

What is community development?

It is very hard to find a simple definition of community development which is easy to understand and which everyone can agree on. There have always been many views of what 'community development' means, and we don't expect that this paper will end those discussions – in fact we hope they continue!

Our aim is simply to provide some relatively straightforward definitions that people can use as a starting point for understanding what community development is.

Community development is an occupation (both paid and unpaid) which aims to build active and influential communities based on justice, equality and mutual respect.

Community development work is done in ways which challenge oppression and tackle inequalities. It involves changing the relationships between ordinary people and people in positions of power, so that everyone can take part in the issues that affect their lives.

Community development work involves working with communities to:

- identify their strengths, needs, rights and responsibilities
- plan, organise and take action
- assess the effect of any actions taken.

It also involves working with agencies to increase their capacity to understand and work with communities.

Communities can be based on where people live (geographic communities), or on a shared concern, issue or identity (communities of interest).

Values and Commitments

To help understand why community development is different from other ways of working, people find it helpful to think about the **'values'** or **'commitments'** of community development. These can be summarised as follows:

Taking a community development approach requires being committed to:

Collective working

- working together towards common goals
- forming networks and making connections to help people collaborate and come together in groups

Equality and justice

- challenging discrimination and working alongside those who are powerless
- raising awareness about inequality and how things can be changed

Learning and reflecting

- recognising that everyone has skills and knowledge
- learning from mistakes as well as successes

Participation

- helping individuals to get involved and sharing power throughout communities
- increasing people's influence over decisions which affect their lives

Political awareness

- raising awareness of communities' concerns
- linking local concerns to the bigger picture

Sustainability

- working with and investing in the capacity of people and groups so that change lasts
- using environmental resources responsibly

What community development **is not**

- **Quick.** Community development is a long term process, focusing on people and their needs and aims. This long term approach is essential to ensure that changes are sustainable and long-lasting.
- **A numbers game.** If only five people turn up to the public meeting, these are the five people you start working with.
- **Partnership working.** Community development is the activity which enables many people to get to the partnership table in the first place.
- **Consultation.** Community development is much more than consulting on decisions already made.
- **A cheap way of delivering services,** demonstrating management efficiency or validating funding bids.
- **Talking with three** 'community representatives' and saying that their responses are the demands of the community. Community development enables many more voices to be heard.
- **Volunteering.** For most people involved in community activity, it is because if they want a service such as a playgroup, they have to provide it themselves. It is not necessarily because they want to be volunteers.
- **The answer to everything.**



Key points about **community**

- Just because people share a characteristic (e.g. living in the same neighbourhood, having a low income, worshipping at the same place) doesn't mean they will feel part of 'a community' together. We might describe a group of people as 'a community' but we can't assume that they feel like one.
- As individuals we are all part of more than one group and feel attachments to more than one community. These different attachments feel more and less important to us at different times. Our allegiances to different groups or communities can also pull us in different directions at the same time.
- In the same way, communities themselves are diverse. Members of a community have a range of interests, some that they share and some that they don't. Conflict within communities is therefore to be expected.
- It is wrong to assume that 'community' is always a positive thing, or that because people have something in common there will be mutual trust or respect between them. Some people experience communities as being exclusive and oppressive. To turn 'community' into supportive and inclusive community action often requires support from skilled practitioners.

How community development is **different** from other community processes

Terms such as 'community development', 'community capacity building' and 'community involvement' are **similar** in the sense that they can all refer to processes of helping community members develop skills and confidence so that they can have more influence on the issues that affect their lives.

However, terms such as 'community involvement', 'community participation' and 'community engagement' usually refer to attempts to encourage communities to get involved in the work of an outside agency or organisation. This type of work is more likely to start with the needs or targets of the agency, rather than the needs of the community.

Community development is **different** to other community-related work because it involves a commitment to:

- starting with the issues which people in communities identify as being important to them, rather than starting with the issues that an outside agency wants to tackle
- helping people understand why the issues they want to tackle have come about, and why some groups have more power or resources than others
- working towards changes which reduce inequality and poverty.



Left: Delegates at CDX conference

Publications providing a useful introduction to the history, theory and methods of community development

Building Community Strengths: A Resource Book on Capacity Building

Steve Skinner

1997 (ISBN: 0 902406 78 7)

Practical guide exploring different approaches to strengthening the capacity of local community groups, with case studies, checklists and practice guidelines.

Available from: CDF, tel: 020 7833 1772, www.cdf.org.uk

Building Practitioner Strengths: Reflecting on community development practice

Mandy Wilson and Pete Wilde

2001 (ISBN 1 901974 19 7)

A framework through which practitioners can examine and reflect on their own practice. Includes reflective accounts from workers operating in a range of contexts.

Available from: CDF, tel: 020 7833 1772, www.cdf.org.uk

Community Development and Networking

Alison Gilchrist

The booklet provides a framework for understanding networking as a key community development strategy.

Available from: CDF, tel: 020 7833 1772, www.cdf.org.uk

Community Work Skills Manual

Val Harris (editor)

A practical workbook written by a collective of community workers and jointly published by the Association of Community Workers (ACW) and the Community Work Training Company.

Available from: www.fcld.org.uk or by tel: 0114 273 9391

National Occupational Standards for Community Development Work

Lifelong Learning UK

The National Occupational Standards detail the skills and practice principles required to engage in community development work. They set out what is involved in using community development approaches in a variety of contexts.

Available to download from www.fcld.org.uk or www.lifelonglearninguk.org

Signposts to Community Development (Revised Edition)

Marilyn Taylor and Alison West

2001 (ISBN 1 901974 03 0)

A concise snapshot of the history, methods and values of community development in the UK.

Available from: CDF, tel: 020 7833 1772, www.cdf.org.uk

Skills in Neighbourhood Work (3rd edition)

Paul Henderson and David Thomas

2001 (ISBN: 0 415 23323 3)

Popular textbook explaining the skills, knowledge and techniques needed by community workers and other practitioners to work effectively in and with communities.

Available from: CDF, tel: 020 7833 1772, www.cdf.org.uk

Strategic Framework for Community Development

Community Development Exchange

A tool for policy makers and planners to assess current practice and to develop a coherent strategy for community development.

Available to download from www.cdx.org.uk

The What, Why and How of Neighbourhood Community Development

Christine Flecknoe and Neil McLellan

2004 (ISBN 0 900787 35 X)

This book sets out in plain language a view of community development and how it works in practice in a neighbourhood.

Available from Community Matters, tel: 020 7837 7887
www.communitymatters.org.uk

Key **websites** for further links and resources

Community Development Exchange

www.cdx.org.uk

Community Development Foundation

www.cdf.org.uk

Federation for Community Development Learning

www.fcld.org.uk



Scotia Works, Leadmill Road, Sheffield S1 4SE tel: 0114 241 2760 email: admin@cdx.org.uk website: www.cdx.org.uk

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