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1

Introduction: What is community work?

Many kinds of spontaneous and autonomous initiatives arise in communities, run in a voluntary capacity by the members of those communities. This book is, in large part, about the process of assisting and supporting such initiatives, essentially by another organisation or worker. There is no agreement among practitioners about the exact use of terms, and some phrases, especially ‘community work’ and ‘community development’ are used in different ways by different writers. The terms are also sometimes interchanged by the same writer or used rather loosely. I can, therefore, only say how I generally use the terms, and try to be consistent. Community work is also constantly evolving.

Willmott (1989) emphasises two main points about community. First, communities can either be of a geographical nature or be ‘communities of interest’, where the link between people is something other than locality, for instance, people suffering from a particular impairment. Second, there is both attachment and interaction between the members of a community. It’s also important to understand, as Hoggett *et al.* state, that there are all kinds of competing subgroups and struggles between different sectors for power in a ‘community’. Hoggett *et al.* also show that the more you try to examine ‘community’, the more slippery it becomes (see also Mayo, 1994, pp. 48–68; Henderson and Salmon, 1998). So the word ‘community’ in ‘community work’ largely needs to be seen as an adjective, describing a certain approach to social intervention (but see pp. 8–10 on this) rather than having the aim of ‘creating community’.

For me, the best way to start thinking about community work (especially community development work) is to consider it as *the process of assisting people to improve their own communities by undertaking autonomous collective action*. Having said this, I use the term ‘community work’ mainly as an umbrella or ‘overarching’ phrase to cover, for instance: paid work; unpaid work; doing things for, or to benefit particular communities or groups; and helping

groups or communities to do things for themselves. I use other terms to describe specific approaches within what I now believe needs to be seen as the very ‘broad church’ of community work.

As is implied above, assisting communities to help themselves collectively requires, in many cases, paid workers. These workers are employed in a number of different guises by many organisations and have a range of job titles. Community work may also be carried out by: social workers, housing officers, clergy, adult educators or health workers – in addition to, or as part of, their ‘normal’ work.

The essence of professional (paid) community work (especially community development work) is to ensure, first, that people, as members of geographical or non-geographical communities get a better deal, and second, that, as far as possible, they bring this ‘better deal’ about themselves (largely through collective action), developing more skills and confidence in the process. The main rationale for employing staff to facilitate this process is twofold. First, a healthy society needs the active participation of its citizens – imposed solutions to problems without the involvement of their supposed beneficiaries just don’t work well enough. Citizen participation is also vital as a means of holding politicians and policy-makers to account. Second, without assistance, many attempts by people to engage in collective action and other forms of participation and influence fail, especially in ‘excluded’ communities. Note, however, that while ‘professional’ community development work tends to be mostly directed at disadvantaged communities, the process of supporting local autonomous collective action can be, and is, applied in a wide range of other ‘communities’ too. For these reasons, if a society is seriously concerned to improve the quality of life for all citizens, ways need to be found of working to create, support and strengthen community groups and to ensure that they are effective, influential, inclusive, democratic and work for just ends.

Different approaches to community work

It is important to try to categorise the different approaches to community work because it is easy to lose our way. However, the ‘ideal types’ of community work discussed below do not describe exactly the messy reality of practice. Also, there are so many different dimensions to community work and so many things a worker needs to know that you really need a team of workers in order to have enough

skills to do everything. However, we almost never have that ‘luxury’. Each approach to community work is listed in Figure 1.1 in the form of a continuum. At one end of each continuum is one form of work, while its opposite (more or less) is at the other end. Workers can plot where they are on each continuum either in general, or for a particular piece of work. Most of the approaches described below are worked through in later chapters.

Figure 1.1 Different dimensions of community work

Community development work.....	Social planning
Self-help or service approaches.....	Influence approaches
Generic community work.....	Specialist community work
Concern about ‘process’.....	Concern about ‘product’
The enabling or facilitating role of the worker.....	His/her organising role
Community work ‘in its own right’.....	Community work as an approach or attitude
Unpaid community work.....	Paid community work

Community development work ‘versus’ social planning

Community work, especially community development work, is best understood at neighbourhood level. However, the principles of community development work at that level apply in a number of other contexts, too (see, especially, Chapter 9). Neighbourhood community workers tend to operate in two main ways. The first is to help existing groups and to assist people to form new ones. This approach can most usefully be called *community development work*, and it is this method which is most unique to community work. Community development workers operate as facilitators with people in relation to what *those people* decide to become involved with, helping them realise *their* collective goals. The second main way in which a worker may operate is by initiating projects, liaising and working directly with service providers to sensitise them to the needs of specific communities, assisting them to improve services or alter policies. In this approach, the worker, to a greater or lesser degree, bypasses the community group, if one exists, in order to bring about change. I generally refer to this form of community

work as the *social planning approach*. While all community workers need to be able to work in both ways, some community work jobs will involve more opportunities for community development work and others more opportunities for social planning. Inevitably, in a community work team, some staff will primarily be doing community development work and others, probably the manager, social planning. There are also many forms of community work which involve both community development work and social planning (see Chapters 6 and 9). This applies particularly to partnership working, covered briefly at the end of this chapter and in more detail in Chapter 8.

Self-help/service approaches and influence approaches

If we examine the role of the community group or organisation with which the worker is working, we note that some of the community's needs can be met largely from the resources existing within the community: play schemes, lunch clubs, voluntary visiting schemes, coffee mornings, sports clubs, festivals. In these situations the group is involved in a self-help or 'service' approach. Other needs can only be met by modifying or changing the policies of organisations outside the community or by accessing resources from them. These needs require 'influence' approaches, which can involve everything from 'consensual' work, through to 'contest' (see Chapter 7).

Generic and specialist community work

'Generic' community workers are able to work in relation to any issue or sector – play, employment, leisure, housing – and with any group – older people, women, disabled people – whatever kind of agency they work for. However, service agencies often appoint what can be called *specialist* community workers (though they usually have other job titles) whose job is both to improve services and to involve consumers or client groups in some way in this process. Thus, in the past three decades in Britain there has been a growing emphasis on 'specialist community work' by service agencies either with the whole geographical community on a particular issue (for example, health) or with a specific category of people (people with learning difficulties, for instance) (see Chapter 9).

Process and product, expressive and instrumental groups

What is often called a 'process' goal (or even just 'process') is to do with changes in people's confidence, knowledge, technical skills or attitudes, or the development of an organisation. A 'product' goal is to do with the changed material situation – an improved housing maintenance programme or a successful play scheme. Both kinds of goals are important and are intertwined. Different situations tend to dictate whether process or product goals predominate. I was once working with a group to try to prevent a motorway from being built. In order to present evidence at the public enquiry a great deal of co-ordinated work had to be undertaken quickly. If 'process' had predominated and attention had been given to ensuring that the group members developed the necessary skills, the deadline would have been missed. It is often the case that a worker can use a 'facilitating' or 'enabling' approach when process goals are paramount, but uses an 'organising' approach when concerned with product.

Community development work is largely based on the idea that 'product' should be brought about by a process which ensures that the participants in the action have as much control as possible over all its aspects and that they acquire the ability to act themselves (individually and collectively) as a result. However, this approach usually only works if product goals are also met, since group members lose heart if they fail to achieve their concrete objectives. Therefore, in most situations workers have to attend to both kinds of goals.

Community groups which are only concerned with process (that is where the sole purpose of the group is the shared experience, the learning and other social benefits within it) are sometimes called 'expressive' groups. Expressive groups can be contrasted with 'instrumental groups' in which the main purpose is to achieve a 'product'. While all groups have expressive functions, some groups have virtually no instrumental functions. It is important for a worker to understand the main function of any particular group, since an instrumental group needs 'leaders' who can run meetings and organise action, as well as people who could obtain some benefit from being members but who might not contribute towards 'product'. If a worker is working with an instrumental group, it is vital that he or she encourages people to join the group who are prepared (or may be helped relatively easily to develop the skills) to take (instrumental) action, usually via a committee of some kind. Even with

an expressive group, however, someone has to organise it, which requires instrumental skills.

The facilitating (or enabling) role and the organising role

The classic community development work role is that of enabler, guide, catalyst or facilitator where the worker goes at the pace of the group and assists its members to work out what they want to do and how to do it. This style of work is also sometimes called 'non-directive'. However, there are times when the worker takes a more directive, leadership or organising role within a group, either informally or even as the chair or secretary, usually because 'product' needs to predominate and because the group members may, at that time, lack the necessary motivation or skills. The worker may also change from less to more directive roles and back several times in one meeting.

Community work in its own right and community work as an attitude or approach

When a generic or specialist community worker is facilitating autonomous collective action in the community as his or her main job (or part of it), this can be called community (development) work 'in its own right'. However, schoolteachers, faith workers, shopkeepers, police officers, community centre caretakers, housing workers and other service providers may carry out their work 'in a community work way'. That is, they show respect to community members, seek to learn from them, try to take their concerns into account when doing their own jobs, and offer occasional advice or help. Thus, the central ideas (i.e. empowering individuals and groups, understanding the needs of others and taking these into account when actions are taken or policy is made) are not unique to community work.

Unpaid and paid community work

People who are active on an unpaid basis in their own communities, including elected representatives, often claim to be community workers. One difference between paid and unpaid community work can be that the unpaid workers are community leaders rather than facilitators. Such unpaid workers generally take roles in community groups such as chair and secretary. However, in Britain, some courses for 'volunteer' community workers or activists now encourage those

volunteers to develop facilitation skills. And paid workers sometimes take organising roles, as we have seen. However, the paid community development worker really must have the skills to facilitate. The unpaid worker may be poorer without them, but they are not absolutely mandatory for running community groups. Also, paid workers are usually answerable to a manager or board and have terms of reference requiring them to do particular kinds of work, with the supports and sanctions which go with paid employment. These arrangements both legitimise the work of the paid worker and create expectations about standards of practice which mostly do not apply with unpaid self-selecting workers. A related point here is that it is possible to use ‘community development’ to describe the autonomous process by which community groups form, grow and act (mostly without any outside assistance) and to use ‘community development *work*’ to describe the professional activity of supporting this process. In the minds of lay people the two processes are often not separate.

Starting where people are: a paradox

A community worker on a council housing scheme was keen to set up a tenants’ association to pressurise the council to repair the housing more effectively. Several tenants agreed to come to a meeting to discuss this. Nobody came. Then, some tenants asked the worker to help them set up a bingo group. While the tenants, presumably, wanted better housing, it looked as if they were not motivated, at that time, to take collective action to do anything about it. As community workers, we are often so enthusiastic about our own objectives for the community (and we can only do the job well if we *are* enthusiastic) that we fail to perceive that the community members do not share that enthusiasm. This mistake is easy to make, partly because community members will often tell us what they think we want to hear.

The paradox is that effective community development work can only take place if the members of the community take some responsibility. Yet, what community members want to do is often different from what community workers think they should do! Community workers who think the community has a particular need but find that, at a particular time, the community will not work to achieve it have three, not mutually exclusive choices. They can seek to meet the need themselves by taking an organising or social planning role. Or they can build up contacts and trust and ‘sow seeds’ until some

community members are ready to ‘own’ what the worker thinks they should own. Finally, the worker can work with the community on priorities it identified but which were not his or hers.

The centrality of networking

Most models of community development work are based largely on an organisational paradigm, that is the idea of creating, supporting and working with definable community groups in order to achieve specific ends. Thus, most community development practitioners seek to create an ‘organised community’ with its own, often ‘low-level’ institutions which can act as agents for change, and do not try to build that vague thing ‘community’. There is, nevertheless, something real, although very intangible, about a ‘sense of community’ (see also p. 1). Feelings of solidarity, sharing, etc. help make life worth living, especially when times are hard, and it is this which ‘networks’ address.

Sometimes, the real work of a committee gets done or the real impetus for a breakthrough is agreed in an informal chat outside a meeting. While these processes can lead to abuses of power, any good community worker creates and uses such opportunities to move things along, to ‘test the water’ for a new idea, to smooth a ruffled ego, and for many other purposes. Gilchrist (2004, pp. 28–86) describes what I now think of as the ‘networking paradigm’ of what community development and community development work are at least partly about.

Getting things done using the ‘organisational’ paradigm alone is difficult. Organisations have to be built and maintained, develop rules, gather resources, allocate roles, etc. The more complex they are, the more bureaucratic they become. This formality makes it difficult for them to negotiate with each other, especially when there is a change of situation for which there is no precedent, agreed procedures or staff available. Experienced community workers spend much time creating links both between local people and between them and a range of organisations, helping them deal effectively with each other. This ‘networking’, which community workers both engage in and facilitate, takes place, at least in part, at a semi-informal level, with individuals meeting, to a degree, as individuals, when they may not be operating entirely in their formal roles. If you can get two individuals from different networks chatting informally

about an issue, in the pub, on the train, or in the works canteen, there develops a greater flexibility about their interaction, as a result of which obstacles to getting things done begin to shift. This shift may be accompanied, or indicated by the sharing of a joke or a personal story. Shared visions can also begin to emerge from such interactions – they don't often come from formal meetings as the box below shows. You also know you're getting somewhere if the body language of one of you mirrors the other's.

The 'stupid' questions

I was once at a committee meeting where a senior manager who was to run the meeting failed to turn up. As a consequence the lower-level staff talked informally about the issues in question and dared ask the 'stupid' questions which they had not voiced beforehand. At the end of the meeting a member said that this was the first time she had really understood the issues in question and now knew what we were supposed to be doing! The group went on to agree a course of action to which all were committed, I think, because of the open and honest exploration in a relaxed atmosphere.

Networking results in accidental and unpredictable outcomes and could be called 'planned serendipity'. According to Gilchrist, networking is about operating on 'the edge of chaos' because networks are by definition, unorganised. But it is on this 'edge' that change begins to happen. Other key points Gilchrist makes in relation to networking are that people's sense of collective identity is constructed within informal groups and relationships. Networks cope relatively well with contradiction and complexity, are a way of ensuring critical opinion is expressed and can create a needed safe space to discuss contentious issues. Co-operation in and between networks relies on persuasion and reciprocity, not coercion and contracts. However, you can't control networks, and they can undermine formal authority. Half the work in all organisations is done through networks and is invisible to management. In particular, networks are very relevant for multi-agency working and provide space 'behind the scenes', where people feel free to say things. Networking is a kind of 'bridging social capital' offering the beneficial 'weak ties' which we all seem to benefit from personally and professionally. Moreover,

networking across boundaries helps people gain useful insights from other areas/fields and can result in the creation of alliances across disciplines. Additionally, if a network has provided an experience in the past of good collaboration, there may be more resilience when there are deep-seated conflicts.

The existence of effective networks is probably a prerequisite for the development of effective community groups and projects. Networks are like the clouds of pollen which ensure plants bear fruit. However, you need to be strong to create time to network, because today's emphasis on targets has resulted, to some extent, in the spontaneity and flexibility being squeezed out of community work activities. Make sure you network systematically.

The problem of invisibility and demonstrating effectiveness

It is not easy to observe the painstaking work, often behind the scenes, which has resulted in a community group becoming effective. Consequently, it is difficult to demonstrate, to potential funders, for instance, that community work makes a difference. Community workers don't do the development of the occupation any favours when they emphasise that the community itself has undertaken a project without also indicating that, in order to facilitate it, the worker's role was critical. In order to demonstrate effectiveness it is often necessary to make potential sponsors 'walk the streets' with you. That is, you have to take them to see effective projects and schemes and then carefully talk through with them the reasons why the particular scheme was successful. Community workers need to develop the skills of making community work processes more visible. Also, more research is needed to indicate connections between community development work and increased voluntary action and other outcomes (see CDF/CLG, 2006).

Start-stop . . . start and sustainability

Many community work projects are short-term: three years at most. It will be six months before the project is 'up and running'. It will be another six before much is delivered. And after another year and a half the staff will be looking around for new jobs, with the better staff leaving first! Then, several of the community-run initiatives supported by the staff run down, leaving a disillusioned community.

Three years later, a similar initiative repeats the process in the same area! Moreover, some individuals are excellent at their jobs, others less so. Yet others may be temporarily ineffective through illness or domestic problems. Once in post, the worker may also have to seek to redefine their job description because it was not carefully enough thought through. For all these reasons, community work needs to become strategic, long-term, appropriately funded and integral to the mainstream work of the organisations which deliver it. In Britain, while there has been good progress over the last few years, there is still limited understanding of the above points.

What is community work for?

Values and attitudes

Community work, especially community development work, can be described, first, as a set of values and, second, as a set of approaches linked to those values. The values are to do with justice, respect, democracy, love, empowerment and ‘getting a better deal’ for people who, in some way, are collectively ‘missing out’ (see FCWTG, 1999, 2001; SCCD, 2001, for more on values and occupational standards). The values of some community workers seem to be primarily political. Other workers come from pacifism or religion (see Kelly, 1993; Kelly and Sewell, 1996). Yet others seem to come at it from a concern merely to ‘do good’, for instance, or, in the case of Alinsky (1969, 1972), a concern to make the existing system work better for ‘the poor’. In real life, there are many pressures and constraints on a worker. So, whatever their ideology, effective practitioners need to select pragmatically those actions which seem most likely to help the members of a particular community get a better deal for themselves and become more confident and skilled, and which also improve local government or other systems for community benefit. Having said this, however, socialist and feminist perspectives, to which we now turn, have had a great influence on community work thought in Britain and left a substantial legacy.

The contribution of socialism and feminism to British community work

In the early 1970s, a number of research reports came to the conclusion that the main cause of disadvantage was the capitalist system.

These reports drew heavily on a Marxist analysis of society to explain the persistence of poverty. It followed (to some community workers, at least) that, if you were seriously interested in alleviating disadvantage, you needed to work to 'abolish capitalism'. This analysis, together with the sharp growth of community work jobs in the early 1970s in a liberal policy environment gave the impetus for a mini-explosion of attempts, by some, to become a Marxist or socialist community worker. At that time the prescriptions of socialism were largely: nationalisation (at least to some degree) of the main means of production distribution and exchange; worker (and, to a degree, 'community') control; a high taxing state; redistribution and an extended role for the state in service provision. The key characteristic of most of the community work approaches to practice flowing from this analysis was 'oppositional' work, since one was seeking, in however small a way, to abolish an oppressive class-based system. This could include: campaigns, demonstrations and sit-ins; links with trades unions to build more power for change; creating federations of community groups to develop more power for tenants or residents; engaging in political education and propaganda.

However, if you were working, for a Local Authority on a deprived council scheme, how could you gain the space to work in 'oppositional' ways, whatever these actually were? (Many community workers are (still) 'told what to do' by rather directive employers.) Also, since a worker has to seek to achieve specific objectives, evidence was needed that working in 'oppositional', rather than 'other' ways, was more effective at achieving these objectives. Finally, community workers could not reasonably be called such if they did not work, at least to some degree, to the agenda of community members, many of whom would not have been interested in 'oppositional' work.

None of these theoretical problems was, I believe, effectively dealt with by 'socialist' community workers. Also, between 1978 and 1997 there was great governmental emphasis (under Margaret Thatcher and John Major) on competitive capitalism and individual entrepreneurship. Many nationalised industries had been privatised (and the Labour Party which came to power in 1997 did not reverse this general approach). The power of local councils and the resources available for them to spend were reduced, and there was also widespread recognition that local government could sometimes be wasteful, oppressive and bureaucratic. Scope for 'socialist'

community work became even more limited. Additionally, it came to be recognised by government that the public, private and community sectors all had to work together to bring about benefits for excluded areas and people. Communities began to be asked for their views, however inexpertly this was done.

Partly as a reaction to the apparently ‘macho’ and materialistic world view of some ‘Marxist/socialist’ community workers, from the mid-1970s, several women involved in community work began drawing attention to the exploitation of women by men. Such ‘feminist’ perspectives also took community work thinking beyond gender relations alone and into issues to do with ‘caring’ and personal growth (see Dominelli, 2006). Many of these ideas from feminism were accepted (in theory at least) by ‘socialist’ community workers (and others) and, for a time, it was possible to identify people who seemed to fit the model of a socialist/feminist community worker in that they consciously tried to combine insights from both these perspectives in their practice. Some were ‘zealots’ who seemed to place ideology above the experience and constraints of practice. Others combined a commitment to their ideology with an ability to act pragmatically, recognising that you had to achieve benefits in a relatively short time for the people with whom and for whose benefit you were working. Yet other workers, who did not start from a socialist/feminist analysis, also took note of such insights.

A wider concern with equality

By the mid-1980s, the ‘oppression’ of women, ethnic minorities, older people, gay men, lesbians, disabled people and others was firmly on the community work agenda as it was increasingly recognised that certain people are systematically denied opportunities both by the way public and private organisations work and by personal prejudice. From then on, many local authorities (in particular) developed equal opportunities policies and engaged staff, some of whom were once (or thought of themselves as) community workers in order to extend and implement such policies. By about 1990, those community workers who would have been associated with a socialist/feminist approach to practice had tended to adopt as their focus a burning concern to fight against inequality, discrimination and injustice and to build the power of oppressed groups. The initially narrow ‘socialist’ class analysis had been replaced by a wide-ranging commitment to combat all forms of discrimination

and exploitation. So, the inheritors of what can perhaps be called the ‘socialist and feminist tradition’ of community work now sometimes find themselves working on equality issues in relation to a range of excluded or oppressed groups in the public, voluntary and to a lesser extent the private sectors. However, community workers whose underlying political ideology, if they consciously have one, is not ‘socialist/feminist’ have generally also taken on board this ‘equality’ issue, and it is now part of mainstream British community work theory.

The ultimate paradox is that some aspects of a Marxist analysis are, in my view, increasingly relevant today. The global market has meant that, while capitalism has ensured that many prosper beyond their wildest dreams, many others seem destined to have poor (or no) jobs, poor health, poor education and a life of poverty and in some cases oppression (e.g. asylum seekers enslaved into prostitution). As the majority are not badly off, they do not vote for significant redistribution, and prospective governments advocating this would not get elected. This is not to say that the answer is to seek to abolish the global market, nor that nothing is ever done to alleviate poverty and oppression – the answers are not simple.

Society’s institutions and the individuals within them tend to develop systems and cultures which reinforce negative attitudes to: ‘scroungers’, ‘disaffected’ young people, ethnic minority people, women (in some situations), disabled people, older people. The economic position of ‘excluded’ people, together with these cultural forces and expectations, also often creates a kind of ‘learned helplessness’ which prevents them from developing positive self-images and envisioning for themselves a better world where they can succeed rather than fail. Thus, action is needed at different levels and in a range of ways to counteract these economic, social, cultural and psychological processes which produce and perpetuate systematic oppression, exclusion and powerlessness. An understanding of such processes is, in my view, essential for effective community work practice, though the opportunities to address them at field level are, of course, limited.

The value and effects of community work

Little is written about the effects of community work, but a picture of its value is now beginning to emerge.

Individual change

Being involved in (voluntary) community action can help some people grow enormously and lead enriched lives, benefiting not only their community but also their career. Additionally, there is now evidence that people who are part of strong networks have less heart disease and generally recover more quickly from highly stressful situations, than those who do not. However, the direct positive effects from engaging in community action probably mainly occur to the small numbers of people who participate in it. In addition, people often lose money by being involved in community groups; they take unpaid leave or subsidise the group, for instance. Running a group sometimes causes breakdowns, burnout and marital stress. Being involved in community action often causes a person to look at the world in a new way – for example, a woman beginning to question her role as wife and mother – an important but sometimes traumatic process.

However, community work and community action help to spread the idea, by demonstration, that people can become involved in doing things themselves. When people initiate a project, it is likely that they got the idea from someone else. People who are involved in community action probably also provide models for their children, who later become involved in similar activities. But these changes are often indirect, long-term and difficult to measure. A linked point is that no one piece of community action should be viewed in isolation.

Complex outcomes

When I was a fieldworker, several years' work had been undertaken by my predecessor to help establish a carnival committee, within which were several able community leaders. By the time of my arrival, some of these leaders were aware that many other community needs required attention. I encouraged them to think about these, and two of them subsequently became leaders of other community groups and left the carnival committee, which declined somewhat. In encouraging these leaders I had probably contributed to the decline of the carnival, which I had not anticipated.

Community groups can and do achieve significant objectives. But these changes are often limited, and many groups die before achieving much. A dispassionate analyst would probably conclude, not only that the efforts put in far exceed the concrete achievements,

but also that not many members of community groups develop personally either. But are there other achievements and why is it that community workers feel so strongly that collective action is good? One answer is as follows. There are often some positive outcomes which are not intended and which are not connected in the minds of most people with the existence of a particular group. Jim became chairman of a parent-teacher association (PTA). At the same time, two students doing practical work with me started a youth club and, when they were due to leave, they found that he was willing to take over. He later started running a junior football team too. The PTA had provided a way in for him, first to fulfil himself more, and second to contribute to the community. More research is needed in order to distinguish such outcomes and the wider effects of community development work (see CDF/CLG, 2006).

Community development work encourages at least some people to believe that they can act, that they can cause positive change. Of the lessons learned by the participants in community action, perhaps the most important are new attitudes, new political perspectives and a broader understanding of how the world works. Grace, a single parent, told me that, since our project had been running, she had learned to stand her ground with the housing department worker and no longer let her walk into the house at will. The carnival committee ran a reasonable carnival for a few years, as a result of which the area appeared on the front page of the local paper for positive reasons rather than because it was a ‘debtors’ haven’. This must have done much to boost the self-esteem of residents, possibly giving some of them more hope that their life would get better. Goleman (1996, 1998) singles out ‘hope’ as a key factor influencing people’s ability to make the most of their life chances.

Changing policies?

Pressure from community groups alone does not seem to induce a governmental organisation to change a policy completely, though such pressure can help to modify one, especially if community groups forge alliances with other organisations which have greater influence. But community groups also have a longer-term effect. Through running playgroups for thirty years or so in Britain, the pre-school playgroups movement was influential in affecting thinking about play. Also, campaigns against damp in council housing and campaigns for more women’s refuges, though often unsuccessful in

individual cases, resulted in recognition that certain types of house construction are faulty, and that there is an enormous amount of domestic violence. Similarly, the incorporation of equal opportunities policies in many organisations and also in law, in Britain, has been the consequence, in particular, of campaigns from the women's and black movements. Thus, the major outcomes of community action are often their long-term effects on the climate of opinion and on subsequent legislation or service provision rather than their immediate concrete results.

Evidence-based theory

Putnam (2000) has produced considerable evidence to show that, where there are strong social networks and a wide range of voluntary associations, there is: less crime, better health, more wealth, a better educationally qualified population and many other 'good' things. Clearly, community workers strengthen networks, facilitate the entry of people into community groups and assist in the creation of more (and more effective) local organisations. These networks and organisations can also be thought of as 'social capital'. This is, in summary, 'the capacity of individuals and communities to act directly and indirectly, in a range of ways to influence their surroundings and circumstances for the better, gaining personal benefits, including skills and useful connections, in the process'. Chanan (2003) also produces evidence to indicate that the building of social capital is a prerequisite for the success of neighbourhood regeneration programmes. That is, the existence of locally run organisations, 'staffed' by skilled, knowledgeable and 'network-rich' volunteers, is necessary if the large neighbourhood regeneration programmes are to work effectively and be sustained (see Chapter 10).

Conclusion

The persistence of disadvantage is not merely due to the lack of resources allocated to disadvantaged neighbourhoods. It is also due, in industrialised countries, to housing, education, social services and other programmes not being joined up and there being so many rules and formal procedures that the service deliverers are so restricted in what they can do that they cannot act flexibly to meet social need. The bringing of people together in local partnerships with service providers (see Chapter 8), facilitated by community workers or

others, creates an interface between such service providers and the local community which at its best, enables problems to be ameliorated. Community development work is basic in all this, because normally, informed and sustained participation by local people in such partnerships only happens (at least, in disadvantaged areas) when they grow into that through engaging in small-scale activity (e.g. the road safety campaign, the ‘litter pick’ or the summer play scheme) first. The structures, networks and new accountabilities created in the development and regeneration process also give legitimacy to the community workers who, sometimes via local partnerships, sometimes out of their own initiative, create new projects (social planning) ‘bend’ existing programmes or find ways around barriers to local improvement (see also Chapters 6 and 10).

Points to ponder

1. Do you agree that the core of community work is ‘assisting people to improve their own communities by undertaking autonomous collective action’?
2. What do you believe community work is for?
3. How important should political ideology be in community work?

Further reading

Alinsky (1972) *Rules for Radicals*.

CDF/CLG (2006) *The Community Development Challenge* (this important publication covers many of the theoretical points discussed in this chapter).

Corkey and Craig (1978) ‘Community Work or Class Politics’.

Dominelli (2006) *Women and Community Action*.

Gilchrist (1995) *Community Development and Networking*.

Rothman (1976) ‘Three Models of Community Organization Practice’ (the all-time classic community work theory article).

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