Good practice in community development work: Towards community well-being

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Abstract

This paper critically explores what constitutes good community development practice and identifies key elements that support good community development practice, and which have positive outcomes for client communities and practitioners. A brief introductory definition of the concept of community development provides a framework for the discussion, followed by a critical analysis of the nature of community development practice that focuses on creating community well-being.

Introduction

Good community development practice is defined as development intervention that is underpinned by the values, principles and commitment to social change for the individual, group and community. The primary objective of such intervention is the enhancement of individual and community well-being.

Well-being is described as the experience of a good quality of life (Chambers, 1997: 9). It is an intrinsic part of human experience manifest in everyday living, which consists of meeting basic human needs such as food, shelter, clothing and a basic income. Holistic well-being extends beyond these basic needs to include security and freedom from fear, the experience of fun, love, good relations with other people, and a network of friendships. It also relates to having peace of mind, adequate information and resources to make informed choices, and to be an active and effective member of one’s community. Well-being is contextualised by social and cultural values. The definition of community well-being used in this paper incorporates both the western (pakeha) liberal values of capitalist (liberal) democracy, individual freedoms and equality, as well as indigenous people's perspectives that emphasise collective identity, manaakitanga (respect, kindness and empathy), whanaungatanga (kinship and good community relationships), and awhitanga (the connectedness between individuals amongst themselves and their community, and the strong links between spiritual and physical well-being).

This paper examines the idea of good community development practice by identifying the key elements of practice that have positive outcomes for client communities and practitioners. Rather than focus on specific case examples it provides a broad framework on which practitioners in specific sectors may engage with their own examples.

The paper is divided into five sections. Following this brief introduction, section two defines the concept of community to provide a conceptual framework within which community development intervention takes place. Section three identifies some of the underpinning values and principles of development intervention, and is followed by section four, which examines the
challenges of the complex community development practice environment. The conclusion provides a critical perspective for practice focused on creating community well-being.

Community as the basis for good development practice

Community is defined in terms of a group of people who share some things that bind them together. These could be physical location (geographic or spatial community), or socio-cultural such as heritage, common experience or common visions, values and expectations. The critical factor is that members engage and interact with each other and have a sense of belonging and identity with each other, or group consciousness.

A clear understanding of the concept of community is critical for good community development practice on at least two levels: the personal and the political. At the personal level, community fulfils three principal needs:

- The need for self-awareness and self-identity, which come from the process of socialisation and feeling of belonging.
- The need for collective identity, those things that make a community distinct and give it pride in itself; and
- The need for collective action to protect and promote self and collective identity and both meet current needs and work towards creating a common vision and attaining desired future expectations.

At the political level, community becomes the locale for conscientisation and action, understanding power, power relations and the patterns of distribution of power, and how these may be used to attain the goals of well-being for the individual and the community. The needs at the political level are for the community to be effectively organised and managed internally to enhance the capacity of the members and groups in the community to operate in the political arena, to relate to each other, with other groups within the community and outside of the local community; for the community to develop internal capacity to undertake necessary actions for effective social change; and to develop civil society to lead the process of social change.

Given this conceptualisation of community, good community development practice focuses on values and principles for the empowerment of individuals and communities to work towards attaining what they consider to be their well-being. Such practice focuses on the needs of the community rather than the agenda of the sponsoring or funding agencies, no matter their status, statutory, not-for-profit, market (business) sector or community-based organisations. Individual and community empowerment comes through activities focused on the realisation of the human potential that enable people to attain three basic human goals, namely the capacity to be self-sustaining, to be valued (human dignity and fundamental rights) and to be free from servitude (equity and social justice) within the overall context of their community and society.

This form of community development intervention goes beyond providing just the basic physiological needs of food, shelter and clothing, and basic services such as health and education (material well-being which is the primary outcome of economic growth). It also incorporates non-material well-being, the enhancement of human dignity, reduction of inequality, personal security, respect for individual human rights, recognition of personal values, social justice and empowerment (which are the outcomes of social development). These form the fundamental bases of the values and principles for development intervention irrespective of the type of community (geographic or socio-cultural) and the scale of the community (local or global).

Values and principles underpinning good community development practice

Focus on social change

Community development intervention seeks to empower individuals and communities to attain their well-being through collective action. This process consists of a series of conscious planned actions that focus on the dynamics inherent in the interaction among community members who
seek to attain well-being within the constraints of their resources: capital, land, technology and organisational capacity. In a capitalist market economy these resources are inequitably distributed within society. A major underpinning principle of community development intervention therefore is the attainment of equity in resource allocation to enhance the capacity of all sections of the community to attain well-being.

Attaining material well-being is principally dependent on having adequate income (financial capital) to purchase the goods and services required for a good life. Thus many community development programs tend to focus on income generation (economic investment) and income distribution (social welfare). Attaining non-material well-being (addressing issues of freedom and autonomy, human dignity, citizenship and the right to participate effectively and contribute to one’s community, partnership and protection) is less dependent on income or financial capacity, but more on social capital. Hence good development intervention seeks to promote equality and equity; respect, observance and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms; and the effective exercise of rights and the discharge of responsibilities at all levels of society (United Nations, 1995).

The critical questions relating to values in community development practice include what constitutes values, whose values are more important, the community workers’ or those of the employers, or the project funders’? Where do the values of members of the community fit, and how does the community development worker operate outside her/his cultural base?

Community development practice cannot be values-free. While there may be contested levels of accountability (as discussed below), good community development practice upholds the underpinning principle of development intervention, namely, focus on social change. Community development as a vehicle for social change works to create an enabling environment where members of the community themselves make decisions about their issues. The enabling environment is the active engagement of local people, local knowledge and expertise, local resources, and maintaining adjust-ments between social welfare and local community resources. The community development worker acts as a catalyst in the process, stimulating community mobilisation and organisation, enhancing the development of organisational skills and capacity of the community, establishing internal links within and external links between the community and external agencies to access information and resources. This involves both internal and external political development (Ife, 2002: 175-179).

Participation and collaboration

Another principle of good community development practice is participation and collaboration. This means that members of the client (partner) community define what their needs and issues are, what they consider to be their well-being and what processes would work best within their context, rather than the sponsoring or funding agency imposing an external agenda that may not address the underlying needs of the community. For example, in state sponsored community development programs, the needs of the client community would be best met through effective participation strategies rather than token consultation. Problem identification and needs analysis, for example, cannot be undertaken for the community without their active participation. As Maria Augusta Neil eloquently explains:

Only when all the people participate in the making of decisions will the decisions be made in their interest. For no person can stand where another is except vicariously – after the other speaks his or her truth, and the one is open to hear it. An unspoken position is an unknown variable (Neil, 1977: 18).

Effective participation enables the community to articulate its vision, which enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of development outcomes. However, the process of effective engagement and the development of community vision can be challenging to the community development worker as explained in the following section.

Creating community vision
Vision relates to our reason for being. It is about how we see ourselves and how others see us. Visualising, looking into the future and creating a picture of who we want to be. It is a visual map of our community as it should, or would be. Vision sets the framework for all other things that need to be done to realise the visual map.

To achieve effective community outcomes, community development practice must move steadily from vision to goals and objectives to enable the development of an overall longer-term strategic plan. From the strategic plan we develop medium term (2-5 years) plans and then short-term (annual) business plans. Developing good community vision demands effective engagement of all sections of the community through effective participation. Engaging an inclusive range of people helps to strengthen the community owner-ship of both the process and the outcomes of the vision. A vision that is attained through collaborative processes of harmonisation is more relevant and accessible to the community, and has a better opportunity of community owner-ship, and consequently is more likely to address the felt needs of the majority of the community.

This demands establishing and nurturing local leadership at the community level, local community networks to sustain diverse local perspectives and harmonise community vision by fostering trusting relationships and understanding between community members, groups and agencies. Using effective facilitation skills, community development workers would support and enhance the building of broad-based involvement of the appropriate communities of interest in the development process, thereby increase inclusion and minimise marginalisation.

The principle of integration
Community development practice operates at three levels, namely, the individual and family (the micro level) who are at the centre of all development initiatives, the groups and immediate community (meso level), and the larger society and policy framework at the macro level. The principle that underpins good practice in this context is integration. This principle demands that the needs of individuals and families cannot be treated in isolation. Welfare needs of the individual are intrinsically linked to those of other individuals and families in the community and those of the local community. The needs of communities also overlap amongst other communities and into the overall society. Good practice consists of effectively addressing the needs of the community at all three levels within the context of the available resources, taking into account their history and the needs of future generations, as well as maintaining a balance between local resources and external input (or welfare and grants). Development intervention, therefore, takes place in a highly complex environment. Integration of intervention strategies at all three levels enhances the opportunities for the effectiveness of intervention.

Processes and outcomes:
Community development is both a process and an outcome. Community development processes focus on the dynamic interactions within the community as it responds to policies and programmes dealing with common issues of social change. Development intervention invariably impacts positively and negatively, and also unevenly across the sectors of the community. It affects interactions and relationships between people amongst themselves, and with their institutions, organisations and the environment. One of the challenges of community development practice, therefore, is to manage these impacts and relationships, and to design organisational structures that mobilise local experience and expertise to address both individual and community needs.

In seeking to promote this function, community development emphasises the importance of local people and institutions in articulating their needs (the principle of participation and collaboration), and the design of appropriate local social, economic, cultural and political organisations and institutions to improve the effectiveness of development intervention. Processes include all forms of collective action, community-derived decision making, partnerships for sharing information, and experience and knowledge from the community development
workers, the sponsoring agency and the community itself. Outcomes relate to building community capacity for social, economic, environmental, political, cultural and spiritual development. Outcomes are the products of processes (or activities) such as delivery of services, the mobilisation of resources, information and knowledge, and the shift of decision making from outside of the community to the local community on issues affecting the well-being of members of the community.

Good community development practice, therefore, shifts decision-making process from centralised policies and procedures of the top down approach, to a more collaborative bottom up, accessible and flexible model that builds on community-based initiatives and innovation. This approach demands partnership and a shared understanding through dialogical relationship (Freire, 1972) that combines the knowledge and wisdom of the community development worker and the understanding, knowledge and experience of the community. Dialogical relationship takes the visions of communities to inform the policy-making and decision-making and procedures of governments (central and local authorities), the market and other funding or sponsoring agencies, to deliver more effective community-focused development outcomes. This process creates opportunities for communities and sponsoring agencies to achieve mutual outcomes through partnerships and shared vision to address critical issues of exclusion and marginalisation of local communities in the development process.

It is important to emphasise that neither processes nor outcomes are superior to the other. Both are equally important. In some cases the process may be the outcome. For example, conscientisation of the community about issues of oppression in the community to enable the creation of community vision can be both process and outcome.

**Ethical principles in community development**

Ethical practice is about working in the interest of the community, the underpinning principles being to improve the circumstances of the members of the community, particularly the disadvantaged, promote inclusion and diversity and sustainable development that respects the environment as human habitat rather than just a resource to be exploited.

Good community development practice takes ethical practice beyond simply resolving the potential conflict between the practitioner’s actions in relation to others (professional colleagues, clients, employers and funders). Ethical practice relates to finding balance between individual rights and community well-being, equity of access, structural inequality, empowerment and structural oppression, social control and social change. Community development workers navigate these challenges in their everyday actions and relationships in an increasingly complex environment of contesting accountabilities, divergent paradigms about social and collective responsibility and individual choice.

In the particular case of Aotearoa New Zealand, unlike in the United Kingdom for example, the absence of a professional organisation of community development workers limits the development of ethics for community development practice. Attempts in the late 1970s and early 1980s to form a professional association were not successful and the organisations collapsed (or became dormant). The New Zealand Local Government Association Incorporated developed a charter in 1993 titled: ‘Charter for Local Government on Social Justice Issues, Community Development and Social Services’ which stated that:

Local government is elected to represent each community in every aspect of that community’s well-being. It is the most appropriate level of government to recognise and effectively respond to local needs and aspirations. This requires a council to be involved in issues of community welfare and social justice (New Zealand Local Government Association Inc., 1993 SO20/02).

The charter identifies key principles of social justice, community development and social services. While the provision of social services is not a primary function of local authorities in Aotearoa New Zealand, this statement was clearly a response by community development workers both in the state sector (government departments and local authorities) and the not-for-profit and community sector to the local government reform of 1989-1990 which consigned local
authorities to what Bruce Hucker describes as:

...administrative and regulatory units with peripheral political functions, instead of as essentially political institutions performing those functions among others for the common good or in the public interest (Hucker 1997: 55).

The statement represents to me the best attempt at defining the ethical base for community development practice in Aotearoa New Zealand so far.

Current discussions on the formation of an association (or associations) emerged from the National Local Authority Community Development Conference in Hastings in September 2003. These are progressing and will be finalised at the 2005 conference in New Plymouth.

One of the most critical issues for any association when it is formed would be the definition of ethics of community development practice. Given the diversity of practices between the statutory sector (in fact even within the statutory sector there are marked differences between the different central government departments and local authorities), and the community based and non-government organisations, finding common grounds for what constitutes ethical practice would be challenging. The common ground has to be what I stated at the start of this paper, namely, enhancing human dignity, reduction of inequality, enhancement of personal security, and respect for individual human rights, recognition of personal values, social justice and empowerment

Reflective practice

The values and principles discussed up to this point focus on the client community. While this is of primary importance, the centrality of the community development worker in development intervention requires that we examine some of the principles that enhance the role of the practitioner as a means to enhancing the effectiveness of development intervention. One of these is reflection.

The nature of community development work does not lend itself easily to reflection. In the busy schedule of getting things done and meetings held on time, community development workers tend to neglect one of the most important principles of good practice, which is reflection. This is further accentuated by often quite difficult ideological, political, economic and financial circumstances that may be described as hostile even to the concept of reflective practice. Professional and personal development needs, such as attending workshops, conferences and courses, or simply taking time off to think, become secondary.

Community development work is very demanding on the worker. Many community development workers see themselves as responding to a calling rather than just undertaking professional jobs where they go home after a satisfactory day’s work. We come into this calling with our own context, which derives from our experiences, class, gender, family, values, education, and culture, amongst others. Context affects practice in two main ways: explicitly (consciously) and tacitly (unconscious). Reflective practice enables us to develop critical self-awareness to ensure that our motivation, past experiences and context do not constitute a hindrance but enhance our practice.

Critical self-awareness is an important aspect of good practice because community development workers convey authority and expertise that impact on client communities, groups and individuals. This impact also comes through development and implementation of policies. Reflection and critical self-awareness ensure that our responses and activities derive from the needs of client communities rather than our personal experiences and needs.

Supervision

While this is not a paper on supervision, it is important to state what this term means in this context. Supervision is the process where the practitioner (supervisee) engages with another (usually a senior practitioner) to explore issues of their (supervisee’s) practice with the primary objective of enhancing the professional practice of the supervisee. The process is supportive, educative, mediative and managerial. To be effective supervision has to be regular (at least once
every six weeks), mutually accountable (to the supervisee, supervisor and agency).

Supervision is an important process that provides support for community development workers and is instrumental in the maintenance of good practice and professional standards. Given the complex environment in which community development practice operates, and the context of client communities, groups and indivi-duals – the majority of whom are vulnerable, in distress and poverty, marginalised and excluded – community development work is exhausting and potentially stressful. Exhaustion and stress come not only from carrying a huge workload, but also in the nature of the work, which touches passionately on people’s lives, as well as balancing the contradictions between expectations of funders and sponsoring agencies and the experiences of client communities.

Supervision provides an opportunity for reflection and to explore personal feelings and how these intersect with professional practice (further enhancing critical self-awareness). It provides an opportunity to offload and reflect with someone who has walked (or is walking) similar paths but has demonstrable evidence of both personal and professional manage-ment skills, namely motivation, creativity, independence, establish-ing sustainable partner-ships, professional development, and maintenance of professional standards. Effective supervision enables the practitioner to identify strengths, competencies and possibilities to enhance their professional capacity.

The complex environment of community development practice

As can be inferred from the preceding discussion, development intervention takes place in a highly complex environment consisting of a range of players with contesting agendas, demands and ideologies. At least four main challenging features characterise this environment, namely uncertainty, contestability, competition and accountability.

Uncertainty relates to the fact that what may seem to be the best way to work with one individual, group or community cannot be absolute. Practice decisions made with the utmost professional confidence always operate within a context of uncertainty. Consequently, decisions relating to one case cannot remain static, nor necessarily be transferable from one context to another. Each case is special, requiring processes that respond to its context.

Contestability pertains to how community development workers respond to the diversity of voices in the complex socio-economic, cultural and political environment. Empow-ering practice validates clients’ voices. The diversity of voices means that dialogue can be difficult to manage, and often deteriorates to debate about appropriate policies, processes and outcomes.

Several professional areas that claim to be doing community development work are constantly in competition. Community develop-ment in Aotearoa New Zealand is currently undertaken in a variety of departments and institutions in central, regional and local governments, non-government organisations, community-based organisations and iwi (Maori tribal authorities). It is becoming increas-ingly important to focus on those particular combinations of values that underpin community develop-ment practice rather than the sponsoring agency within which the work is undertaken. This demands that community development workers be very clear about the values and principles that underpin community development work as outlined above.

Furthermore, community development practice operates within an environment of complex accountabilities. These include accountability to employers, their visions, missions and values (vertical-upward), accountability to project funders, some of whom may not be employers of community development workers (vertical-upward). There is also accountability to clients (both individuals and communities) who are the primary targets of policies and processes (vertical-downwards), and accounta-bility to the values of community development practice, namely, equity, human rights, empowerment and social justice (lateral-sideways).

Good community development practice demands effective manage-ment. This uncertain,
contested, competitive environment holds to professional values whilst encoura-ging social, community and indivi-dual change strategies. This is not easy to manage, and may be partially responsible for why community development programmes often fail to meet target outcomes.

**Conclusion: Good community development practice and community well-being**

Community development is the process of building communities where individuals, families and groups are disposed to:

- Gaining strength, confidence and vision to work for positive change in their lives individually and together with others (Eade, 1997: 4).

It provides a framework for preventing and managing the negative effects of social change and enhancing the positive impacts of change through the learning of skills and strategies to enable the community to address their needs constructively and to function more effectively. Good community development practice actively engages in facilitating the conscious actualisation of these processes. Good practice seeks to establish and utilise local cohesive networks within the client community, and between the client community and the sponsoring agency (statutory sector, community sector and market sector) to support community-based initiatives to address community issues, nurture and promote inclusion processes by linking community needs to public policies.

Good practice that enhances community well-being recognises the intrinsic connectedness between individual well-being and community well-being, and with it the obligation to others, both those living today and future generations and their quality of life. Good practice must, therefore, abandon the myth that community development only takes place with the poor and disadvantaged. Clearly as Twelve-trees (1991) suggests, the role of community development work is to ensure that ordinary people as citizens and members of high needs groups get a better deal, and where possible they take ownership of the process of bringing about this better deal.

However, community development practice cannot be limited to working only with the income poor. Community well-being is more than individuals becoming income rich or wealthy, but ensuring that wealth generation benefits the majority of the population, is environmentally sustainable and has inter-generational equity. Community development work with the income rich must emphasise what Chambers describes as ‘responsible well-being’:

The word ‘responsible’ has a moral force in proportion to wealth and power: the wealthier and more powerful people are, the greater the actual and potential impact of their actions or inactions, and so the greater the need for and scope for their well-being to be responsible (Chambers, 1997:11).

Community well-being must, therefore, be defined holistically, incorporating the needs of the collective, taking full regard for the inter-dependence and interconnect-edness of the physical and non-physical environments, the political, the cultural and the spiritual aspects of the community. This intercon-nectedness demands a holistic approach to development interven-tion based at least on the basic principles outlined in this paper.

Whilst it may be argued that the concept of good practice is problematic, the underpinning principles of good practice for community well-being is where development intervention empowers and facilitates the effective engagement of members of the community, increases inclusion and minimises marginalisation. However, there is an uneasy tension between empowerment and the structures of power that control the practice of community development. Often these structures are oppressive and disempowering. The contradictions between social change and social control functions of community development practice within the sponsoring agencies, especially the state sector, create further tension between what constitutes good practice in the statutory sector and the non-statutory community-based and not-for-profit sectors.

Good practice works to support community-based efforts that enhance social equity, respect for bicultural (and transcultural) partnership with resources for developing and supporting cultural diversity. Good practice promotes equity as the goal of development intervention, recognising that the well-being of the individual is intrinsically connected to the well-being of the
community, and links the local to the global as an organic whole.

References


