This was the point where, unwittingly, consumer and community sovereignty was replaced by worker sovereignty. After this point there was a gradual reduction in the number of people attending the MC meetings. Possibly it seemed that the CDA was less relevant to the work of their own organisations and communities, or possibly they felt justified in placing their energies elsewhere once the CDA was established. Whatever the reason, active community involvement began to decline. The long-term impact of this was not appreciated by the staff at that time, probably because each employee was already developing their own links with individual projects and communities. But the impact was considerable since:

* there was a gradual fall off in active political support for the CDA among key organisations like the Community Relations Council;
* policy making could not be legitimised by reference to a representative community body - which meant that the staff could not 'hide behind' this body when seeking to impose limits to, or priorities in, their workload;
* as the number of people attending the MC declined so the significance of all staff members attending increased: they sometimes made up over half of those present at MC;
the MC could not effectively carry out the role of employer or resolve disputes between staff members.

The effect of these changes would not have been so significant if co-operative projects had joined the CDA and participated in MC. Some groups did this - but on the whole these were:

* essentially 'white' rather than ethnic minority;
* most frequently non-trading co-ops e.g. housing co-ops;
* where individual members of these co-ops were interested in the CDA.

Working with the individual projects it was clear that many appreciated the services provided by the CDA, but didn't feel impelled to get involved in its management. Reasons for this might include:

* the time and energy that was needed to promote their own project and maintain their own domestic lives;
* their primary commitment was to other political activities: this was especially important for the 'black groups' where expressing solidarity with black political initiatives was more important than showing solidarity with an essentially white (but perhaps instrumentally more immediately useful) CDA;
* the way of operating in a MC that included intellectual professionals and a degree of formalisation, was perhaps alienating and certainly unstimulating for many people.

So the history of the management committee of Brent CDA, over its first four years of full operation, was a progressive breakdown in community and 'consumer' representation and a real shift of power to the workers. This process was initiated by the staff and exacerbated by the changing environment of community politics in Brent over this period. Yet the staff also felt the lack of community and co-operative involvement and sought ways of involving these people - an intent that was not adequately put into practice. The outcome was the staff and a core group of nominees and associates managed the Agency from 1981 to 1984. However, during early 1984 there was a challenge to the hegemony of this group which came from people involved in a number of co-operative projects - although, rather ironically, spearheaded by white 'professionals'. This challenge was at two levels, it aimed to change:

1) the approach taken by some staff members on particular projects and in so doing effectively censured those staff members and the previous 'management group' of the Agency;

2) the constitution of the Agency to remove the community and local authority members.
These moves culminated at the first AGM of the CDA in 1984. This meeting was well attended by members of co-ops - some of whom had never attended a MC before. In a long meeting all the officers of the CDA were changed and the objectives of the co-ops was achieved by side stepping the constitution. The rights of the Trades Council and Tenants and Residents Association could not be reduced, but the rights of co-ops were enhanced to ensure that they had majority control. Ironically, however, the new chairperson of the Agency (who had vociferously promoted the challenge to the previous dominance) was not a member of a co-op but the nominee of the Brent Tenants and Residents Association!!

This meeting effectively ended the first era of Brent CDA. All of the 'founders' had left the MC and in the months that followed all of the longer serving staff members also left the Agency. A new CDA came into being.

The experience of Management at Brent CDA raises a number of issues about the role of lay management committees.

A significant problem at Brent was the information gap between the professional workers and the lay Management Committee (MC) members. At Brent the number of projects being handled by the CDA rose very rapidly. The approach taken by the staff was that information should be given to the MC about the work being done; but that the staff largely retained the right for deciding which project to give priority to, and the nature of the help given. This was perhaps different from the model conceived by the founders which would have given greater authority to the MC to decide what projects the staff should assist - and facilitate a strategic role rather than a reactive role for the Agency.

Now, given the range of work being done it was impossible for all of it to be discussed in a short MC meeting. Furthermore, many of the decisions in development work are technical and dynamic: technical in the sense that they are about the techniques of marketing studies or legal structures, and dynamic because the decision has to be made in relation to rapidly changing conditions. It was not possible to convey to a MC this detailed information about all projects. But even if this had been possible then a second problem, of confidentiality would be raised.

For many of the projects the CDA acted as adviser and consultant, and the staff had no right to disclose information to the MC. If this was to be done, then it was perhaps the role of the project members themselves. With commercial projects the sponsors often asked for guarantees of confidentiality, while for others political expediency - since Council members and often a Council Officer attended the MC - dictated that information be withheld from the MC. At one stage the Councillor on the MC took it as his duty to report to the Councils' Employment Sub-Committee any item which the CDA discussed that went against (his interpretation of) Council policy!!
Another issue raised from the Brent experience is how far, and precisely how does a voluntary management committee direct and control full-time professional staff? It has already been suggested that it is difficult to give MC members sufficient detail about projects. Without this it becomes very difficult for the MC to set priorities for the staff. At best they can ask that something be done but cannot dictate how much effort is put into doing the task. But, if a MC does dictate what staff should do what power have they to enforce their will? Obviously they are the formal employer and can take disciplinary action and ultimately dismiss a worker. But this is really the ultimate step which would be very disruptive if it was exercised, as a coercive tool. Apart from this, 'management' depends upon the willingness of those being managed to defer to the request of the managers. In Brent CDA this deference was in doubt from an early stage.

As we have already seen, sovereignty within BCDA moved from the MC to the staff. As this changed so the role of the MC became more consultative and advisory than directive, and this changed the purpose of information and the nature of the MC's response - at least up until the changes of 1984. But could the MC have resisted the transfer of sovereignty or reimposed their will on the CDA? To do this a third problem would have to be tackled - one of collective action.

The non-staff members of the MC came from a range of organisations, with different interests, and different levels of commitment to the CDA. During the period of formation of the Agency these differences were coalesced by the leadership of the law centre staff. However, once the views of these leaders were challenged (i.e. by the newly recruited staff) there was not sufficient 'payback' for the less committed MC members to support collective action to reimpose MC control. The primary interest of the majority of the MC, was the avoidance of confrontation and the reduction of tension. It was therefore impossible to get agreement on collective action unless there was broad agreement. If it was not possible for this agreement to be found then it was likely that a decision would be avoided or delayed or - most commonly - passed back to the staff to decide!

The problems of information giving and collective action were exacerbated by the turnover of MC-members and by irregular attendance of some members. This meant that some people attending any MC meeting would not know the background and history of subjects under discussion. Therefore either time was spent recapping, or the ability of these people to participate was restricted, or old debates were re-opened. Any of these outcomes was irritating for the staff and other MC members who attended frequently; and certainly limited the ability of the MC to operate efficiently and effectively. These problems were exacerbated because the most regular attenders at the MC were articulate, professional people with excellent political and social skills. The changing and less regular attenders tended to be members of co-operatives for whom the 'finely tuned' and politically charged discussions at the MC were very new ground.
Finally, it should be noted that there was an element of formalisation within the MC which may have been difficult for some members to handle. Written reports were presented from time to time and a frequent request from the MC was for more written material rather than less. Several problems arose with the written reports:-

* it was difficult to express the richness and detail that existed in the political environment in which much project work was progressed;

* the formal responsibility of the MC meant that long and sometimes legalistic documents had to be circulated;

* on the whole the staff did not give adequate time to the preparation of information, and it was not sent out sufficiently in advance of the MC for the members to have read all the contents - possibly they would never have done this anyway.

The MC meetings were not run on a formal basis - indeed they might have been more successful if the operation of the chairperson had been more strict.

From the above it can be seen that the formal management of the CDA by the MC was not effective in the period from 1981 to 1984. This was because:-

* the authority of the MC was not respected by the staff;

* the role of the MC was therefore unclear to its members;

* there was a disparity in knowledge and information between the staff and MC members;

* there was a disparity in skills between professionals on the MC and other members;

* the diversity of interests among members inhibited their ability to take collective action in opposition to staff views.

The outcome was that the role of the MC became more consultative and 'management' effectively moved to the employees of the Agency - working collectively. This management will now be considered.

Collective Management by the Staff

The intention of the Founders of Brent CDA was that there should be no hierarchy within the Agency: all staff were to be on equal grades. The emphasis was on a collective team - a team that was accountable to the Management Committee. Whatever the intention, the initial staff decided that they would work collectively since it seemed illogical to have development workers who urged co-operatives to work collectively
but didn’t strive to do this themselves. This, of course, reveals a
difference between the staff and the MC about what kind of projects
were co-operative – the staff taking a view that co-ops were, by
definition, collectively run. In truth there was a limited experience
of co-operatives among the staff, and the consensus was guided by the
one member who had worked in an ICOM co-op and was very committed to
the ideal of collective working. So the CDA staff set out to manage
themselves collectively – but had no developed model of what this
meant.

It should also be noted that the staff were expected to be
self-serving, i.e. do their own typing, filing, etc. This was a
necessary adjunct to staff equality since funding for clerical staff
at equal grade could not be obtained.

The staff met each week, closing the office for one afternoon. An
Agenda of items was agreed at the beginning of the meetings, and
minutes were kept – initially by the legal worker but later in
rotation amongst the staff.

There was no discussion about what collective management meant, and
the experience of Brent CDA was similar to many other collectives –
working things out, or failing to work things out, through trial and
error. The initial assumption was one of consensus decision making
in an atmosphere where supporting colleagues was regarded as
important. The decisions that came out of this process therefore
tended to support:-

* the recommendation of the person most directly concerned;
* the desired outcome of the persons whose views were most strongly
  held.

However, as the pressure on the resources of the Agency began to
increase the flaws in this arrangement became apparent. It was clear
that this was not a system of management but a system of consultation.
The staff meeting (SM) had no authority to enforce its view: it was
left to the discretion of the individual staff members how far they
changed their actions in response to views expressed by their
colleagues. A number of individual responses can be recognised:-

* if the outcome was similar to the individual member’s preference,
then they could treat this as a staff meeting decision and use
this to legitimise their actions both within the Agency and
externally: here the SM acted as manager;
* if the outcome was not as desired by the individual, they still
  had the discretion to either
  - ignore the decision and carry on as before – if the matter was
    noticed or raised again then it would merely result in a repeat of
    the SM discussion;
  - refuse to have any more to do with the subject: basically
saying 'if you don't agree with my view then do it yourself';
- agree to follow the SM view, but give it a low priority in their
own work so that nothing much would happen.

The importance of the different ways of regarding a SM decision varied
- in practice but not principle - with the importance of the subject
matter. It should be noted that there was always a high degree of
independence by the individual staff members over how they organised
their time: what hours they worked and what work they did. It was in
this subject area that the most vitriolic disputes occurred in the SM,
and where the lack of direct management was most obvious. Clearly,
the underlying dispute was about how the CDA's resources should be
used. The origins of these disputes are significant for understanding
the nature of collective management in Brent CDA.

The different perceptions of the type of projects the CDA should be
helping was a major 'underlying' source of friction among the staff.
Perhaps strangely, differences in perspective here were rarely raised
directly. But they did come up through discussions about how much
effort should be invested in different projects. The friction
generally arose when one staff member started to spend significant
amounts of time on projects that other staff members thought 'suspect'
- either on the grounds that they weren't 'co-operative' or on the
grounds that they were not sufficiently important to the work of the
Agency. These problems could arise precisely because neither the MC
or the SM imposed a process by which obligations to new projects were
taken on. Although there was a review of new enquiries at the staff
meeting which was supposed to limit commitments, in reality the
enthusiasm with which a staff member greeted an "initial enquiry"
tended to establish commitments, or otherwise. In this situation
staff were allowed to build their own case-loads which tended to
reflect their perceptions of, and preferences for, the work the Agency
should undertake. Attempts to limit a staff member's input to a
project were resisted strongly or subsequently ignored. In part this
was because of personal commitments to the project that had already
been made, and in part because of the 'hidden' differences in ideology
about the purpose of the Agency. The 'poles' of this argument were
'pure' collectively run worker co-ops, on the one hand, and community
run 'hybrid-co-ops' on the other. There was also friction about the
split of time between direct project development and administrative
work. As noted above, staff were expected to be self-servicing.
Nobody in the Agency had the specific task of creating or maintaining
administrative systems, so some members did this more than others
thereby expressing the different values they attributed to formal
administrative systems. Conflicts occurred at two levels:-

* because some staff members simply didn't adhere to, or give
priority to, maintaining the system;

* because time spent on administration was experienced as time lost
to 'essential' development work.
The problems over administration and time were inflamed by different attitudes to work-time with some staff members working late into every night and others working a strict working day.

The origins and the strengths of the conflicts often derived from the personalities of the individuals - and these were clearly influenced by their personal backgrounds and previous experiences. Because of this the conflicts couldn't be resolved by rational discussion and in the absence of any effective and directive management - either by the SM or the MC - they became a bitter and constant 'sore' within the Agency.

So, reviewing the experience of collective management in Brent CDA, a number of points arise:-

* it must be recognised that this was not a collective of people with shared aims and perspectives that had chosen to come together for joint action for a commonly held purpose; because of the differences that existed there was an inadequate basis for resolving fundamental issues within the collective;

* it is clear that the authority of the collective was only as great as the lowest level of authority given to it by any participant;

* that among the staff of Brent CDA there was not an adequate basis for trust to develop.

The outcome of these characteristics was that for much of the time there was not collective management, but four individuals - with numbers of collateral relationships - working within the same organisation. They were largely able to follow their own interests, priorities and methods of working, and ascribe different values to the commonly made decisions. This resulted in a (perhaps healthy) range of approaches to the work and types of project getting supported, but meant that administrative systems and attempts to create pro-active policies usually failed.

So, collective management in BCDA was not a success. It failed to 'manage' - except where there was no dissension. If the CDA had been a trading company then there was no way that it could have survived. But was this a failure of collective management per se? Well, a number of factors can be identified as contributing to the failure:-

* different assumptions about the role of the CDA, individual roles within the CDA, and the authority of the SM;

* different personalities - some that would have conflicted in most circumstances;

* excessive pressure of work and - largely because of the lack of management from the SM or the MC - no adequate means of controlling or prioritising work.
Yet the problems persisted despite changes in personnel - even when new staff were carefully selected to fit into the collective and might have been expected to pick up the dominant view of collective management amongst the existing work group. This suggests that the problem lay in the structure and process of the collective arrangements - and the failure to tackle these problems.

At the level of structure, the authority of the SM vis-a-vis the MC or the individual staff members was never clear. A model was developed by some staff members which viewed the SM as 'the manager' and each member as subordinate to this manager. But the SM had only the moral authority ascribed to it by the employees and that was not sufficient to give the SM real coercive or directive power. In reality staff members were left with the discretion to decide whether the SM or the MC was sovereign and used this discretion to rationalise their covert decision to do what they wanted as individuals.

At the level of process, there was rarely sufficient trust in or commitment to the SM to facilitate honest and open discussion between all members. A familiar pattern developed consisting of:

* members being defensive about the information they disclosed to the meeting: on one occasion a member refused to reveal any detail about a project on the grounds that it would breach their 'professional code' regarding confidentiality, but on many occasions there was a more covert selection process going on.
* members reacted in a defensive way to any criticism or recommendations that contradicted their approach.
* when there were serious disagreements the discussions ended in a stalemate with no decision, or a majority decision which the minority did not follow - and might actively seek to undermine.
* it was left to the female member of staff to try and find ways out of sullen stalemate: only this person had experience of trying to resolve group process problems and an enormous burden was placed on her by the male members of the group.
* it was assumed initially that non-participation in a discussion meant acquiescence with whatever the outcome was - but it became clear that silence was actually being used as a means of resistance to the outcomes, as a way of avoiding responsibility and as providing the basis for the individual subsequently ignoring that outcome. When the process was 'improved' to insure that each person made their view clear it was common for the non-participant to ask for their dissent to be minuted!
* the SM was emotionally exhausting and the energy levels in the meetings was often very low.

The result of this pattern was that the SM tended to degenerate into a formality. The meetings occurred, the agenda was gone through and
minutes were made - but the serious issues relating to the underlying objectives or the allocation of resources were never on the agenda!

The Outcome - A Failure of Management

From this review it can be seen that there were two levels of management, both of which failed. The MC was unable to manage because its authority was challenged by the staff on the grounds that co-operatives were in essence about control by the workers - and in reality the MC had few powers to resist a move by the staff for more authority. This workers' sovereignty should have been exercised by the staff working collectively in the SM - and again the argument about the inconsistency of promoting co-ops but not working collectively was raised to support this method of management - but this failed because there was not sufficient common ground between the staff members for collective decisions to be made. So authority moved from the SM to the workers as individuals, who made independent decisions or worked on a collective basis with other staff or MC members. These 'failures' of management had a number of important implications for the CDA and the staff.

First the lack of authority in the MC meant that some important community representatives no longer attended (why bother when you have very limited influence) and the CDA was not able to build a partnership with other community organisations, most significantly the Community Relations Council and The Trades Council.

Secondly, the CDA was unable to agree and legitimate a process for deciding what projects to support or where to invest its energy and resources. This had two implications:-

* the staff were exposed to every person that 'walked in off the street' wanting help, and had no barriers (physical or administrative!) to help control workloads - most staff then worked very long and unsociable hours;

* the Agency worked in a reactive way, not a pro-active way - spending its resources on those groups and projects that came to it and never having the time or energy to go out and make links with communities that needed its service but were not finding their way to the Agency.

Thirdly, there was no authority which could impose a common aim and ensure that the efforts of all staff were servicing this aim. The implications of this were:-

* that there was no 'external' basis for the staff to argue for particular activities or limit the actions of their colleagues;

* there was no 'higher' body to which the staff could refer disputes for resolution.
Finally, the atmosphere within the CDA was often very strained as a result of the pressure of work and the unresolved conflicts of objective, personality and style. This was very damaging for the work of the Agency. At one point it reached the state where two of the staff members were unable to work in the Agency at the same time. The effects of this were really revealed when these two left the Agency at about the same time. The remaining staff, who already had similar perspectives and a considerable degree of mutual trust, produced more work in the following months than at any point in the Agency's life. The replacement of a conflictual atmosphere with a supportive atmosphere was a tremendous boost to morale and stimulated the growth of work done.

Unfortunately, this constructive atmosphere started to decline when the staff returned to its full number - perhaps because of the strength of the bi-lateral relationship, or perhaps because of the familiar differences in objectives, personalities and approaches to the task. But soon after this a further dynamic arose - that of ethnicity - that was to split the management of the CDA in a quite different way, and lead to the resurgence of control by the MC which has been described.
4. WORKING PRACTICE IN BRENT CDA

Obtaining Work

Initially projects came to the CDA by 'walking in off the street' - one of the results of having a conspicuous shop-front. As the number of projects increased then more people were referred by:

* people in or knowing about other projects the Agency helped;
* the local authorities (Brent and GLC) who had been approached for help;
* local authority 'outreach' workers in youth centres, community centres etc;
* local politicians who people had approached for help;
* members of the CDA management committee;

Since the CDA never seriously took a pro-active approach to finding projects, it tended to have a network that covered certain areas and communities in the Borough, but not others. The network tended to cover the West Indian communities in the south of Brent, but there were very few enquiries from the Indian communities.

One CDA worker favoured 'street-walking' as a means of attracting projects - but pressure of existing work and an unsympathetic response from mistrustful colleagues limited this activity. In retrospect, it was probably a good approach for targeting the CDA service to some communities.

Initially, whoever was in the office, answered the telephone or dealt with visitors and enquiries. After a time it was agreed that one person should be 'on duty' each day. It was their job to:

* answer the telephone;
* deal with enquiries;
* deal with the post;
* be present for core hours of 10 a.m.-1 p.m. and 2-4 p.m.

So, when a 'new project' came in this would generally be dealt with by the 'duty person'. This meant either sitting and chatting through the idea, or making an appointment to do this on a subsequent day. After this 'initial interview' an 'Enquiry Form' would be completed which outlined the project and who was involved, where they heard of the CDA etc, and suggestions for future actions (if any).

From mid 1983 an ethnic origin form was completed by each enquirer since Brent Council required monitoring to be done.
The new 'Enquiry Forms' would be reviewed at the weekly staff meeting and future action (if any) agreed. Often the nature of the project made it more suitable for one or another worker to follow up. This allocation was subject to that worker having the time and enthusiasm to do this. Sometimes one worker would be keen to follow up but not have as much experience in 'the trade' as another - and they would then agree to proceed jointly.

The 'Enquiry Form' procedure was designed to limit the number of projects that the CDA took on. This worked to some extent - but it was really impossible to withdraw CDA support if:

* the first interview had been very supportive and enthusiastic;

* one worker wanted to work with the project.

After this staff meeting approval the 'contact worker' would largely pursue the project (with its promoters) on their own. Where joint 'contact workers' were agreed, this rarely worked well and the more enthusiastic worker tended to lead the CDA work.

The staffing of the Agency was designed as two development workers and two specialist support staff offering finance and legal expertise. To a limited extent this occurred e.g. with the finance worker doing or helping with financial projections etc, and the legal worker providing advice on registrations. But on the whole the specialists also did a significant amount of development work - having their own complement of projects. There were three factors that contributed to this:

* the quantity of project development work that was available given the failure to introduce a strict control of new work;

* the reality that in doing the specialist work it was necessary to resolve outstanding issues across the whole range of development work, so specialist work led back into development work;

* the lack of restraint on any employee pursuing their preferences meant that if a project came to the Agency which a specialist found exciting or worthwhile, then the tendency was for them to get involved as development worker.

This is not to say that the model of generalists with specialists providing a back-up could not have worked. The reality was that each specialist that came to BCDA was either originally wanting a development worker role, or was happy to expand into this field.

At BCDA it was always very difficult to say "no" to people that came in for help. There were three reasons for this:

* the physical arrangement of the office meant that all workers had to be located in the front office with a shop-front and access directly off the High Road;
* the level of need and the lack of alternative sources of help (at least in the early years) made turning people away impossible - and anyway they would just walk in again and take the service by asking questions and getting workers to make telephone calls etc;

* the lack of clearly legitimated criteria for declining to give service.

The policy developed by the staff was therefore to ensure that maximum help was given to a small number of projects, but that smaller amounts of help could be given to other people. As a result of this many individuals and people wanting to establish small businesses were given consultations. This declined somewhat after a small business advice service started and the Agency could refer enquiries. However, many individuals returned to BCDA since the small business advice did not give the detailed development service that the CDA was accustomed to providing.

**Skills and Training**

For the development worker a major problem about new projects was to assess the ability of the project members to actually do what they were setting out to do. It was accepted that most people coming to the Agency for help had limited commercial skills and experience - and the CDA workers had the ability to assess the levels of skills in this area. But what about technical skills? For example, a group of painters and decorators may ask for help in setting up a co-op. They have some work experience, they may even have some City and Guilds certificates - but do they have the skills and experience to do work at the right quality and at the necessary speed to be commercially viable. If asked they will necessarily reply yes - otherwise they wouldn't be trying to establish a business. But the reality was often no.

There are ways that skill levels can be checked for example by taking references. The dilemma here is that, in Brent anyway, the Agency would then be 'discriminating' against the very group it was setting out to help. It would be applying the same standards as the rest of the commercial world - the standards that discriminated against those without skills and work experiences and that therefore discriminated against ethnic minorities, young people and women. And yet, without insisting on standards the Agency was in danger of putting in jeopardy the goodwill that existed for co-ops, by promoting 'cowboy firms'.

A second problem for new projects was assessing whether the project members were sufficiently dedicated to make their project work. Again, project members rarely had the experience to know what efforts are needed to run a business. To operate at one's trade at a viable speed all day, and then to start on the 'business end' (book keeping, writing quotations etc), takes a great deal of commitment, maturity, and stability of circumstance (in home and relationships). But once
again, to insist on these qualities is to discriminate against the very groups the CDA was pledged to help.

At BCDA there was no occasion when a group was rejected because of the CDA worker's concerns about technical skills or maturity. The worker might continually emphasise how hard it was to trade commercially if a group seemed to be lacking in skills - discouraging rather than rejecting. This was especially relevant to the work with young people. Over the life of the Agency a great deal of time was given to young people but all of the projects failed because the participants didn't have the technical skills or personal maturity and stability to succeed. Now, this may seem very wasteful - and it was if the aim was commercially successful co-operative development. But on another level the personal growth that could be observed in some of the young people was great and probably contributed to them achieving the maturity and stability to obtain and keep regular employment. Such an outcome seemed to meet an important objective of the Agency. It was as valuable an education to these young people as going to University might be for others and it fulfilled some of the same functions.

The lack of commercial skills amongst client groups was anticipated - and efforts were made in the development process to give the necessary skills. Once again it was difficult for people without commercial experience to learn enough, quickly enough, to run the business themselves - and it was difficult for them to anticipate or appreciate what work was involved. This contributed to the failure of some projects - most notably in the building trade which has very easy 'terms of entry' but a relatively complex commercial structure, since the terms of contract are more variable than in many other trades. It is very easy to lose money in the building trade!

At Brent CDA there was not an ongoing programme of training in commercial skills. Projects were helped with setting up their book keeping, and were encouraged to appoint accountants to help with this. In some instances the Agency provided ongoing advice - especially the projects which used the Agency as their office - and on one occasion Agency staff effectively worked in a project giving commercial support e.g. with estimates and invoicing, purchasing and marketing. This didn't prevent the co-op from 'evaporating' as the members disappeared to do other things.

How Projects Used the Agency

Another problem with new projects was to understand the way they were seeking to use the Agency. Clearly all projects were seeking to progress their own aims and ideas but they approached the role of the Agency differently. The range here might include:

* Agency as consultant - recognising the Agency as a source of specialist advice that could be accepted or rejected;
* Agency as **partner** in a process of getting the project off the ground: ideas were discussed, a consensus reached between project and CDA, and this consensus followed;

* Agency as **servant** - whom the project could instruct what should be done;

* Agency as a **provider of services** which people could use in whatever way they choose, to promote their own project;

* Agency as an **outreach council office** from which one demanded services and help 'as a right';

* Agency as a **political tool** that could be used in the process of raising grants from public bodies.

The perception of the role of the Agency tended to dictate the levels of information and honesty that 'client groups' invested in their relationship with workers. So a partner relationship implied a high level of honesty, while an 'outreach of The Council' relationship implied giving only the information and version of the truth that was required to comply with formal requests, and the 'political tool' relationship meant giving the information that the client thought would best benefit the achievement of political support, even if this meant total fabrication!! The way the relationship was perceived, and therefore quality of the information that was provided, obviously affected the ability of the CDA to work successfully with a group.

What runs through the problems of different ways of using the Agency is a question of how the CDA worker was able to establish a basis of trust with a 'client group'. In some cases this was not problematic because the worker and the client formed a spontaneous warm relationship. In many other cases this trust was more problematic. Barriers to the development of this trust included differences in class, culture, ethnicity, language, gender, education, and different expectations about the definition of co-operative, and the role of the Agency. From the staff side concerns about the skills and commitment of the client group would also be a barrier to trust. On some occasions these problems would never be overcome - or periods of trust would be followed by periods of unease. On other occasions trust would be established through a period of close and successful working.

A degree of trust was essential for successful co-operative development since only this facilitated honesty. Now, it often seemed that 'clients' were not being straightforward (or honest) in their responses to development and it was easy to become upset or dismissive about the failure of a client group in this respect. However, it is possible to understand this experience. One source of understanding is the (currently dominant) culture of adjusting the truth in order to obtain the desired response from a listener who has some authority, (e.g. parent, teacher, social worker, employer/supervisor, supplementary benefits officer etc): it doesn't really matter what
you say provided it elicits the right response. The CDA worker has authority because they can be seen as the gatekeeper to certain resources that a client group needs; saying the right thing to ensure continued CDA support may be seen as more important than saying what you actually want or believe.

A second source of understanding derives in a pragmatic way from the problems of mistrust mentioned previously. In some cases a client group feels that they have a new and 'valuable' proposal and that there is a need for confidentiality in order to prevent this idea being taken up by other people. In other cases they might feel that if the true picture of their business situation (or prospective situation) were revealed this would damage their business prospects, or perhaps their potential for attracting public support. So, confidentiality can be invoked to protect a new commercial idea, or to obscure the true commercial picture.

Finally, it is essential to recognise that what the client group wants will change over time - and the actual development process is going to accelerate this rate of change, especially for a client without a lot of previous commercial experience. This change is not immediate however. As a development worker you may use language which has a richness of meaning that can only become apparent to participants in projects through experience; without this experience (or something akin to it) a client may not be able to understand what the development worker is talking about. As this conception and understanding grows then the ability of the client to make their own judgement also grows, and this may yield a different decision to ones made at an earlier stage of the project. So, a response 'honestly' given in one month, may be reversed (consciously or sub-consciously) a few weeks later. The nature of 'development work' ensures that all 'answers' are temporary.

The above discussions about how clients view the Agency, about trust and about honesty, reveal that the CDA worker has only a limited amount of power over what happens in a project - at least where they are providing a service to clients. The resources they have may provide some basis of power but it is temporary and limited. In the end the only lasting authority that a development worker has is obtained through a high-trust relationship - at a personal level - with some or all of the client group. But even this is likely to be temporary. The respect element of a high trust relationship may continue, but the influence element may reduce and be replaced by the group's growing trust in their own ideas and abilities, or growing trust in other advisers.

From time to time Agency staff did consider having a range of written contracts with their clients to try and provide a basis of trust and to legitimate development worker activity. It was envisaged that different contracts would be appropriate for the pre-funding, establishment and 'fully operating' periods of a co-op's development. Each contract would set out the rights and obligations of both the CDA
and the client group - and would have provided a basis for the CDA withdrawing support if the clients did not perform in accordance with the agreement. The contract would also have enabled the CDA to define its area of work e.g. by stating what it regarded as a co-op, or the range of services it provided, and to have insisted in co-op involvement in the Agency’s MC as a condition of continued work. It was not intended that co-ops would pay for the service until at least the 'fully-operating' stage.

Although it was agreed that 'draft contracts' should be written as a basis for further discussion within the CDA, this was never done.

**Development Work - The Brent Approach**

The general approach to development work at Brent CDA was bottom-up rather than top-down (although two top-down projects were in hand when the staff were appointed). But the way development work was carried out was not completely bottom-up. The most dominant characteristic of the Brent approach (and it should be pointed out that this was not a thought-out approach) was an assumption that the clients 'wanted to get something happening'. Action was considered vital, pragmatism prevailed.

The practice in the Agency was to work with the group to decide what was necessary to develop the project, and then to decide what the group would do and what the development worker would do. The development worker was thus both an adviser and an executive. In many cases the division of tasks left the development worker with the more technical work (e.g. preparing financial projections) and the client group with the more routine work.

One difficulty in the approach taken was that the development worker might see links and potential that the client group had not envisaged. The CDA worker might think the project financially unviable without substantial changes and might therefore introduce new ideas, or ask the client group to consider new markets or products or a different scale of operation. By taking the initiative in this way the CDA worker could considerably enhance the chances of a project getting off the ground for example by:-

* increasing the financial viability so that it was able to obtain and repay loans;
* by making the project 'fit' the criteria of public finance that was on offer;
* by using their experience and contacts to 'sell' the project to public bodies with money available.

However, there were two very grave dangers in this approach:-

* that the revised project was no longer one which the 'client group' understood, were committed to, or believed in;
that the demands of the project now exceeded the capability of the 'client group' to carry out the project.

In general it was possible to 'shape-up' a project to get it funded - and funding projects was rarely a great problem - but carrying out the project was a different matter.

Several outcomes could follow the successful funding:

* the project continued as planned, overcome anticipated problems and succeed in establishing itself: there were only three of these in the years 1981-1984, who currently employ about 17 people full-time;

* the project continued but changed its activities or structure because of commercial pressures or personal preferences;

* the project continued but changed its activities because the project that was funded was not what the members actually wanted: they therefore ignored the business plan submitted with the funding application, and did what they wanted;

* the project failed to establish itself and closed down.

So the approach of Brent CDA was rather 'professional' - it involved supplementing the skills of the 'client group' in order to help them achieve what the development worker understood to be their aim. Often this was successful as a technique for obtaining funding, but there was a danger that the project subsequently failed or changed because it wasn't what the members wanted, or they hadn't the skills to make it work.

In reality the CDA provided a rather limited range of help to client groups. It was customary to provide the following:

* concept analysis and development;

* advice on the preparation of a funding application, and sources of funds;

* a technical service in preparing financial projections;

* advice and help in registering as a co-op;

* clerical services, use of telephones and photocopier etc.;

* some help with establishing book keeping systems, PAYE etc.

Much more limited advice was given on another range of subjects e.g.:

* marketing and sales techniques;
* internal rules for the co-operative;
* contracts of employment and conditions of trade;
* training in business skills;
* advice on acquiring property;
* accounting techniques and aspects of tax etc;
* help on group working and collective management.

The limits to the range of work commonly undertaken were set to some extent by the work overload - although this could also be used to rationalise personal preferences in the range of work that got done - and to some extent by the limited skills of the staff members. The latter point is not necessarily a criticism of the staff. One by-product of employing professional staff was that they had a commitment to the requirements of their profession and (under these requirements) could not undertake some types of work. For example, the lawyer required 'practising certificates' from the Law Society. To obtain these while working at Brent CDA meant restricting the range of subjects that advice was given on (so as not to compete with solicitors' firms). This was reinforced by the solicitor's practice of not giving advice on subjects that are beyond one's expertise. In the case of the qualified accountant the professional norms required compliance with the law and the personal validation of all figures used. This resulted in a necessarily 'conservative' practice in the Agency - but the accountant could be expelled from the professional body for misconduct if these norms were not followed.

To supplement the in-house and professional services provided by CDA staff, the Agency encouraged projects to:

* appoint and use firms of solicitors for their legal work;
* appoint (and budget for) an accountant to provide post-establishment financial monitoring and advice;
* obtain funds to have feasibility studies and market studies done by independent Agencies;
* use other community agency resources e.g. The Law Centre, Community Architects, Community Accounting Services, etc.

This policy had the advantage of supplementing the staff resources of the Agency, and of enabling groups to obtain specialist and independent advice (appropriate to their trade) which the staff of a CDA could not hope to provide. The Agency also employed consultants to provide training and 'group development' for Brent co-ops.

What this description of the practice of development work at Brent CDA
suggests is that the conventional bottom-up/top-down distinction is inadequate. A common practice in Brent was for a project coming from the community to be effectively taken up, developed and funded, and then handed back to the client group. For example, a group might want to form a record company. The development worker would help them to discover the problems, use his own knowledge and experience to identify ways of overcoming these, put together a business proposal with the group based on this revised idea, and then help to find the funding. So a bottom-up project was developed in a top-down way (although with ongoing consultations) and then was handed back for bottom-up implementation. This approach was most common for groups with little commercial experience and little technical expertise - and these were almost all 'black' projects. Where a group of skilled people wanted to start a business the likelihood was that they would be left to do more themselves and encouraged and assisted in obtaining specialist help. To some extent this was because the technical and marketing aspects of the project tended to exclude the CDA workers, and partly because the social skills of the clients made a CDA 'takeover' more difficult.

Evaluating the approach to development work is difficult. Commercial success (surviving as a trading company) was restricted to the projects where the client group had appropriate skills and experience and outside specialists were involved in the development. Many of the 'handed back' projects failed to establish themselves as financially independent trading co-operative companies. Some failed altogether, while others remained as publicly funded organisations. Most of the former were 'white projects' and most of the latter were 'black projects'. In both cases the development process was a pragmatic outcome of the needs of the project and the limited resources of the Agency - as perceived by the CDA workers!! Now, it can be argued that a 'failed' black project was still a success because of the 'learning situation' it provided for the participants. There is substance in this argument, and it is reasonable to suggest that this is a valid way to use public resources (project funding as a form of training budget). However, a more crucial question is whether the 'handed back' black projects would have been better served if they had been encouraged to pursue a more self-sufficient development process. Bluntly, the CDA workers (probably subconsciously and with the best of intentions) didn't think a viable project would be put together by the group. Viability here is defined by the CDA workers who were all white, and drawn from a conventional professional business background. In reality the projects would have had an equally good chance of meeting their objectives (either in successfully trading or in providing a training experience for the participants) if the 'client group' had been encouraged to do their own development and presentation. The outcome of the CDA's pragmatic approach can thus be seen as a form of institutional racism that was in complete contrast with the intentions of the founders or workers of the Agency.
Illegality

One important issue in development work was the question of how the CDA should respond to illegality. The problems this caused for a 'professional' worker have already been noted. The most common form of illegality was people 'working' in projects while simultaneously claiming social security benefits, or running a business without deducting PAYE, NI etc. The scale of illegality was therefore not mammoth. The dilemma facing CDA workers was that in many projects the income at the beginning was not sufficient to pay regular wages - but the welfare arrangements are not sufficiently flexible to ensure project members their benefit if the co-op was not able to pay them. One project did try to be legitimate and two of the members 'signed off' while they did a three-week contract. Officially, this should have been an acceptable procedure (there is the administrative facility within the DHSS) but the reality was different. The DHSS official 'accidentally' completed the wrong form and it took six weeks after the end of the contract for benefit to be paid again. The third member of the project didn't sign off; he got his 'benefit' and his wages while the job was being done - and a smooth flow of 'benefits' when it finished. This co-op never tried to do another job! So, a problem is that project members often cannot risk losing or interrupting their benefit (since they have no other source of income), but the project may not be able to pay them regularly. As development workers the only sensible reaction is to 'turn a blind eye' and concentrate on getting the project to a position where it can pay regular salaries.

A second problem relating to this, is that projects can be in a 'poverty trap'. The level of benefit (in cash and kind) being received by members may exceed the amount a project can pay at the outset. The benefit being received is a net figure and for a family is likely to be around £50-£70 per week. To produce this net amount a project would have to pay gross salaries of between £80 and £130 to equal the benefits - and the minimum amount that people need to live at the lowest standard. Two government programmes can ameliorate this situation to some extent - The Enterprise Allowance Scheme, where the participants can raise £1000 to put into the business, and Family Income Supplement.

A third problem that can result in development workers supporting illegality is that the administrative systems to maintain PAYE and VAT may demand levels of training that would divert the co-op from its real purpose of getting the business working in the first place. It is common for bookkeeping and other administrative systems to get low priority - and to give them a higher priority might well divert people from more essential 'trading' concerns like sales or debt collection. People that are new to a commercial situation have an awful lot to learn very quickly and the CDA worker has to use discretion about where pressure is put. One way to avoid this is for the CDA to undertake the wages function for a period of time.
Infrastructure Development

Not all of the development work done by BCDA was directly related to clients' projects. Other projects were related to improving the facilities for co-operatives through training facilities, workshop space or local loan funds. At Brent a considerable amount of time - perhaps 25% of staff resources - was used on these projects. In some ways these were much closer to what the founders of the Agency imagined that the CDA would be doing - and the method of development tended to refer to the MC more frequently and with more important questions than in other projects.

An important issue that arises in 'infrastructure' projects is the relationship between the eventual users of the 'facilities' created, and the CDA itself. At Brent this issue arose in a workshop building that was obtained by the CDA and then made available to a co-operative on a licence basis. The CDA staff were acting as development advisers to the co-op, but were also acting (for the CDA's Management Committee) as their landlords. Over a period of several years the co-op refused to pay rent to the CDA, but the latter couldn't take steps to obtain the money due without bankrupting the co-op. This conflict of roles caused severe friction within the CDA at both staff and MC levels.

Agency Administration

Finally, in this section, it is perhaps necessary to comment on the administrative work in the CDA. As mentioned previously, there were no clerical workers on the staff and the basic assumption was that each worker would undertake their own clerical functions including typing, filing, correspondence, photocopying, reception duties etc. The Agency did have a budget for typing and substantial documents were to be given out to a typist. The CDA did develop a method of allocating administrative tasks - with the staff meeting giving primary responsibility for each task to one or another staff member. Some allocations were on the basis of skills e.g. the finance worker handled book keeping etc. others on the basis of interest, and others on a 'thou shalt' basis. However, the amount of attention each individual gave to their tasks varied considerably. This was a source of friction among the staff with varying levels of commitment to particular tasks compounding varying levels of commitment to the idea of being self-servicing.

It is estimated that about 25% of staff time was allocated to administrative tasks, making contacts with other agencies, and fulfilling the information needs of the MC and Brent Council.
5. WORKING WITH DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

Classification of Disadvantage

It is clear from the documents relating to the founding of the Agency that its work was expected to focus on the most disadvantaged groups in the local communities - and range across a number of areas of disadvantage including employment, training, housing and environment. It is perhaps useful to consider the nature of the disadvantage a little further.

The disadvantaged groups in Brent can be classified in two ways. First by type of disadvantage and secondly by ethnic origin. To a considerable extent these classifications overlap: certain ethnic groups suffer more severely from a range of disadvantages than other groups. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognise the dual 'scales' when trying to tackle the problems.

Two broad types of disadvantage were employment and housing. However, each of these has roots in deeper forms of disadvantages. In employment the disadvantage is rooted in the access to education and training. This could be traced back to schooling - the individual's attitude to school and their experience of school - and then their opportunities to obtain training. The latter are, in Britain, very closely linked with employment. Much available skill training is provided on a day release basis from regular employment. The employer therefore pays the wages for the trainees and perhaps more importantly, provides the opportunity for the trainee to practise their 'trade' and learn work discipline alongside experienced workers. So employment is an essential part of training and the trend for initial training to take place on MSC schemes can deny trainees access to essential elements of skill acquisition. But then the lack of training debars access to employment opportunities, at least in the more stable and well paid economic sectors, resulting in high unemployment or low wages and temporary employment.

It would be difficult to argue that there are very significant differences in the opportunity for schooling, training and employment in the south of Brent, compared with the north of Brent - although the latter area is far more affluent and this must affect the demand for service trades etc. So why are there concentrations of problems of training and employment in the south of the Borough? An important explanatory factor appears to be the housing and environmental conditions in the south. Here the density of housing, on both redeveloped public estates and traditional housing areas, is much higher. The quality of the housing is lower with the buildings being older and having less amenities (bathroom, gardens etc). Some of the public housing has high concentrations of single parent families and a considerable number of private houses are in multiple occupation. In some areas the incidence of crime and vandalism is also high. These conditions (together with the high levels of unemployment and the resulting poverty) create unstable social conditions. These are not
conducive to formal study and probably increase the sense in pupils that schooling is irrelevant to their lives.

So the situation in the south of Brent is a high incidence of multiple deprivation. The causes are an interlocking and self-sustaining process of unemployment, poverty, poor housing, domestic instability and poor performance in education. The skills and personal stability of the young people then mitigates against training and employment, so perpetuating the problems.

Turning now to the second classification of disadvantage - ethnic origin - it is clear that a disproportionate number of people from ethnic minorities suffer from the problems described above. In Brent the main ethnic minority groups are West Indians, Asians, and to a lesser extent Irish. The first two groups are commonly referred to as 'blacks'. But this aggregate term can be misleading since in social and employment terms the circumstances of different ethnic groups can be different. The Asian groups have problems of language and culture that can compound the employment problems. However, the strength and traditions of their culture have some benefits. Employment can be obtained through family links and the trading culture within these groups is then transmitted through employment and reproduced through the financing of new small businesses by the extended family.

However, the experiences of the Asian communities are not without problems. First, the communities must be dis-aggregated since there are many different communities divided by religion and the country and district of origin. Not all of the communities have the 'trading culture' or trading capital. Secondly, the 'system' can work for Asian people who are prepared to live within the traditional culture and accept the poor employment conditions that can be associated with petty trading. For young people that reject this, the situation can be difficult since they are necessarily rejecting a part of their 'family culture' and thus, possibly, the family support. This is a particular problem for Asian women of whom the cultural expectations demand subservience to men and where 'fixed marriages' may still be the norm.

Among the West Indian communities the problems of cultural distance from the dominant British culture are not as great, but there is a much less pronounced 'trading culture' than among the Asian communities. There are therefore not the opportunities for employment 'within the family' nor is there the experience or financial resources within the communities to support new entrepreneurs. These blacks are more dependent on obtaining employment in 'white firms'. To some extent there is also a need to dis-aggregate. There are different communities with different religious links and 'island' connections.

So, the ethnic minorities do suffer from multiple disadvantage, but once this is dis-aggregated then the situation becomes more complex with some communities suffering more than others. And this is before taking account of overt types of racism in job selection or housing allocation which certainly exist.
The experience of disadvantage is clearly not restricted to ethnic minorities. To some extent it is generalised across all young people, and to women. The experiences of young people and women from ethnic minority communities is perhaps worse than for those of English origin, nevertheless the experiences of the latter were also important and had to be considered by Brent CDA. Likewise the prospects for young people with physical or mental handicaps were particularly problematic.

Racism in Brent CDA?

Now, how could Brent CDA intervene to tackle this range and diversity of deprivation? This is a question which is perhaps best considered at three levels - what the founders intended, the appropriateness of their staffing, and how the staff actually operated.

The perception of the founders was most probably that the CDA would respond to requests for help from and work through, (in a top-down way) the recognised community organisations concerned with ethnic minorities, young people, women, the disabled etc. In this way the staff of the Agency might have been able to avoid problems of legitimacy in working with marginalised groups - their role may have been essentially one of providing a professional service. However, this approach relied upon giving legitimacy to certain organisations as the representatives of particular community interest. If this situation was possible to conceive in 1979, when the 'model' for the Agency was developed, it certainly didn't exist (on the ground) by the early 1980s. To some extent this was because from 1981 (and the Inner City riots) onwards there was a growing awareness and growing fragmentation among the ethnic minority groups. In this process, major coalitions of community interest (like the Brent Indian Association) blew apart, and the demands of young people became more aggressively pursued - through new pressure groups that represented their distinct perspectives.

How would the founders 'model' of relating to these communities been able to cope with this fragmentation? Two points can be made here:-

* the approach of the CDA founders avoided debate about the legitimacy of a representative from an ethnic minority; it didn't raise questions about how the individual came to be the representative and therefore side-stepped problems arising from different cultural expectations of democracy and representation (e.g. if the cultural norm was that the 'elder statesman' in a community spoke for that community then this would be acceptable to the CDA).

* the approach was alien to the instincts of some people involved in new ethnic minority youth pressure groups who sometimes rejected the committee approach because it was closely associated with the dominant white culture that was responsible for their disadvantaged position: it was considered a form of institutional racism.
The latter point gained increasing weight in the years after 1981 when ethnic minority organisations began to demand that 'black' community organisations be managed by blacks and employ only black people. This tendency clearly challenges the apparently self-evident correctness and applicability of some basic co-operative principles - equality, open membership - which BCDA was promoting. For example, in order to achieve equality, it is necessary to positively discriminate in favour of the disadvantaged, then you achieve equality through a process of inequality. At a practical level this increasing 'black separatism' meant that the 'radical black' movement in Brent could not be included in the management of Brent CDA; it rejected such involvement by not attending CDA meetings (even though organisations were members of the CDA in a formal way) and by promoting alternatives to the CDA.

The staffing of the Agency had an important influence on its ability to work with ethnic minority groups. It was important in both a practical and a symbolic way. At a practical level the failure to appoint a member of staff that could communicate in an Asian language (or several Asian languages) was a very clear handicap. The handicap was not just in language however, but in understanding and making contact with and winning the trust of the different communities. In this way the handicap applied to the West Indian communities as well as the Asian. In a symbolic way the failure to appoint ethnic minority staff expressed the cultural domination of white people and assumptions within the CDA. It stated very clearly that the CDA was to offer skills and experience valued by the white communities to other communities - to help those communities. It was a racially arrogant approach. The importance of these symbolic aspects of the staffing increased with the rise in importance of the 'radical black' community sector since it was precisely such examples of 'institutional racism' that they sought to fight. The staff were appointed on the basis of professional skills and the ability to work together. They had the technical skills to do the work, but could not deliver these to the communities they were expected to assist.

The existence and influence of institutional racism in Brent CDA was made more explicit during staff recruitment in 1983. The appointment was for a Financial Adviser and it was expected that applicants be qualified as accountants. However, by this time there was a high commitment to appointment of a 'black' person and the argument of 'positive discrimination' was accepted by the appointment committee. Nevertheless, discrimination was exercised in two clear ways. First applicants were judged on their ability to make an application in a way that was considered appropriate in Britain, and qualified applicants that didn't follow this procedure were rejected. So the process of application and selection contained elements of institutional racism e.g where references were used to express the social contacts that the applicant had, rather than support for their technical skills. Perhaps the worst examples were where applicants said they couldn't get work because they were discriminated against. If they hadn't the experience then they couldn't get the CDA job - and their statements of distress at being victims of discrimination were
seen as indications of instability!! Secondly, the criteria of getting along with the 'existing staff' ensured that white middle-class values prevailed, since these were the existing staff! In the first set of interviews the appointment committee failed to find a candidate that fulfilled both the technical and the personality criteria. The post was re-advertised and eventually a 'black' person was appointed. He was technically qualified and his professional and personal background suggested that he shared white values with the existing staff. He was black, but a nominal white!

Now, it is perhaps too easy to be critical of the actions of the founders and the MC relating to staffing. It should be remembered that the CDA was conceived and promoted in the late 1970s when consciousness about racial politics was very much less than in the post-1981 situation. Black community action in the earlier period tended to work through recognised community groupings that worked within the existing conventions of how to promote one's cause; and the CDA was to give extra resources to these black community groups. Secondly, introducing different cultural norms and radical approaches to racial disadvantage does challenge the preconceptions of the co-operative movement. The 'disturbance' to these preconceptions caused by positive discrimination is one example. Another is the moral questions that arise if you employ or work with people whose cultures or religion support discrimination against women or other ethnic or religious groups. Thirdly, the problems of working in a collectively-run agency with white people who have a different approach have already been discussed. How does a small agency operate with its staff including a feminist and a male member of a religious group that views women as inferior? This is not only a moral question, but a very practical one as well.

The appointment of black staff to the BCDA (and a training scheme it promoted) did have a major role in challenging the inherent racism of the Agency. An important stimulus to change was the increased politicisation of the black worker once he was exposed to the arguments of the 'radical black community sector' in Brent - and more specifically other black professionals employed in this sector. The increased consciousness of the issues by this worker led to a rejection of the existing style of work in Brent CDA, and more specifically a rejection of the knowledge gained by other 'white' workers from their experiences with previous projects. The experiences of inherently (although not intentionally) racist people in an institutionally racist organisation could offer little. An essential element of 'radical black politics' is to do it oneself in one's own way. The learning process within a black Brent CDA had to start again.

The process of change in BCDA was facilitated by a number of factors. Firstly there was the system of collective management that effectively left each worker pursuing their own interests and methods - there was no 'line management' to resist change. Secondly, there was an increasing awareness, amongst the staff and some members of the MC, of
the need to address the issues of racism in the Agency. Thirdly, the move by the 'black interests' to form a coalition with a second pressure group in BCDA that was demanding control by the co-ops rather than by the political 'heavy weights' in the community sector. There was clear common ground since both movements demanded that the rights of management (defining the needs and appropriate responses) be exercised by the recipients of the service in true co-operative style! Finally, it was impossible for those on the staff or MC to seek to discuss the demands of the 'coalition for change' since the very act of arguing defined them as either racist or anti-co-operative. The failure of the CDA to attract a broad range of people to its MC meant that other views, that might have argued for a different orientation to the CDA, were not put at this crucial stage.

The outcome of the process of change was at two levels. The change in management following the first AGM (described previously) was one level, while the change in the approach and future staffing of the Agency was another level. In the year between mid-1984 and mid-1985 the Agency went through a major evolution the implications of which are not currently known.

Despite the problems that might have been thought to follow from the institutionalised racism of BCDA, the Agency did a lot of work with black projects in Brent. This was possible since the racism was certainly not at a surface level: indeed the staff and the MC had a very positive attitude to working with ethnic minorities. In the period between 1981 and 1984 it is estimated that in the region of 70% of the project work of the Agency was with ethnic minority projects. This work will now be considered.

Working with Asian Groups

As mentioned previously BCDA did very little work with groups with Asian origins. Given the significance of this population in Brent, it is important to ask why. Clearly, one reason was that the Agency didn't have employees that could speak in Asian languages or could work comfortably in the Asian communities. Another reason was an early dispute with the Brent Indian Association about control of the Brent Multi-Lingual Community Printers (whether it was a community co-op or a workers co-op) which alienated some powerful individuals within the Asian communities. The failure of the CDA to take a pro-active stance and go looking for projects in the Asian communities reinforced these positions. Although these are significant reasons in themselves, the position was probably further weakened by the lack of success in the 'Asian' projects BCDA was asked to help. This arose, in part, because of a mismatch in the cultural norms of these communities and the cultural norms of the new co-op movement in Britain.

There were, admittedly, only two projects undertaken and therefore the evidence is slight. One project was a catering co-operative which developed from a 'cooking club' at a community centre. The object of
the club was to provide a place for Indian women to get together as a way of overcoming the isolation they experienced in a culture which frowns on women working and therefore denies them social contact except through the extended family. After some initial successes, the co-op failed to progress. The reasons for this are not totally clear but causes suggested were:-

* a fear of losing state benefits that the women's families were receiving;

* uncertainty about the support of their husbands in a culture where autonomous activity by women may be disapproved of by their husbands.

The second project was a building cooperative for an Asian community that was traditionally involved in building. The group of about fifteen 'founders' included two people that already owned building businesses, and another who had an architect's practice. These people would be members of the proposed co-op, but would also maintain their own businesses. The CDA tried to sort this out into either a worker co-op, or a community co-op, or a secondary co-op; but basically the conventions of co-op that were available could not encompass the cultural norm for this community in which independent trading units co-existed within a network provided by the extended families. The 'network' provided a supportive working and financial environment for the separate businesses, but at the cost of some independence since membership depended on giving credit and reward to certain key members. It is possible that a suitable 'co-op' model could have been found, but progress never got beyond the process of looking since the group cancelled meetings and didn't return for further help.

Working with Young Black Groups

Most of the 'ethnic minority' work done by BCDA was with groups of young West Indian people. Two points arose from this work. The first relates to the relationship between discrimination and skills, and the second to institutional racism.

Many of the projects that came to BCDA consisted of young people with relatively low levels of skill. Some of these were referred by Youth Centres and others by skill training centres. The 'members' of the group were typically young men aged between 17 and 24 who had never held regular employment. Often their skills had been obtained on a MSC training scheme together with day release at a technical college. In several cases these groups came to the CDA after encouragement from youth or community workers with no experience of running a trading business. So, the 'raw material' of the co-op, its members, consisted of people who:-

* had a level of training but lacked the work experience to convert this training into financially viable skills;
* lacked the work discipline developed by conventional employment;
* lacked any commercial skills, and often any conception of what is involved in running even a simple business;
* were young and often had unstable personal lives and sometimes unstable personalities: it was often these characteristics that prevented them from making the most of training opportunities and getting and keeping a regular job.

For a group with all these problems to succeed in establishing a business would need great dedication. For these particular 'black' groups these problems were made greater by their environment in which they have developed. There is, first of all, an ambience - promoted by the Conservatives with their concept of enterprise culture and often supported by the Youth Workers etc - that anyone can and should get into business for themselves: this is the answer to unemployment and all that's needed is the will! So, running a business is seen as unproblematic. Secondly, the growing awareness of racial discrimination can mean that they see this discrimination as the reason why they haven't been able to get a regular job, so if you remove the discrimination they could get the job they want. Certainly discrimination has affected their life chances. But it operates from a very early age through social and physical conditions in which they live, in the way this handicaps their education and personality development, and ultimately in their job opportunities. Furthermore, discrimination may mean that their parents and wider families are not providing models of work experience or a conception of 'running a business' for them to follow. Removing discrimination still leaves them in need of education and training. But belief that it is discrimination which stops their progress may prevent them from recognising their desperate need for training and support, as a pre-requisite to finding fulfilling employment or establishing their own business. Thirdly, the inner city world in which they live is as much dedicated to acquisitiveness and the establishment of individual self-esteem by the appearance of affluence as the rest of British society. This 'fast buck' mentality means that young people have expectations of high and rapid financial rewards from their business.

The outcome from these various influences and experiences is that young blacks came to the Agency with unrealistic expectations of their own skills, of what was necessary to establish the business, and the commercial opportunities in their particular field. They were therefore not very receptive to (or capable of understanding) the more pessimistic approach of the CDA development workers.

To some extent, of course, these responses from the client group would be shared by all young people: youth should be a very optimistic period. However, the ethnicity factor probably had three particular influences:

* discrimination towards earlier generations failed to provide
suitable models that could develop their conception of what is involved in starting and maintaining a business;

* the fact that they could blame discrimination perhaps prevented young people from coming to terms with their own limitations;

* the fact that the pessimism came from white professionals rather than, say, successful black professionals, may have reduced its validity for young black people: it could be consciously or subconsciously rejected as further discrimination.

There were no successful trading co-operatives established with young black people, despite the development work that was done. But in some ways this doesn't matter since there was often an observable process of maturing and personal development in those people involved in the process of trying to establish a co-op — and this provided them with better chances of finding and keeping a conventional job.

Reinforcing the Dominant Culture

A significant amount of the work done with black groups was with radical and sometimes 'Rastafarian' groups of West Indians who were seeking financial support from the local authority. There were two major projects involved: Brent Black Music Co-operative (BBMC) and the Harlesden Peoples' Community Council's (HPCC) Stonebridge Bus Garage Project and, although these were very different the role of the CDA developed in a similar way. The common denominator of the CDA's role was reconciling the 'irregular' organisational objectives and principles of the 'client group' with the expectations of the local authority. The practical implications of this for the outcome of the project have been discussed in the section on working practice (BCDA 'shaping up' a project), but this activity does highlight the way that local authorities, and maybe concepts of co-operation, are institutionally racist.

Both HPCC and BBMC (although in different ways) sought loose organisational structures. The HPCC provides the best example. The early meetings of the HPCC often involved between 50 and 100 people arguing and barracking in a mass meeting. But out of this process came a leadership group which represented different factions and interests and this group attained a level of stability while still being accountable in a very direct way to these mass meetings. The dominant style was personal confrontation over differences, both within the mass meetings and in the leadership group. The process lacked any commitment to formal records, standard procedures and consistency of response: one week's decision could be reversed by the next week's general meeting. This was raw democracy!

Brent CDA was involved at an early stage, but was later requested to provide support by the Chief Executive of Brent Council, who had been asked for help and (in the atmosphere of the 1981 inner city riots) were ingratiating themselves with this young black group. Over the
next two years the CDA put in the equivalent of at least one person full-time to the development of the HPCC main project, the purchase and development of the Stonebridge Bus Garage for use as recreational, workshop and sports centre. The development work was of two types:-

* providing technical advice on matters like legal structure, how to select staff, administrative procedures, development timetable etc;

* arguing for conventional organisational structures and procedures to be implemented - and assisting in this implementation by training and direct executive action.

Now the argument for organisational structures and procedures was on the basis that:-

* this was necessary for the stable and orderly development of the project - and the CDA workers could not assist effectively unless there were processes of discussion and decision which resulted in legitimate and stable decisions which were respected and worked with by all those party to the decision;

* this was an efficient approach which avoided the repeated discussion of the same point and facilitated progress to subsequent points;

* these processes were necessary for a legitimate application to the local council (or other public bodies) for financial support.

The outcome of these interventions by the CDA - sometimes in concert with similar interventions by Council Officers - was that the surface processes of decision making and application changed from those of direct raw democracy (internally) and mass direct action at the political level (e.g. by mass attendance at council committees), to a committee process of decision making and rationally argued and written forms of application for support. At a deeper level the raw processes continued and it was sometimes difficult to see where decisions were actually being made, or why overt decisions were being actively undermined by the decision makers.

So Brent CDA played the role of introducing the organisational and political norms of the dominant culture to groups who started out by arguing that it was precisely these forms and processes which were used by the dominant 'white' society to subjugate the black people. Emotionally the black group rejected these forms. In practice they went along with their introduction but only on a surface level. At a deeper level they retained their forms of raw democracy.

Two views can be taken of this. At one level the introduction of conventional organisational and administrative systems facilitated the group by enabling it to obtain major funding from public authorities that could not, under the legally enforceable conventions of public
administration in Britain, otherwise have been achieved. It could also be argued that the technical skills (in administration) that individuals in the project acquired will be a valuable personal and community asset in their future lives and projects. On the other hand, the intervention of the CDA (and sympathetic Council Officers) meant that the development of an alternative way of proceeding, which better expressed the cultural assumptions and desires of the group, was subverted. It can be argued that the 'imposed' arrangement was more efficient or effective since it enabled the group to achieve their ends; but this assumes that the same (or a better) outcome could not have been achieved by the group following their original organisational instincts. And even the assumption that achievement of the goal is more important than the means of achievement is culturally conditioned - maybe the group would prefer to achieve less, but in their own way!!

How should BCDA have dealt with this; how could it avoid reinforcing the institutional racism inherent in the procedures of the societal context that their 'client group' operates in. One means would be to make clear to the group the implications of not following the conventional procedures, but actively support them if they choose to use alternative approaches. And it may be easier to avoid accusations of racism if the CDA's own MC, staffing, and procedures are clearly non-racist. In the end, hard decisions must be made by the CDA itself about its own goals and the weight it wants to give to different goals - job creation, collective working, empowering communities etc.

In this section attention has been focussed on ethnic minorities as marginalised or disadvantaged groups. This is fair in the situation in Brent since black politics grew to be a major political influence within the community sector and since working with ethnic minorities was a major element of the CDA's work, and because racial politics became a major influence and generator of change in the Agency. However, the same issues did arise in relation to other disadvantaged groups. This can be seen from the following examples.

Women and Young People

BCDA did no significant amount of work with 'women's movement' organisations in Brent. At the time of establishment there was a 'women's centre' in Brent and the facilities for women did develop, e.g. with a women's refuge and workers specifically addressing the problems facing Asian women. But these organisations had relatively little contact with the CDA. The reasons for this probably include:--

* the initial staffing was all male which provided practical (gender) problems for working with organisations committed to women's development; but also indicated an insensitivity within the CDA to sexual politics.

* when a female worker was appointed then it was on a part-time basis, to do legal work: if a 'feminist' project development
worker had been appointed then much greater resources could have been offered to the women's movement in Brent.

* the CDA may have been considered to be mainly concerned with trading projects while the women's movement was mainly concerned with social projects: this perception of the CDA's work was not correct.

* the approach of the CDA - responding to requests rather than pursuing a pro-active policy - meant that if the women didn't come to the CDA there was no attempt to encourage them.

* the philosophy of the women's movement encouraged 'separatism': women should decide their own goals and their means of achieving these, and pursue these themselves.

So, familiar questions arise about the CDA; was it institutionally sexist - and insensitive to issues of sexual politics? Were the methods used by the staff sexist? Would the CDA circumscribe the development of alternative perspectives and ways of organising which the women could, on their own, develop?

With regard to young people the CDA had little experience other than that of working with black and mixed race groups. It did a considerable amount of work with two MSC-funded skill training schemes - mainly helping with the financial and accounting problems these faced. CDA workers were therefore very aware of the training needs issue and the importance for young people to find work to develop their training into a skill. On a number of occasions the CDA began working with the skill training schemes to try to establish co-operatives that would provide work experience and employment for their ex-trainees. However, after early failure, the CDA position was that young people needed a high degree of support - at technical, commercial and personal levels - if their new business was going to succeed. Insufficient time (by both the CDA and the training schemes) was given to trying to develop this support as a pre-requisite of assisting youth co-ops. Once again the questions of technical and commercial skills and personal stability are raised, and once again the question of whether the CDA should deny young people the right of trying, because they might fail. Would it have been better to support young people in trying to establish a co-op, as a part of their personal growth?

The Unemployed

BCDA did not set out specifically to work with unemployed people although the involvement of the Trades Council as a partner in the MC was supposed to establish a channel whereby unemployed (and the prospective unemployed) could come to the Agency. Between 1981 and 1984 the CDA was involved in two major 'rescue' co-ops, and one small 'phoenix' co-op. None of these came to the Agency via the Trades Council link, and although there were major factory closures in Brent
during this period the people affected were never guided towards the CDA. The experience of working with trade unionists around the Trades Council and in the 'rescues' indicates some of the reasons for this -

* there was a considerable amount of suspicion about co-operatives among the members of the Trades Council: at best the majority of members viewed the CDA as irrelevant and at worst as anti-socialist and a diversion to the true interests of trade unionists.

* the Trades Council does not get involved in negotiations carried out between an individual Union and an individual company - it has no influence in this crucial level of activity and therefore no real platform to suggest a co-operative option: given the low level of knowledge and belief in worker co-ops among trade unionists it would require a very sound platform for such advice to be heeded.

* the staff of the CDA failed to win the confidence of the Trades Council leadership or members: to do this demanded a consistent working relationship and service to the Trades Council and this was not done.

* the CDA did not have the size or authority to convince the shop stewards of a major factory that it had the resources or skills to help convert a multi-million pound company to a co-op: there was a credibility gap.

* the concept of democracy within a trade union (at least at shop steward level) tended to be contrary to that preferred by the CDA and perhaps alien to co-operatives: in one large rescue the shop stewards effectively formed a shop stewards' company, where the only form of members representation was through the trade union structures: the employers thus lost their independent representatives who became the managers.

Once again there are familiar barriers to successful working - a lack of trust in the CDA, questions about underlying philosophy and ways of working, a failure to make contact at the crucial point of TU structure. Here, however, the CDA did have a staff member with TU credibility - but this was not built upon and the necessary investment of time and work to ensure TU trust and credibility for the CDA was not done.
6. RELATIONS WITH THE STATE

Introduction

This section examines the relationships between BCDA and the State, in particular its relationships with Brent Council and the GLC. The first part describes some of the problems associated with the funding of projects by local authorities (LAs), while the second part considers the changing levels of support for the Agency and the ways the LAs sought to use the Agency.

Brent Council and the Urban Programme

In the first years of its operation most of the projects supported by the Agency were seeking funds from Brent Council - under the Urban Programme (UP). In 1980 the UP was split into two funds. One was for social projects and the other for Industrial and Commercial Projects. In both cases the process of decision was that the LA approved the proposal in the first instance, and then asked the Department of Environment (DoE) to approve it for UP expenditure – the DoE then paid 75% of the costs and the local council 25%. In the case of social projects there was an annual procedure for receiving and assessing applications, under which a Brent Council Committee selected and prioritised a list of projects that it wanted to support, and submitted this to the DoE who then chose what they would support. With Industrial and Commercial Projects a submission could be made at any time of the year to the DoE, although the total financial allocation to the Borough was fixed for each year so (theoretically) later applications had less chance of being funded than earlier applications. The purpose of the Urban Programme was to fund innovative projects that sought to relieve inner urban problems – but these could be either community or local authority projects. In Brent many of the community sector 'social projects' and 'industrial projects' (e.g. skill training schemes, Brent CDA etc) were funded through the two sections of the UP, at least for their first 5 years. At this time the political policy was that the UP should be reserved for community use, and not used to fund 'in-house' council schemes.

In the years between 1980 and 1982 the Industrial and Commercial Urban programme was the main 'pot of gold' that the CDA helped groups apply for. But there were a number of problems associated with this.

A major problem was that the decision process was very slow. Applications had to be submitted to Brent Council six weeks before the committee to which they would be submitted – this was so that other departments in the council could comment on them. If they were approved by the first committee then there was a further period of about one month for the recommendations of that committee to be agreed by higher committees and ultimately by the full council. They would then be submitted to the DoE – but there was no timetable for a decision from the DoE – this could take many months. This overall timetable was obviously unsuitable for trading projects – even new
start projects - since commercial opportunities could be lost and the member's morale certainly dampened.

A second problem compounded the first. The projects couldn't carry unspent money from one LA financial year to another. This meant that if the project was approved in the early months of any calendar year, the budget had to be spent by the end of March, otherwise it was lost. It seemed that the DoE 'sat on' projects until they realised that if they didn't make some decisions their own budgets would be underspent - so there would be a crop of project approvals in the last quarter of their financial year. Then the project, after perhaps months of inactivity in which very little forward planning could be done, suddenly had to spend crazily. This happened to the CDA itself: its approval came through in February 1980 and all its capital funds had to be spent in 6 weeks. This was achieved by a 'creative' use of contracts e.g. for building work and the 'future' supply of stationery etc. This was a mechanism that was used several times subsequently, to preserve the funds for new projects.

A third problem was that the decisions made about projects were based more on political will than good business judgement. For example, one car repair project (funded before the CDA was established) showed no cost of materials and no income in its 'five-line' budget. On the basis of this inadequate budget both Brent Council and the DoE approved a grant of £25,000 per annum for five years! Yet the Brent Council committee was chaired by a management accountant and other members were primarily business people. Two reasons can be suggested for this phenomenon:-

* the officers in both the local council and the DoE had no experience of trading activities and didn't know the questions to ask or the critical aspect to raise in their reports;

* the committee discussion focussed on the social needs and political responses - not on the viability of the particular application.

The UP therefore funded a number of projects that were basically unviable. This clearly created opportunities for local people, but also stored up problems for the council when these projects started to fail, or came back for more money. Brent CDA spent a considerable part of its first 18 months (as a staffed Agency) dealing with these problems.

A fourth issue that arose with UP funding was the effect of large grants on a commercial project. In principle grant aid was precisely the advantage that community-based projects were seeking. In practice, it can weaken the drive for a project to become financially independent - "there is always another week's wages available from the grant (at least in the short term) so if we don't start trading this week, next week will do." This attitude afflicted the Brent Multi-Lingual Community Printers where the major printing press was
never brought into operation. When they had exhausted one year's grant they started borrowing the following year's grant. Wages were always paid at the full rate, but a commercial level of trading activity was never achieved - or really attempted. When the Council stopped loaning 'future grant' then the wages stopped, the workers left and the business went into liquidation.

A final problem with the UP grants was that it was never clear who owned the assets purchased with the grant. It seemed at the outset that any assets belonged to the co-op and could be used by them as security on other loans. This was not contested until the printshop was in financial trouble - at that point Brent Council claimed rights over the equipment. Despite this, a lack of clarity prevailed, and it remained unclear how these assets should be treated in the accounts of recipient organisations. Brent Council's position seemed to derive from a DoE ruling on UP money for land and buildings, which stated that these must be owned by the council and leased to projects with a non-transferable lease. This could have been applied in a formal way to other equipment, but in practice it was not.

At this time BCDA also gave financial advice to a number of projects funded by the MSC. Here two problems were prevalent:-

* retrospective decisions about how much a project was allowed to spend;
* no recognition of debtors or creditors - all accounting was done on a cash spent/cash received basis.

Both of these problems indicated total commercial naivete by the MSC and created enormous problems and insecurity for projects.

After 1982/83 a number of changes were made that decreased the chances of co-ops getting funds from the UP. Three trends can be seen in these changes:-

* a reduction in the total money available;
* a preference for 'economic projects';
* a move towards support for 'bricks and mortar' only i.e. property improvements.

These changes coincided with increasing budgetary pressure on Brent Council (via penalties on the rate support grant system) and increased demands from the Development Department of Brent Council to use the Urban Programme to support factory and factory estate improvements (i.e. 'bricks and mortar'). However, these changes also coincided with money for projects becoming available through the GLC and subsequently GLEB.
The GLC and the Greater London Enterprise Board

Brent CDA had relatively little experience of GLC funding of projects. However, because it was well established when the GLC and GLEB were set up, it was involved with some of the earliest projects supported by each. In relation to the GLC there were two problems. First, the GLC were trying to rapidly implement their 'radical local economic strategy' and were therefore seeking 'exemplary projects' for funding, and especially projects with direct links to trade unions. Because of this they were prepared to back commercial projects for largely political reasons - selecting from the information available, to rationalise their support. This may have established their short term credibility, but didn't help long term success and tended to undermine the CDA's attempt to get the co-op to make proper assessments of the true viability of their project, and react to these assessments. Another problem relating to the early GLC funding was the uncertainty within the GLC about what powers it had, and the reticence of existing GLC staff to follow the political directives and stretch the existing local government powers in new directions. This took time - and the introduction of a new and 'committed' set of officers - to overcome.

The problem of legal powers also slowed the progress at the Greater London Enterprise Board since this was a totally new branch of local government activity. This caused particular problems for investments relating to property (BCDA was pursuing two workshop schemes at this time). For trading co-ops, however, the arrival of GLEB and its well funded Co-ops Unit made the achievement of funding much easier - although the process of evaluation was now much more rigorous. This evaluation covered both the extent to which the group were committed to co-op principles and the likely commercial success of the venture. But GLEB also introduced a new 'hurdle' for groups in their concept of strategic investments. In the early period of GLEB's existence the main problems were 'shot-gun'opinions from other divisions about the technology being used etc. However, over time a collection of sector studies and GLEB strategies were developed and it became more likely that a project would fail to get funding because the sector strategy showed that it was in a declining or overcrowded sector. In general this assessment may have been right, but the approach gave precedence to economic rather than social aims, which made it an inappropriate source of funds for some projects.

Model Applications

Brent CDA developed a 'model' for applications for funds that was fairly commercial and comprehensive. This 'model' was the preparation of a prospectus which included:—

* description of the project and its social and commercial content;

* a business plan which included projected trading accounts and cash flows and lists of capital equipment needed;
* evidence to support the sales predictions where this was available;
* personal details of the members, including education and training and work experience;
* other available material about their product or service.

This 'model' proved suitable as a basis for obtaining finance from LAs, GLEB and local banks.

On three occasions BCDA helped client groups apply for money from the GLC or GLEB for a feasibility study or a marketing study. One such study came up with very pessimistic results (but was funded for political reasons and subsequently failed), another was pessimistic and the group decided not to proceed, while the third was optimistic and helped secure GLEB funding for the project in the face of opposition from GLEB Technology Division.

How Local Authorities Used Brent CDA

The position taken by BCDA was that they advised the client and to some extent acted as advocate for the client in its approach to the funding authority. The responsibility for deciding to fund the project, or not, therefore rested (in the CDA's conception) with the funding body. This did not absolve the CDA from some professional responsibility for the content of a business plan but left the funder with the job of checking this plan. The way the funding bodies viewed this situation will be considered as one of the range of ways LAs (and GLEB) used the CDA.

Formally, Brent CDA was an independent company that received a grant from Brent Council to employ staff and other resources to carry out its work. But this says nothing about the power relations between the LAs and the CDA. When these are taken into account it can be seen that to a large extent the CDA was expected to operate as an 'outreach' arm of the LA service. At Brent this role was made explicit in a number of ways.

First, officers of the LA could explicitly demand that the CDA did certain work. The chief executive of Brent Council did this in relation to HPCC. Here the CDA staff worked independently from Brent Council and felt free to advise their 'client' against the interests or desires of the Council. On some occasions CDA staff worked alongside Council staff, on other occasions it advised the HPCC not to accept the position being put forward by those staff. So, although there was pressure to be involved, the method of intervention and the advice given was not dictated by the Council.
A second example of explicit direction came from the GLC who demanded that local CDAs carry out monitoring on local co-ops on behalf of GLEB. This monitoring was to ensure that financial returns were completed and that the co-op informed GLEB of significant changes in their circumstances. This directive was imposed on CDAs that were funded by the GLC, long after that funding was agreed, and gave some support to a GLEB view that local CDAs should act in some ways as GLEB local offices. This is clearly an organisationally tidy conception and has some sense in it - however, it was not made clear to the CDAs at the time of their funding by the GLC. Since Brent CDA was not GLC funded this condition could not be imposed in Brent. It was therefore in the strongest position to argue the case that giving a local CDA a formal monitoring role (and the funding agreement with local co-ops clearly stated this role) made it the legal agent of GLEB and it therefore couldn't act as the legal agent of the co-operative. On a practical level such differences could often be overcome, since it was usually in the co-ops interest to keep GLEB informed. However, the ultimate judgement of what to reveal to the funding body must be that of the co-ops: if the CDA becomes the agent of the funding body it means that revealing information to the CDA becomes the equivalent of revealing it to the funding body. If a co-op gets into trouble and doesn't want to reveal it to their funders (at least until a strategy for dealing with the problem is decided) then it cannot involve the CDA in trying to sort out the trouble. But the involvement of the CDA may be critical in finding a solution that is acceptable to the funding body. So, it is precisely at the point where GLEB would want the local CDA to be involved, that the 'monitoring instruction' would become a barrier to this involvement.

In relation to the GLC the concept that local CDAs were an outreach part of their own structure was reinforced by GLC decisions - again taken well after the decision to fund 'independent' local agencies - to impose ethnic monitoring and seek to impose professional staff on the Agencies. These are not moves that are necessarily wrong in themselves, but they were done without consultation with the Agencies and therefore underline the limits to the independence of the Agencies.

Another way that LAs (and GLEB) used Brent CDA was to let the Agency undertake the extensive groundwork for a project, and then effectively take it over as their own. This happened with the two workshop schemes helped by Brent CDA. Both involved a heavy demand on CDA resources to prepare the proposal. When discussions started with potential funders at GLEB and Brent Council, Brent CDA very soon found itself 'cut out' and the negotiations about the schemes went ahead between the Officers in GLEB and Brent Council without further reference to Brent CDA or the community control that it was pursuing. So the relatively meagre resources of BCDA was used by much larger organisations to develop a project to the point where the latter could promote the scheme as their own.

Underlying these ways in which public bodies used the CDA are questions of power and legitimacy. Two models exist here. In a 'devolved model' the CDA would be seen as a grass-roots community organisation. In this model the LA says 'here is some money: you
decide what the problems, priorities and needs are, and you decide how
to tackle these'. This is akin to the GLC's ideas of popular
planning. It leaves the community legitimating the use of the
resources provided by the LA. In contrast in a 'centralist model'
the LA defines what the problems, priorities and needs are, dictates the
techniques for solving these, and delegate the function of carrying
out their decisions to the community organisations. The former
approach accords with co-operative ideals of self-management and
direct democracy and Brent CDA's primary focus of 'tackling inner city
depression by co-operative means', since the process was viewed as
being as important as the outcome. The latter approach accords more
with the conventions of representative government where people in the
community delegate to others the responsibility for tackling their own
problems. It is unclear which model Brent council started with. Part
of the GLC's initial policy was to support 'popular planning' and the
devolved model was associated with this. Clearly, both Brent Council
and the GLC moved towards the second model of merely devolving some
implementation functions.

It was noted above that since BCDA was not funded by the GLC it could
not be forced to carry out the monitoring functions. This was indeed
the case. Nevertheless, there are other sources of power than direct
funding. An example of this was provided by GLEB who made BCDA
monitoring a condition of a loan being provided for one co-op. The
threat to the co-ops funding was avoided by the co-op agreeing to be
monitored, but the CDA not agreeing to doing the monitoring, and the
informal agreement that BCDA would continue to work closely with the
project.

Declining Brent Council Support for BCDA

Political support within Brent for the Agency declined between 1981
and 1984. This can be linked to the changing economic and political
environment within Brent Council.

At the time of BCDA's formation Brent Council was controlled by the
Labour Group and the founders of the Agency have close links with this
group; the Chairperson of the steering group was the Chairmen of the
Council's Employment Sub-Committee and a senior member of the Labour
Group. Thus, the Labour Group on the Council were a partner in the
promotion of the Agency. This sense of partnership was carried over
into the first projects promoted by BCDA (before staff were appointed)
which were hybrid co-operatives that included Councillors and
community representatives on their steering committees. Nevertheless,
it was a partnership primarily at the political level, and even here
it was constrained by the need for broad support at policy committee
level, and the DoE's approval for financing under the Urban Programme.
It is not clear how far this sense of partnership extended to the LA's
officers - specifically the two that dealt with employment and
training initiative within the chief executive's department. It seems
likely that they were ambivalent about two aspects of the CDA:-
the decision to place employment - creating resources outside of the LA, rather than expanding the council's own employment unit; 

the decision to resource co-ops and community based initiatives, rather than conventional small businesses.

The changes in levels of support for the CDA affected both councillors and officers and can be understood through a number of processes. Declining support from councillors can be linked to:-

* the decline in the role of the MC in the Agency and the failure of the staff to cultivate political support from a range of councillors and a range of political groups (like the Trades Council);

* the rise of new 'black politics' in Brent and the branding of BCDA as a white-orientated and racist organisation by some black councillors and community groups. One reason for this was the low profile that the CDA had in projects it helped and consequently the low level of knowledge about the support it was giving - especially to black projects;

* a change in the chairmanship of the employment committee and the retirement of the original chairman from local politics;

* increasing financial pressure on the council.

The decline in the levels of support from council officers may be linked to:-

* the transfer of these officers from the Chief Executive's Department to the Development Department where they became a part of a broader strategy of employment promotion that included factory improvements and amenity improvements to industrial estates;

* the establishment of a Small Business Advice Service in Brent - a conventional approach that was more familiar to these officers;

* a disenchantment with community - based initiatives as some early projects got into problems and needed extensive support;

* a preference in the Development Department for an expansion of employment services 'in-house';

* pressure on Development Department budgets at the same time that Urban Programme money was becoming increasingly 'bricks and mortar' this contributed to the abandonment of using UP money only for community sector initiatives.

Despite the apparent decline in support at officer level, the most significant change was probably relative - there were significant
increases in the Council resources dedicated to employment and training - but very little of this came directly through BCDA initiatives. The council now preferred 'in-house' expansion for its major developments - like the Black Business Advice Centre - although there was also a growing number of 'employment workers' serving minority groups e.g. women, Asian women, particular estates etc. This pattern of development may be explained in a number of ways:-

* the development of a more integrated policy approach, and the formation of a new employment section embracing both property and business support sections, within the development department;

* the availability of 'section 11' funds for the employment of people directly working with ethnic minorities: this is only available for council employees;

* a preference for retaining the right to direct staff and therefore retain control over activities.

So, in some ways, the decline in support for BCDA arose from a political disenchantment with the CDA, and the development of a much wider range of employment support outside of the CDA. Some of this was within Brent Council, and some in organisations serving the needs of particular communities.

Advantages of Independence

The experience of Brent CDA suggests that there are some major advantages in the CDA being independent from the LA; but there are also some disadvantages.

The advantages of independence include:-

* the CDA was free to set its own priorities, knowing the needs of all the different groups it was working with. There were several attempts by Brent Councillors and Officers to instruct BCDA to give priority to particular groups that the council was committed to helping. Help was given where possible, but not at the cost of 'dropping' other groups that did not rank highly on the LA priorities e.g. a worker co-op of white tradesmen;

* the CDA acts as the agent for the co-operative not as the agent for the LA or other bodies. This might involve the CDA giving advice that would be contrary to the interest of a LA, or of funding bodies. An employee of a LA could not (at least officially!) act in this way;

* because of its independent status the CDA could build up a trust relationship with a client group that would be difficult if the workers were public officials;

* the CDA has a radical campaigning function that seeks to create a supportive environment for co-operatives. To do this it needs to
operate as a pressure group in a variety of political areas - it could not adequately do this without independence;

its independent stance enables it to help projects overcome problems they might experience in obtaining LA support by addressing both political and administrative barriers - and sometimes helping one LA section overcome hurdles presented by another LA section;

a development worker operating within a LA structure will tend to respond to clients by seeking ways that the LA can provide support, when more appropriate forms of support may be available in the private sector or another LA.

Disadvantages of independence include:-

a weakness in dealing with LA departments since the CDA workers are outside of the inter-officer relationships and inter-departmental 'trade-offs' through which much LA business is transacted;

a lack of credibility because of the small size of the Agency and its relatively poor resources;

time costs involved in reporting to the LA about the CDA's activities and maintaining a propaganda flow in order to ensure continuing goodwill towards the Agency.

On balance it would seem that Brent CDA was right to be independent, given its orientation to community-level decision making. However, this independence also left it in a somewhat weak position when political orientations changed in Brent Council (among both officers and members).
This case study has raised a host of important problems that faced one local CDA operating in a deprived inner city area. In this section of the report we will summarise some of the main problems, and where possible make suggestions about how they could be avoided in future. However, many of the problems are deep rooted and unlikely to be easily resolved. In many ways the study raises more questions than it answers. It is hoped that these questions will stimulate and inform a debate on the role of local CDAs and other agencies that are trying to intervene to alleviate the problems of inner cities.

Setting Objectives

Many of the problems of Brent CDA were organisational. To some extent these problems are inevitable. It is important to recognise that CDAs, like many voluntary and community organisations, are complex organisations. There are many 'stakeholders' who have a legitimate interest in how the agency is run. There are the different community groups and co-operatives the agency is trying to serve; there are the clients the agency is working with, and of course the agency's funding bodies.

With such an array of different parties involved in the formation and running of a CDA it is almost inevitable that there are conflicts over objectives, and a degree of politicisation. However, this needs to be recognised and processes established - and resourced - to manage it. Clearly this was not sufficiently appreciated at Brent CDA. In the early stages of the CDA it is vital that objectives are discussed, debated and conflicting objectives negotiated. Priorities will also need to be set in the light of available resources.

A second problem concerned the relationship between the objectives of founders of the CDA and the process of staff selection. Staff were selected without properly considering the goals of the agency and without proper induction procedures. As a result an important split developed between some staff and the MC. Some workers felt that a CDA was primarily concerned with promoting worker co-operatives (as indeed many are) while the MC felt that community co-operatives had more potential for local economic development. It is important that staff should share the goals of their MC. As a result selection and induction procedures are vital. Induction should be a chance for a genuine dialogue over goals and priorities. Staff are unlikely to work effectively unless they genuinely understand and are committed to the agency's goals.

Objectives cannot remain static. As an agency's environment changes objectives will have to change if the CDA is to remain relevant. In addition as staff learn from their experience they will want to adapt and change objectives. It is vital then that staff maintain good contact with important organisations and groups in their environment so that they are aware of and sensitive to changes that are likely to
affect how they operate. There also need to be regular procedures whereby goals can be re-examined and renegotiated between staff and the management committee.

While these proposals may sound relatively simple and straightforward their implementation - and re-implementation - is likely to be difficult. In a highly differentiated and political context it may not be possible to reach agreement on goals. Careful selection and induction procedures require considerable time which active founder members may not have. The willingness to re-evaluate and change objectives may require an openness and flexibility that is not available. The composition of the MC may change, the legitimacy of its composition may be called in question or the MC itself may become an arena for conflict between different community groups - any such events may undermine agreement and precipitate a painstaking process of re-negotiation to rebuild consent and confidence.

Clarifying management roles

Defining the roles and relationships between management committees and professional staff is a perennial problem in voluntary organisations. In Brent CDA the problem was particularly acute. A number of problems inhibited the MC managing effectively:-

* There was an information gap between the MC and the staff. The members of MC did not have the time or expertise to keep abreast of all the developments in the agency;

* The need to treat the problems of some clients as confidential made it difficult for staff to give full information about the projects being developed;

* Collective agreement was difficult because the members came from different backgrounds and were pursuing different aims through the agency. Yet efforts were made to reach consensus decisions. This meant that decision-making was a slow and lengthy process, and if there was no consensus there was often no decision. As a result the responsibility for resolving many issues was left by default to the staff;

* The formalisation of the processes of the MC (for example producing written reports and following formal meeting practices) had the effect of shortening meetings, but alienated many people from the management process;

* These problems were exacerbated by member turnover and non-attendance at meetings.

These problems severely limited the capacity of the MC to manage effectively. Perhaps the most important mistake was in conceiving of the MC as management. A different role was needed for the MC which allowed them to exercise real authority over a limited range of
issues, but did not overload them so that there was little time for making reasoned decisions on any issue. One possible solution would be to think of the management committee as a board of directors rather than as management. Their primary role would then be to decide on policy issues and to be a body to whom staff would be accountable for their actions. This would leave staff with the responsibility of day to day management. Of course the Board would have other responsibilities as employers, as a support for staff and with an important role in external relations.

However, redefining roles although important is unlikely to be enough in itself. If a good working relationship between a board and staff are to develop it will need to be worked at and will have to go beyond formal meetings. A variety of options are possible. Board members could be teamed up with members of staff to provide support or assistance with particular problems. Sub-committees can be used to oversee particularly important projects. The board can be used for external relations work and to gain access to parts of the community. It may be possible for staff to keep board members informed of their work informally. This will not be easy, both board members and particularly staff will need to devote time and energy to making the relationship work.

This model leaves day to day management in the hands of staff. However at BCDA the staff collective did not work well. Where staff do not share common goals there is a danger with collective working that it can disintegrate into everyone 'doing their own thing'. As was suggested earlier careful staff selection and induction can help to overcome this problem. Nevertheless, it also has to be recognised that collective working does not mean having no authority structure, but that the collective is the main authority. If a collective is to work effectively procedures will need to be established to ensure accountability and for dealing with disciplinary matters and grievances. There will also need to be procedures for dealing with conflicts and deadlocks between members of the collective. Again a member of the board could possibly play a role in arbitrating in disputes. However, almost inevitably where staff come from different professional backgrounds and are working with different groups there will be some conflicts between individual goals and interests and those that are collectively agreed. This tension needs to be recognised and procedures developed that allow individual and collective goals to be redefined and renegotiated on a regular basis.

Relationships with the State

BCDA experienced a number of problems in its relationships with the State at local and national level. These can be grouped into two areas: problems concerning government procedures and funding, and problems concerning the role of BCDA with regard to the State.

BCDA's experience suggests that government procedures for deciding and monitoring funding to small projects like BCDA, and the co-operatives
with which it worked, were not adequate. The time scale was often too long, meaning that projects had to be delayed. Sometimes money could not be carried over from one financial year to another even when it had only been agreed late in the year. In one project funded by the MSC there was no recognition of debtors or creditors: all accounting was done on a cash spent or received basis. Even in agencies like the Greater London Enterprise Board timescales were often too long for deciding on spending applications.

Other problems stemmed from the ability of these bodies to assess funding applications. Some decisions on funding by Brent Council appeared to be made more on political rather than commercial grounds. As a result projects were funded that were not viable. Minimally funding needs to be based on sound commercial criteria. There is also a strong case that it should take into account the characteristics of the groups involved. If the intention is to help overcome some form of disadvantage, then further investment may be required to overcome the disadvantage. For example there may be a need for training input to improve skill levels.

If government bodies are going to invest in local economic development it is crucial that they adapt their funding procedures to meet the needs of co-operatives and small businesses. Since the experience of Brent some local authorities have set up special bodies to do this, for example, a number of co-operative loan schemes have been developed. Undoubtedly this has improved the situation. However, it is less clear what are appropriate criteria for assessing applications for finance, and how the performance of recipients should be monitored. This is an important area for further research and debate.

Any agency which like BCDA is dependent on the State for funding, but is meant to serve another constituency, will frequently experience conflicting pressures. Is it just another arm of the State, or is it there to represent the interests of its clients, in this case co-operatives? Although formally an independent body this tension was very evident at BCDA. The agency was occasionally instructed by Brent Council to carry out various activities. In addition the GLC and GLEB both tried to use the CDA to monitor loan applications to co-operatives in their area. This proved a real dilemma for BCDA. If it did not do as requested by the local authorities it risked losing the financial support and good will. On the other hand it risked losing its independence, and perhaps its credibility with client groups. If co-operatives saw BCDA as monitoring their loans it could damage the relationship of trust and openness that had been established. Reliance on funding from the State also leaves agencies like BCDA vulnerable to changes in political direction, as was experienced at Brent.
Learning from the Issue of Racism

Race became a major issue at BCDA. Looking back on the experience up to 1984 it is clear how ill prepared were both the staff and the MC of the Agency for dealing with racism. In particular:

* they were unaware of their own racist attitudes;
* they were ill-equipped to deal with the increasing importance of racism in the local political agenda;
* they had no training in racial awareness and politics and therefore didn't have the tools to argue against superficial accusations of racism;
* because of language and cultural barriers (and stereotyping associated with these) the staff were unable to deliver the CDA service to some communities within Brent.

What could have been done about this? In the BCDA situation there can be no excuse for the decisions made over 4 years not to appoint ethnic minorities into staff posts. This was straightforward institutionalised racism. But there are some mitigating circumstances since there was a dramatic increase in racial politics in Brent during the 5 years from the inception of the Agency to the end of 1984. In particular there was a growth in the concept of appointing black people to professional posts in order to provide a new model for all races in the communities in which they serve. How could the CDA have achieved this once it made the early choice to appoint white professionals: how can a small agency remain flexible in a rapidly changing environment? Possible solutions include:

* appointing staff on limited term contracts (perhaps 2 years);
* making sure that both staff and MC receive training to help them adjust to the changing environment, and recognise how the agency must respond;
* seeking funds to appoint trainee staff who can learn from, and subsequently take over from, white professionals - this was recommended by BCDA for HPCC (and implemented there), but not considered for the Agency itself.

But isn't the race issue limited to a few Boroughs in Britain? Well it is clearly more pronounced in Brent and some other inner city Boroughs than in most Boroughs. However, I suggest that the general issue is relevant to most Boroughs because:

* in many cases there should be increased attention to ethnic minority communities that do exist, and are frequently marginalised in both economic and cultural affairs;
* in every Borough there are other groups that may well deserve the special attention of a CDA, and where a similar approach (to that being adopted for ethnic minorities) would be effective: women, young people, industrial workers, disabled people, single parents, people living on particular housing estates etc.

Working With Disadvantaged Groups

Brent CDA was set up with the objective of helping disadvantaged groups create their own businesses and jobs through collective action. The groups that it was to help suffered from multiple deprivation including poor housing, high unemployment, and poor schooling and training. In addition the groups came from a range of ethnic backgrounds with their own culture, traditions of working and particular problems.

In order to begin to work effectively an agency needs to recognise the distinctive characteristics and needs of different groups, and to work actively to build up trust and understanding. Two important barriers inhibited these developments at Brent CDA. The first was the appointment of white professional staff, whose background and training left them ill equipped to work with different ethnic groups. Secondly the agency was hampered by its inability to establish priorities. It tried to serve a range of different groups, and provide a responsive service. As a result it failed to spend enough time cultivating relationships with various groups and constituencies it was trying to help. I have already suggested how appointing staff from different ethnic backgrounds and improving management procedures could help alleviate these problems.

However, the experience of working with disadvantaged groups at Brent raises a host of questions and issues which are not so easily resolved:

1. What form of organisation is appropriate for different ethnic groups? At Brent the agency encouraged groups to adopt forms and procedures that were understood by the State or other institutions in order to facilitate applications for funding. However, this process was sometimes resisted, or did little to affect the informal organisational process. This raises questions about what are the characteristics of successful black organisations? How can outside bodies distinguish between different (black) ways of doing things and ineffective ways of doing things? Is the co-operative form of organisation appropriate for all groups?

2. Can groups which suffer from severe deprivation be effectively assisted to form co-operatives? For example BCDA had very little success helping young black people form co-operatives, although many of them still benefitted by developing new skills and experience. The barriers to co-operative development were formidable, the workers lacked business experience, their training was often to a low level, they lacked the work
discipline which comes from employment and often had unstable home backgrounds. In addition their experiences of discrimination often prevented them from recognising their own limitations. Can such severe problems be overcome by a small development agency? Should CDAs concentrate their efforts on the more skilled and experienced members of these groups? Perhaps more fundamentally it raises the question how far are worker co-operatives relevant to inner city areas like Brent? Do co-operatives really make it easier for disadvantaged groups to enter the labour market, or are worker co-operatives a solution looking for problems? Would other forms of policy initiative be more appropriate?