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Definitions and imperatives of community development

DEFINITIONS

COMMUNITY

ALTHOUGH THE WORD ‘community’ is commonly used and generally has positive connotations, the term itself is problematic. It is used in many ways (Bauman 2001, Chile 2007, Bryson & Mowbray 1981, Ife 2002, Ife & Tesoriero 2006, Kenny 2006). Before we start making sense of the idea of *community development*, therefore, we need to examine the idea of community itself. Just what is it that we are aiming to ‘develop’? When we examine the following usages of the word ‘community’, we find that it conveys a variety of meanings:

- community care
- the Australian community
- a community centre
- widespread community debate
- the academic community
- the Google Earth community
- the Muslim community
- the needs of the local community
- consulting community representatives
- the global community
- community mental health
- community grassroots initiatives.

A word used in so many ways defies strict definition. It is more appropriate to think, instead, about all the meanings that it has in its different contexts. Ultimately, ‘community’ is subjective. It means what the person using

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Jim Ife

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the word decides it will mean. It is therefore important to look at this constellation of meanings.

The first thing to note is the positive connotations that the word ‘community’ has for us. Community is generally seen as a ‘good thing’: as something to be valued or desired. Although there can be no doubt that communities have been and can be oppressive, this negative view is usually far outweighed by the good feelings the word seems to generate. In part, these are associated with a nostalgic longing for a past that is felt to be more meaningful than one’s present experience, such as one sees portrayed in idyllic TV costume dramas about village life or hears in the reminiscences of elderly relatives. This evocation of ‘community’ expresses a reaction to the perceived threats and emptiness of contemporary life and a wish for a certainty and a security that is imagined to have existed in times past.

This idealised past is far from the lived reality, of course. Those idyllic villages could impose a rigid conformity and could exclude the outsider or anyone who was thought to be too ‘different’. Life in villages was not all friendship, nurturing, kinship and conviviality. For many it amounted to apparently endless toil with little reward and constant insecurity. People were always at the mercy of the weather, the feudal lord or master of the estate and armies that roamed the land and claimed the right to take food and pleasure as they wished (Samuel 1975).

Despite this, the vision and the hope conveyed by the ideal of ‘community’ remains strong. Loss of community may have brought the benefits of industrialisation, mobility and wealth at a level undreamed of by the villagers of yesteryear, but in the modern mind these benefits were purchased at a loss of something valuable in terms of personal relationships, collective responsibilities and social cohesion. A perceived emptiness and loss of meaning in modern industrial or post-industrial life has resulted in a longing for something which, while largely imaginary, is nonetheless a powerful vision and motivation (Bauman 2001). There is certainly a feeling that something called ‘community’ has been lost and that we are the poorer for it. We feel a need to rediscover, or more realistically to reconstruct, a stronger and more robust form of human community than is our current experience.

This idea of loss of community was a recurring theme in sociology in the twentieth century. Classical sociologists, most notably Tönnies (1955) and Durkheim (1933), took considerable trouble to trace the decline of traditional community and its replacement by a more atomised, individualistic and superficial form of society (in Tönnies’ terms, from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* or, in Durkheim’s, from *mechanical solidarity* to *organic solidarity*).

This sense of loss of something valuable called ‘community’, and the corresponding positive value associated with the word, has led to its being used indiscriminately to give a positive spin: for instance in ‘community mental health’, ‘community corrections’ and ‘community service’. Governments, politicians and advertisers understand the power of the word and use it accordingly, often with little substantive meaning beyond the ‘feelgood’ factor (Bryson & Mowbray 1981, Craig 2007).

However, ‘community’ has more meaning than this. One of the meanings associated with it is the idea of the collective. ‘Community’ implies people acting together in some way as a group, and the whole meaning more than the sum of its parts. A community is not just a collection of individuals; those individuals are part of something bigger, which has meaning for them and for others. The idea of valuing the collective is somewhat at odds with the dominant individualism of modern post-industrial capitalist societies, but it has played an important part in the human experience throughout history and across all cultures. In this sense modern post-industrial capitalist societies are the exception rather than the rule. Collective consciousness, collective understandings, collective experiences and collective action are all important in other societies. Perhaps it is this understanding of the collective in contrast to individualism that is at the heart of the nostalgic wish to recreate the idealised communities of the past.

But community is evidently about more than simply the collective. There is, in most understandings of community, some idea of *membership* (Bauman 2001). This idea of membership is important. Membership implies not just a certain status but also rights, privileges and responsibilities, and some level of common purpose. To be a member of an organisation one normally has to agree to the aims and goals of that organisation, to undertake to not work against those aims, and to uphold the good name of that organisation. There is an implied level of commitment and a willingness to contribute in some way to the furthering of the organisation’s goals. That the phrase ‘member of a community’ is so readily accepted suggests that the idea of membership is an important part of the construction of community. With membership goes a feeling of belonging, and this seems to be an important component of community. Often when people talk about the need for community they will cite the importance of this feeling of belonging; of a place where one is recognised and included (Ife 2002). These aspects of membership are important if we are to understand the symbolic significance of community in contemporary society.

Another common association of ‘community’ is an idea of human scale. The experience of community is seen as a corrective to the alienation and

atomisation of the large-scale and impersonal structures of modern society. Society can just seem too big and too impersonal and there appears to be considerable appeal in the idea of something on a more human scale. Despite the apparent economic imperatives for things to happen on a large scale, the phrase ‘small is beautiful’, coined by E.F. Schumacher in the 1970s (Schumacher 1973), continues to resonate. Humans, after all, evolved as hunter-gatherers, and it could be argued that the small group necessary for the hunter-gatherer lifestyle is the most ‘natural’ form of human social interaction (Diamond 1998). Although it would be a mistake to pursue such a biological determinism too far, it is through small groups, whether based on the tribal group or on the extended family, that people have defined and realised their humanity throughout human history. The large industrial societies of the last century or so (predominantly only in the West) represent the exception rather than the norm. The persistent wish for things to happen at a more manageable, personal and ‘human’ scale is a powerful reason for the persistence of community as an ideal, and this forms an important part of the common construction of community.

The idea of community, therefore, has certain associations – the collective, mutual rights and responsibilities, membership and belonging, and human scale – which are generally seen as diminished within the context of modern (or postmodern) industrial (or post-industrial) societies but are positively valued. There are, however, some other issues associated with community that are more contentious.

One issue that will be explored in more detail in subsequent chapters is the multidimensional nature of community, which has inevitably led some community development workers to concentrate on some dimensions of community to the exclusion of others. Perhaps most notorious in this regard are the advocates of community economic development. While economic development is clearly important, there is sometimes a tendency for community economic development workers to assume that, so long as a community’s economy is strong, everything else will somehow work out. This is a form of economic fundamentalism, familiar in the workings of global capitalism, which devalues other aspects of human and community experiences. In later chapters a multidimensional approach to community will be discussed, which incorporates the social, the political, the cultural, the environmental and the spiritual as well as the economic. The idea of human community, if it is to have value, should reflect these different aspects of the human experience. To concentrate on any single one to the exclusion of the others is to reduce community to a unidimensional experience.

It has long been common to draw a distinction between geographical communities, defined in terms of specific geographical location, and functional communities, where there is some non-geographical basis for the definition; for example, the Italian community, the Christian community or the business community (Ife 2002). In complex industrial or post-industrial societies, functional communities may be more significant for many people than are communities based on a town, village, suburb or region. Strong functional communities have been made possible by relatively easy mobility; people are no longer confined to a single geographical area but can travel to meet others with similar interests. At the time of writing it is becoming doubtful whether such high levels of personal mobility can be sustained in the future, as the likely rise in oil prices and the need to reduce carbon emissions significantly affects people's ability to travel as far and as often as they wish. This may well result in a re-emphasis on the local, and hence geographical communities may become more significant.

The other significant development is that of virtual communities, in which people are connected through the internet and may never have actually met face-to-face. The internet has made it possible for people with common interests to establish 'communities' even though they may be widely separated by physical distance. Such vastly dispersed communities are not a new phenomenon, however. Scientific communities are a good example of people forming a community despite wide physical separation, and these existed well before the development of the internet. They were connected through the mail, through reading and participating in exchanges published in scientific journals, and through occasional conferences. Other functional communities have also been maintained largely through the apparently ubiquitous newsletter. The internet, however, has made such community experiences widely available to many more people, and the ability to communicate and respond instantly through email, rather than waiting for conventional letters to be delivered or for newsletters to be mailed out, has allowed the new virtual communities to function in a way that was previously only possible in a face-to-face encounter. It has made communities that are not based on any geographical definition more viable and more numerous than ever before.

This rise of virtual communities has clear benefits. People are more able to participate in communities of interest without the limitations of travel. This has considerable advantages, especially for those with mobility problems, those who live in remote locations and those without ready access to transport. However, as with most technological innovations, it also has its problems. One of the advantages of geographical community is that

it is potentially inclusive. Everyone has to live somewhere (even homeless people will live in a city, a town or a municipality) and so everyone has a legitimate claim to belong to a geographical community – in some cases, to more than one. Functional or virtual communities, however, can be exclusive and it is easier for people to be left out and marginalised, especially those without the necessary computer access or computer skills.

A further problem with virtual or functional communities is that they devalue a sense of place, or of connection to a physical locality. This assumes greater importance in a world where the environmental crisis has reached alarming proportions. If ever there was a time when people needed to feel a connection to the physical world, to a sense of place, it is surely now. Yet virtual communities enable people to have an experience of community that is removed from the physical world, and in which a sense of physical place can be completely absent. This is hardly conducive to a sense of obligation to care for one's environment and, as indigenous people the world over have insisted, it removes a vital component of our humanity (Knutson & Suzuki 1992). For us to realise our full humanity, indigenous people will argue (and many non-indigenous people will agree), we need to feel a profound sense of belonging to the land and a connection to a specific place where we 'belong'. Later it will be argued that this represents an essential component of community; hence the virtual community experience not only discourages environmental awareness and responsibility but will only ever be a partial experience of human community.

For these reasons, it is important that the physical, geographical basis of community not be abandoned. Virtual communities and functional communities can be important for many people but, in the sense in which it is used in this book, the idea of 'community' will generally be treated as including some notion of physical location and of connection to the natural world.

Another important and contentious area is the issue of sameness and difference. It is usual for people to understand 'community' as implying that people are brought together by something they have in common. Community is perceived as being built around common characteristics, as a place where people can experience and reinforce the things they hold together. This is particularly true of functional communities, in which people have sought community membership on the basis of some common element, and also of communities built around a cultural identity.

While the motivation for such communities is obvious, it also needs to be pointed out that there are dangers around this tradition of building communities out of commonality. The most obvious of these dangers is

the danger of exclusion. When a community is built around commonality, a person or a family that is different is likely to be excluded, formally or informally. This is particularly problematic where geographically based communities are organised around commonality. The locally based community that is proud of its history and its cultural heritage, and has worked hard to preserve and strengthen that heritage and sense of ‘identity’, is likely to reject and exclude a new arrival who is seen as somehow ‘different’: the refugee family, the person from a different religious faith, the person with a different ideology or the gay or lesbian couple, for instance. This is the basis for racism and other forms of discrimination, and for exclusion on the grounds of culture, of which there are all too many examples in contemporary Western societies. For a geographical community, the only thing that its members should be expected to have ‘in common’ is a connection to that particular locality; no other criteria for membership of the community should be required, formally or informally. (It is usually the informal exclusion of the ‘other’ that is the more common, and the harder to address, than the formal.)

Communities that are consciously and deliberately built around commonality are particularly dangerous at times of perceived crisis or risk. Such communities are likely to react against anything they see as a threat by reinforcing exclusivity and shutting out the stranger. They will seek security and comfort in the familiar and reject the unfamiliar as endangering their perceived community strength. This has been experienced at a national level in the popularity of ‘border protection’ and communities at the local level can react in similar ways, readily resorting to xenophobia, racism or scapegoating in response to the perceived threat that the stranger brings to their construction of their ‘way of life’. For many social and political ‘progressives’ the idea of a strong community built on pride in cultural heritage is valued positively, while exclusion and border protection are criticised as dangerous and oppressive. Yet there is little difference between the two, and there is a natural and inevitable connection between strong communities built around commonality and the practice of exclusion and ‘border protection’. Because of this, community development that fails to address issues of diversity and access can actually help to reinforce prejudice, racism and cultural arrogance.

Another problem with communities built on commonality is the danger of sterility. Where the experience of community is one of constant contact with people who are similar and familiar there is little room to grow or develop, as one is not exposed to new, different ideas and experiences that can challenge existing preconceptions and suggest alternatives. In such

communities this constant reinforcement of the status quo can lead to a boring and static conformity – hardly the ideal environment for the full realisation of the human experience. There is little point in talking only to people who think the same way as we do. It may be comforting but we are unlikely to learn very much, and it will simply perpetuate already-existing stereotypes and world views.

For these reasons, there is a significant problem with the idea of building community around commonality and this needs to be addressed. It is important for communities to be open to change, to be able to accept and indeed welcome difference, to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Rather than building community on commonality or sameness, it is important to explore the building of community on difference. This has been emphasised by postmodern writers, who have stressed the significance of difference rather than sameness and have identified the Enlightenment origins of an obsession with sameness and uniformity (see for example Carroll 2004 and Kumar 1995, among many).

Following the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy (1991), communities built on difference can be far more resilient and viable than communities built on commonality. Indeed, for Nancy, ultimately the only thing we have in common is our difference. Instead of being something to avoid in communities, difference is something to be accepted, promoted and celebrated. It is out of our differences, rather than our similarities, that we will develop and grow. Strong communities must therefore be built on diversity rather than uniformity; must welcome the stranger because of what she or he can bring; and must include rather than exclude.

This in turn involves a questioning of the boundary around the community in line with the postmodern mistrust of clear categories and impermeable boundaries. For community development, the border needs to be problematised (Tascón 2009) and perceived as excluding. Instead of simply accepting conventional definitions of the boundaries of a community (including geographical communities), we need to see such borders as constructions that should be open to question and never regarded as settled. Above all, however the boundary of a community is constructed, there needs to be an emphasis on the permeability of that boundary so that both people and ideas from ‘outside’ are embraced rather than spurned.

Community, then, is a problematic concept that not only defies neat definition, but itself also requires critical reflection. Indeed, part of the process of community development is to reflect on the meaning of ‘community’ for the individuals and groups involved, rather than starting with a ‘clear’ definition of a ‘community’ that needs to be developed.

DEVELOPMENT

Like ‘community’, the word ‘development’ has positive connotations, though these are often counterbalanced by the poor reputation of many ‘development projects’ and the perception that a good deal of harm has been done in the name of ‘development’, especially in the so-called ‘developing world’. However, these criticisms do not generally reflect on the positive value of development; rather they suggest that the way in which development has proceeded has been flawed. Such critique is usually accompanied by the advocacy of some alternative form of development, named variously ‘sustainable development’, ‘appropriate development’, ‘people-centred development’, ‘bottom-up development’, ‘human scale development’ and ‘holistic development’ (Peet & Hartwick 2009, Shiva 2005, van Ufford & Giri 2003). The idea of development, it seems, is almost universally valued, even though the way in which development has been implemented is widely criticised. However, this critique of the forms that development has taken suggests that development by itself is not sufficient to bring about a desired result. The way in which development is implemented is crucial, and in this sense there is a similarity with community. ‘Community’ too can have its negative manifestations, despite its generally positive connotations.

One of the key dimensions of development is the distinction between top-down development and bottom-up development (Ife 2002). The former is development that is directed by the ‘experts’: those with superior wisdom, knowledge and expertise, who have clear ideas about how development ought to proceed and who seek to implement development programs accordingly. Where the ‘expert’ comes from a cultural or national tradition that is different from that of the community, this top-down development is essentially colonialist in that the external expert knows best and seeks to impose their world view on others. However, top-down development can also operate from within a nation or culture; here the ‘expert’ may be a government agency or an NGO, which again assumes superior wisdom to that of those who are to be ‘developed’. Such top-down development is in contrast to the bottom-up tradition, which recognises wisdom and expertise located in the community itself and seeks to validate that wisdom and to provide resources so that the pace and direction of development can be directed by those most affected.

Of course, most development projects are a mixture of both the top-down and the bottom-up. Many top-down projects acknowledge the importance of ‘empowerment’ and ‘participation’ of the people concerned,

and similarly many bottom-up projects make use of external expertise, especially when that expertise is not available in the community itself. Some projects that claim to be bottom-up are in reality largely top-down: they can be constrained by management and accountability requirements, the need for demonstrated outcomes, the requirements of funding bodies, and so on. In such projects, talk of ‘empowerment’ and ‘self-determination’ is often empty rhetoric to disguise the top-down and essentially colonialist and exploitative nature of the development activity, and the ‘participation’ of the people is token consultation rather than genuine engagement.

It is partly the mix of top-down and bottom-up models that gives ‘development’ a bad name. Most if not all of the criticism of development is aimed at top-down approaches, which seek to impose on a community someone else’s view of what is appropriate development and thereby deny people’s right to self-determination and perpetuate structures of oppression and disadvantage. Such inappropriate and undemocratic top-down development takes its extreme form in the neoliberal programs of ‘structural adjustment’ imposed by the World Bank, the IMF and other apparent economic ‘experts’, often despite the express wishes of the people concerned – so much so that they can only be implemented with the help of military or security forces and the abuse of human rights (Klein 2007).

By contrast, bottom-up development is criticised less often. The most obvious criticism of bottom-up development is that it can seem haphazard and piecemeal because it tends to be process-driven rather than outcome-driven, and hence tends not to deliver clear, predetermined outcomes of the kind much favoured by managers. It also tends not to fit into previously determined time-frames required by funders. Participatory democracy can be messy and time-consuming, and from within the framework of modernity it can seem inefficient and unreliable. However, genuinely bottom-up development tends not to attract the same level of political criticism as does the top-down approach.

The issue of top-down and bottom-up development will be discussed in later chapters. It is central to understandings of *community* development, and it also has significant implications from a human rights perspective. It will be argued that one of the reasons why human rights has often been less than effective is that it has tended to adopt a top-down, legally driven approach rather than a bottom-up perspective, and that if we are to take a community development approach – implying the importance of bottom-up development – human rights, in both theory and practice, will be cast in a rather different light.