

## What's the matter with values ?

### Some thoughts on the value of the values-base for community development

Community development has long proclaimed that it is a way of working with people that is underpinned by a vision of social justice. Its values are fundamental to both purpose and practice, and may be broadly defined as:

- participation;
- equality;
- learning; and
- co-operation.

A defining feature of community development is that the work proceeds from the perspectives and interests of communities themselves, with an overall goal of the establishment of sustainable capacity and infrastructure to support on-going and future activities and engagement. Community development aims to re-shape relationships within and between communities and organisations, so as to strengthen the foundations for collective action and partnership working. This includes changing power relations as well as extending the reach of social networks.

It is often asserted that *how* community development is carried out is as important as *what* it achieves. *Processes* are seen as having equal significance as goals. In particular community development workers try to ensure that the people they work with learn from the experience, are empowered and acquire a greater sense of mutuality. It is not sufficient to simply organise a community event or provide a community-based service. The principles of community development demand that the intended beneficiaries and users are involved in making decisions, that steps are taken to tackle barriers and biases that might inadvertently exclude some people from participation, and that there are opportunities for people to reflect on their involvement within a wider context.

Working *with* rather than *for* communities inevitably takes time and requires a skill set that prioritises interpersonal work as well as organising ability. An understanding of the subtleties, complexity and dynamism of community and organisational life will ensure that political insights about how influence is exerted in decision-making (at all levels) can be used to empower people who have tended to be marginalised and disadvantaged.

However, the values and commitments that underpin community development work have not been readily accepted or understood by other stakeholders, such as funders or professionals who are working with communities; for example, from a built environment or health background. Although progress has been made in creating models for evaluating the effectiveness of community development initiatives and measuring its impact on community life, community development has found it difficult to demonstrate its specific contribution to the outcomes of government policies. Consequently, its values and methods are sometimes overlooked or distorted within programmes that prioritise delivery within relatively short timescales.

In recent years, government thinking in many areas has been closely aligned with community development values. Broad policy themes of cohesion, inclusion, engagement and civil renewal all acknowledge that power and resources are unevenly distributed in society, and that therefore effort, funding and skills are needed to enable and empower excluded people to have more influence over the decisions that affect their lives. Concepts such as social capital and active citizenship offer a useful way of explaining the broader, transferable purpose of community development, alongside concerns relating to justice and equality.

At its heart, community development is about change through collective action and it may be this aspect of empowerment that has prevented it from being more widely endorsed. It has also proved difficult to establish a robust evidence base that demonstrates clear correlations between community development's espoused aims and its actual achievements, for example in relation to poverty and health.

However, it is possible to identify correlations between the core values of community development and the successful implementation of programmes and services. In fact, it could be argued that neglecting these values has resulted in the imposition of inappropriate 'solutions' that have only partially met the needs of the target communities, have failed to 'reach' those most in need of support, or have proved unsustainable.

Applying the value of **participation** means involving communities in decision-making and taking their views and interests into account. People are able to contribute perspectives and experiences that might not have been available to officials and professional 'experts' and the strategies developed as a consequence are more likely to fit local circumstances. This leads to fewer costly and wasteful mistakes, as well as a sense of shared 'ownership' such that better use is made, and care is taken, of new or refurbished facilities. For example a health centre whose building and design has incorporated local ideas and energies can be used for a variety of purposes and seen as part of the community landscape. Different needs and enthusiasms are catered for because people have had a chance to influence decisions from the outset, as well as sometimes being part of the delivery and management.

Similarly, placing the value of **equality** at the centre of the work is an acknowledgment that society is not a level playing field: that we live in a world full of inequalities and social exclusion. It ensures that attention is paid to overcoming obstacles or discriminatory practices that prevent some people from participating in or benefiting from an initiative. Positive action measures are used to accommodate cultural differences, ensure access or remedy past imbalances. This allows new, quiet or hidden voices to emerge and to influence decision-making, ensuring that the needs and interests of the whole population are met, not just the most articulate.

An important aspect of community development is the value it attaches to **learning** from experience, encouraging people to question, to discuss and to reflect on what is happening in their own lives and the world at large. Informal education processes support people in trying out new roles, acquiring new skills and knowledge, challenging accepted views and growing confidence in one's own rights and capabilities. In order to be active citizens or lifelong learners, many people find community-based, task-led approaches to be more motivating than formal lessons and workshops. Community development creates learning opportunities that emerge from people's own experiences but lead to empowering new insights and assurance.

In contrast to the image of communities as homogenous and harmonious, tensions and divisions abound based on age, ethnicity, patterns of settlement and prejudices. Many people are resentful or suspicious of official bodies, taking up hostile attitudes based on previous bad experiences or cynicism. **Cooperation** reminds individuals and organisations of the need to work constructively across boundaries and to respect differences. Community development workers are often to be found behind the scenes, bringing agencies together and building bridges between diverse sections of the community through networking, brokering, advocacy and mediating. Given differences in power, interests and culture, conflicts are inevitable as organisations compete to promote their interests, but community development provides techniques and commitments to deal with these and enable people to work together over the long term.

*(Based on the SCCD Strategic Framework, the National Occupational Standards for CD work, and the latest draft of CDX's Information Sheet: What is community development).*

*Alison Gilchrist unpublished paper  
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