

## Community work in the UK – a continuing journey

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This article is an updated version of an earlier Talking Point, published just over five years ago. The earlier sections are only partially revised, but I have tried to include in the section on the current situation a flavour of some recent developments and debates.

### **Historical overview**

In the United Kingdom community work is a relatively new profession, but draws on three traditions each of which is at least a century old. The first of these is that of **informal self-help and solidarity**, the reciprocal support and sharing which characterise small-scale forms of social cooperation, including the extended family. The second strand represents a more organised form of **mutual aid**, whereby formal associations were established with a subscription affiliation to provide assistance and shared resources across a defined membership. Collective organisations such as the early craft guilds and friendly societies are examples of these. The third strand differs from the others in that it is based rather more on **philanthropy**, a desire to intervene on behalf of or in the service of others deemed 'less fortunate'. The 19th century charities and Settlement movement are representative of this approach, which, like the first two approaches, often combined a campaigning dimension as well as explicit remedial education, 'character building' and somewhat condescending relief of hardship. Like many elements of welfare in the UK, the origins of community development are to be found in civil society, pioneered by voluntary organisations which were independent of the state, such as the early trade unions, churches and charitable foundations.

As the twentieth century gathered momentum, the state realised the value of a community-led approach to social welfare and we begin to see the emergence of government-sponsored community development. This occurred at home and abroad. From the 1930s through to the 1950s there was a major re-housing programme with people being moved from the inner-cities to begin their lives afresh in newly built towns and peripheral estates. Community officers were appointed with the specific brief of working with the re-located residents to help them set up autonomous groups and projects which would **create a 'sense of community'** and re-ignite collective strategies for **helping people to help themselves**. These workers were frequently employed by social services departments and saw themselves as an 'agent' of the welfare state, acting on behalf of the relevant authority rather than the local residents. Social integration and increased neighbourliness were seen as the parallel and primary goals of community activity. Through the establishment of voluntary groups, the 'community' was invested with responsibility for protecting individuals from

the impersonal institutions of the modern state and providing opportunities for democratic participation.

During this period and into the 1960s, community work saw itself as the **preventative branch of social work**, emphasising individual development and collective welfare. It was thought that social problems arose through increased fragmentation and alienation and could be addressed by involving local residents in developing collective solutions. Community associations and other locally-based voluntary organisations were seen as potential managers of projects providing social facilities for the elderly, health education, benefits advice and childcare. There was considerable emphasis on personal growth processes that assumed that community involvement in itself was

- therapeutic (staving off mental health problems),
- morally worthy (encouraging mutuality and social responsibility) and
- educational (promoting the acquisition of skills and new understandings).

Adult education classes and cultural activities were seen as 'improving' the mind for sections of the population who had been disadvantaged by school, while recreational societies such as youth clubs and sports associations were encouraged as a means of diverting people from a life of crime, idleness and social disaffection. It could be argued that it was during this period that community work became clearly associated with the development of 'community', meaning self-help groups and informal networks which characterise the local voluntary and community sector.

Community development as a means of smoothing potential disruptive transitions has also been used abroad. Post-war Britain needed to develop strategies for its overseas territories, struggling towards independence, which would allow them to achieve self-government while **protecting colonial interests**. The Foreign and Colonial Office (1943) proposed a definition of community development which was designed to facilitate a transfer of (democratic) power, without disruption to economic relations and indeed while ensuring the **development (often through unpaid labour) of an indigenous infrastructure** for transport, education and basic health and welfare. The approach was paternalistic, promoting strong local participation in order for these developments to be implemented within limited resources. In 1948 the United Nations adopted a definition of community development which described it as "a movement to promote better living for the whole community with active participation and if possible on the initiative of the community". However, it also recognised that "if this initiative is not forthcoming" community development provided "techniques for arousing and stimulating it".

Thus community development has long contained within itself a tension between the goals of the state and the aspirations of the 'target'

community, with no guarantee that they would necessarily be aligned. This was exacerbated in the 1970s with a number of social policy initiatives which required greater levels of **public participation in decision-making**, notably in relation to planning, education and health. These were accompanied by an increased focus on the neighbourhood and attempts to develop community-based local solutions to what were essentially problems caused by wider economic and political forces. The government set up a number of Community Development Projects in areas experiencing high levels of unemployment and social deprivation. Community workers were employed to work with local people to achieve increased participation through improved

- consultation,
- confidence,
- collective organisation and
- communication

between residents or users of services and the welfare professionals that delivered them. Community involvement became a major plank of urban policy at this time, underpinned by assumptions that the problems experienced by 'disadvantaged communities' were caused by some kind of cyclical deficit within the local population. This 'community pathology' approach finds echoes in the notion of 'capacity building', regeneration and 'neighbourhood renewal' currently being promoted by the New Labour government.

The Community Development Projects provided valuable experience and evidence for a more radical version of community work which became prominent in the 1970s. This was informed by both Marxist and anarchist analyses of the economic system, accompanied by the growing influence of equalities or liberation movements, particularly around anti-racism, gender equality and more recently, Disability rights. For some community workers, their role became an **extension of the 'class struggle'**, with campaigns for a higher share of the 'social wage' and increased democratisation of the local state. Even though many community workers were paid for by the state, they tended to view local and central government as the 'enemy' and sought to **build alliances** between the community groups and other organisations of the working class, notably the trade unions. This inevitably created conflicts and the CDPs were eventually closed down. They left in their wake a number of influential research reports, notably 'Gilding the Ghetto' (CDP, 1977) and a legacy of disillusioned communities, 'burnt-out' workers and disenchanted politicians.

Meanwhile, a less confrontational version of community development, sometimes termed '**community social work**' or '**social planning**', continued to operate alongside the radical model. This was primarily concerned to promote self-help and voluntary organisations which would complement or improve statutory welfare services. The purpose was to

establish and support community groups and networks that could act as a kind of local safety-net and to provide a form of participatory democracy which could be used by the state to improve its decision-making.

With the election of the Thatcher government in 1979, there was an explicit transfer of responsibility for welfare from the 'nanny state' to 'individuals and their families', with an increased reliance on private and voluntary organisations to provide services. Unemployment rates rose to unprecedented levels and public money, administered by the Manpower Services Commission (and subsequently the Training Agency) was used to create short-term jobs and **volunteering opportunities**. During the 1980s much community work effort was diverted into such schemes, helping voluntary organisations to bid for and manage contracts to run job creation programmes and what had hitherto been local authority services. A growing commitment to 'equal opportunities' meant that funding became available for 'communities of interest', for example women-only projects or culturally specific services, such as for the local Bangladeshi community. Grants were made available for short-term projects which reflected prevailing political issues, such as crime, drugs, HIV/AIDS or homelessness. As a consequence, community work became **more specialist and more insecure**, dependent on temporary employment contracts and often operating at the periphery of larger institutions. Community workers employed by local authorities were increasingly used to **monitor grants** given to voluntary organisations, to arrange **consultation exercises** and generally act as the 'eyes and ears' of the state. Conversely, community workers employed in the voluntary sector became '**project managers**', delivering services, drawing up business plans and accounting for the 'investment' through rigid and pre-determined performance criteria. Many might argue that this period represents the 'dark age' of community development.

### **The current situation**

Since the election of New Labour in 1997 there has been a renaissance for the idea of 'community'. We now even have a Minister for Communities (David Miliband) and a whole section of the Home Office devoted to Active Communities. Many of the government's policy and funding initiatives emphasise the importance of involving local people or service users in the planning and management of programmes aimed at tackling 'social exclusion' and generally enhancing the 'quality of life' for disadvantaged communities. In England we have an ambitious national strategy for '**neighbourhood renewal**' which combines the politics of increased community participation with a desire to improve the delivery of mainstream services, such as education, policing, housing and health. Similar programmes exist in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Embedded within this approach lies a commitment to producing 'integrated and sustainable solutions' to what are recognised as very

complex and deep-rooted problems. In order to achieve this, the government is interested in practices which

- increase community engagement,
- improve democratic leadership, and
- develop more inclusive partnership working.

While current thinking tends to highlight the role of charismatic and dedicated individuals taking on leadership and entrepreneurial roles, nevertheless the scope for community development interventions has expanded dramatically. The demand for greater levels of community involvement has been accompanied by what are known as '**capacity-building**' projects, designed to increase the skills, knowledge and confidence of local representatives and policy officers for their work on Partnership Boards. There has also been a growing expectation that residents and service users will be consulted about future developments in their living environment, with opportunities to identify shared concerns and design 'local solutions to local problems'. The government would like to encourage people to make a more active contribution to society, as volunteers and citizens. It is therefore **investing in the community and voluntary sector** to assist those groups and organisations to deliver public services and promote volunteering. In particular, the ChangeUp programme, now called CapacityBuilders, provides substantial funding to improve the infrastructure of the voluntary sector, although (whether by design or oversight) the financial framework for this has made it difficult for smaller, local organisations to access this funding.

In an attempt to co-ordinate the work of civil servants across Whitehall, the Together We Can programme draws together initiatives from 12 different departments to encourage better working with communities. This builds on the Firm Foundations report, published last December, which sets out the government's framework for community capacity building. This was the result of deliberations by two working groups of civil servants and people from the community development and voluntary sectors. It represents a major step forward in recognising the importance of using community development approaches to support learning and action within communities. However, there was no new funding attached to the Report's recommendations and the government (with a few honourable exceptions) still seems reluctant to use the term 'community development'. The methods and values of community development can be applied across many disparate areas of public policy and welfare. At the moment there are particular opportunities in relation to government concerns around

- social inclusion,
- community safety
- sustainable development,
- community cohesion,
- active citizenship,

- volunteering and
- community planning.

Community development (in its purest form) has, however, tended to emphasise the principles and processes of working with local people to help *them* achieve *their* goals, rather than the delivery of services or 'solutions' determined by welfare 'experts' or government officials. In the past, it has been notoriously difficult to demonstrate the impact of community development or to specify exactly what skills and resources are needed to do this kind of work successfully. This is changing, due to a growing interest within government and the work of the Community Development Foundation (CDF), the Federation of Community Development Learning (FCDL) and the Community Development Exchange (CDX). CDF has been involved in developing **indicators** of community engagement and community 'life' generally. The Federation has had a major role in devising and promoting the **national occupational standards** for community development work defining key competences for this role. CDX produced a **Strategic Framework** which has been widely used to explain community development for people who are less familiar with this approach. The recent CDF/CDX **survey of community workers** has given us a much clearer picture of who is undertaking community development, their employment conditions and the difficulties they face, particularly in terms of poor management, short term contracts and access to training. Progress has also been made in recognising the need to create a robust evidence base for community development. CDF is now working with a consortium of University-based partners and 'thinktanks' to set up a **long-term research study** investigating the relationship between community-development interventions, social networks/local social capital and 'quality of life' outcomes, such as improved health, less crime, higher rates of employment and so on.

### **Core principles**

In the earlier version of this Talking Point and elsewhere (Gilchrist, 2000; 2004), three models of community work were proposed based on consensus, pluralist and conflict approaches. New Labour has tended to adopt a communitarian ideology in relation to welfare services and civil renewal, arguing that people have both rights and responsibilities towards the rest of society, while acknowledging that many are excluded from mainstream services and opportunities. Key programmes that have a community involvement requirement often combine consensus and pluralist analyses while rejecting more radical strategies for achieving social justice. Whichever model is dominant within different agencies or government funded-programmes, there are certain characteristics of community work which distinguish it from similar professions, notably its commitment to participatory forms of democracy. This sits uneasily alongside the UK's tradition of representation and

paternalism and may be perceived as posing a challenge to the power and status of elected councillors and politicians. There are serious issues around what is understood by the term 'community leadership' and a consequent reluctance in many local authorities to fully embrace the idea of 'active and empowered communities'.

Fundamentally, this is what community work aims to develop by working with individuals, groups, networks and organisations in ways which tackle inequalities and encourage collective action. The emphasis that community development approaches place on 'process' as well as specific goals is a crucial but often misunderstood aspect of the work. The way in which something is achieved is just as important as *what* is achieved. For example, it is not simply a matter of arranging events or activities which benefit the community. Effective community development involves **participation in decision-making** at every stage and every level. It should increase people's sense of **empowerment**, by helping them to learn new skills and knowledge, and to gain confidence in leadership or negotiating roles. The **informal education** dimensions of community work promote learning from experience through shared reflection, modelling and debate. It encourages people to try new activities, to learn from each other and seeks to create situations which boost people's self-esteem and their desire to discover forgotten talents or acquire new abilities. The Home Office 'Active Learning for Active Citizenship' programme, piloted through regional hubs and currently being evaluated, has pioneered the integration of community development philosophy with adult learning techniques. Since people's involvement in activities supported by community development work is usually **voluntary**, it is important that their experience is rewarding for them as individuals as well as benefiting the wider community.

This balance between meeting the needs of individuals and achieving **collective goals** is sometimes difficult to maintain, but represents an important core principle. Community development is primarily concerned with helping people to work together more effectively and equitably. Nowadays this includes supporting people's involvement in **multi-agency partnerships** with representatives from the private and statutory sectors. It also means developing their own activities and organisations in neighbourhoods, villages and housing estates, as well as within more dispersed populations who share a common interest or collective identity. Community workers play a vital role in helping people to network, making links and forming useful relationships across perceived and actual boundaries. They act as both **catalysts and connectors**, putting people in touch with one another and identifying opportunities for increased co-operation. This may require dealing with conflicts and misunderstandings between the agencies involved, but it is also about managing differences to bring about positive changes in attitudes or working practices. **Anti-oppressive strategies** are a defining feature of British community

development and methods and policies have been developed which simultaneously **promote equality** and **honour diversity** within society.

## **Conclusion**

Community development in the UK continues to be full of challenges and opportunities. New concepts (such as social capital and collective efficacy) and old values (such as trust and solidarity) provide an exciting framework for future exploration. There is increasing recognition that the skills, strategies and personal qualities involved in working with communities (often of disadvantaged people) have much to offer other professions. It will be important to keep in mind the core principles of community development and to ensure that community work maintains its fundamental purpose which is to **help people to help themselves**. This 'bottom-up' approach, as it is known, is what makes community development a distinct and valuable contributor to achieving a more just and stable society.

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### Websites:

- Community Development Foundation [www.cdf.org.uk](http://www.cdf.org.uk)
- Federation for Community Development Learning [www.fcld.org.uk](http://www.fcld.org.uk)
- Community Development Exchange [www.cdx.org.uk](http://www.cdx.org.uk)
- Active Learning for Active Citizenship [www.active-citizen.org.uk](http://www.active-citizen.org.uk)

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