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Lorna Prescott  
CDX Chair

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Dear Lorna

I promised to write to you setting out some thoughts about the Independent Expert Panel which CDF has convened, following your note in the CDX newsletter. I am writing as an individual although, having consulted with a number of colleagues, it is clear my concerns are shared widely. I have a long engagement with community development both in the UK and more broadly, having worked for twenty years in the field, helped to establish CDF itself in a former incarnation in 1968, helped to found the Association of Community Workers in 1969, written widely on the subject (including having produced several books, with one currently in production), and taught and researched in it, and having been President of the International Association of Community Development for nine years. I am currently Professor of Community Development and Social Justice at the University of Durham. I hope my credentials are adequate to underpin these comments.

On hearing of the establishment of the panel, I wrote to the Chief Executive of CDF expressing some concerns about the panel, the manner of its creation, its objects and its way of working. I had a response which didn't really answer many of my concerns and the publication of the first paper submitted to the Panel has simply underscored those concerns.

My note to Alison Seabrooke said, in brief, that I was unclear about aspects of the panel's work; in particular how the members of the panel were chosen given the claim by CDF that it was to be an independent panel; that it could hardly claim to be able to speak on behalf of the whole CD constituency if the process of nomination was not more open; that its evidence base would be extremely limited if it confined itself to reviewing papers produced by CDF staff, most of whom, as I understand it, have had little or no direct experience of community development themselves, but that, most of all, it was unclear as to what CDF saw as the goal of such a panel. At this critical time in terms of public services generally, with the new government claiming to endorse the notion of 'community organisers', whilst at the same time moving towards a new concept of volunteer-led community-based activity, was this an attempt to establish the ground rules for the government as to what community development was really about (which is what Alison suggested in her response to my initial note); or was it a defensive measure concerned more centrally with defending the interests of CDF itself. Given that CDF is not now widely perceived as the voice of autonomous community development within the UK (or indeed even within England), but as essentially a delivery agent for government policy, neither of these objectives would seem to be acceptable to the wider CD community if the panel operates as established to date. I suggested in a further response that the panel needed to be seen to be independent – by which I meant independent not only of government but of CDF – and that it should consider, inter alia, calling for evidence to aid its deliberations, an

option which Alison has ruled out. I suggested this because one of the major tensions facing community development in the past fifty years has been the way in which community development has occupied an ambiguous role in relation to the state, being seen by many as a practice with the potential for liberating and empowering local communities whilst, at the same time, being used frequently by the state at local and central government levels as a means by which tensions particularly at local level about the direction of government policy were managed and dissent was controlled. I think the panel, as presently constructed, reflects that tension.

Alison also suggested that the report of the panel's work would be used 'as an aid to our thinking within CDF and with our partners on the current and future role and support needs of the occupation': as constituted however, its way of working seemed likely strongly to reflect the views of CDF which constitutes a partial and, I believe, somewhat compromised view of community development. A later email from Alison suggested that external contributors could send responses via a CDF staff member who would filter material through to the panel on the basis that CDF would help the panel see 'the wood from the trees', hardly an open and transparent process. It is not clear to me that this, however limited, invitation to contribute from outside the panel has been widely publicised or translated into an open invitation for evidence.

My anxieties have not been eased on reading the first discussion paper. The references listed, ten in number, contains only one (CDX 2008) which appears to have come from a source not associated with CDF in some way. Some of the other sources in the paper reflect the bias inherent in CDF's ownership of the process. To take one example, we are given a discussion about the national indicators which government regards as important for measuring empowerment and participation, and quotes from the Community Development Challenge (a joint production of DCLG and CDF), but there is little reference to alternative perspectives on how the impact of community development might be evaluated: Alan Barr's work, that of COGs and Marilyn Taylor, and my own writing in this territory for example. This can hardly be said to represent an independent or comprehensive overview of the 'current context for community development' which the paper claims to provide.

What is particularly missing from the paper is any kind of critical engagement with that context. This might not be surprising given the ambiguous position which CDF now occupies in relation to the government, but it potentially flaws the approach which the panel might be able to take. For example, the commitment of New Labour to empowerment and community participation is taken as read and at face value: this ignores the growing evidence from, for example, the New Deal for Communities programme which, whilst predicated on community empowerment, actually morphed into a programme for the management of communities in which local community representatives were given an increasingly marginal role in key aspects (such as financial control, appointment of staff, direction of travel and so on) (see for example the writing of Dinham and Diamond). Nor is the DCLG rhetoric on empowerment challenged in terms of evidence on the ground; indeed the government appeared to equate empowerment with local people's ability to become involved in the delivery of public services. This is not what empowerment is about; it is about local people having the political ability to determine what kinds of services they want and to struggle to ensure that they are provided by providers on an equitable and high quality basis. Indeed, New Labour has, as a result of its approach to empowerment, opened

the way for the Coalition government to take this process further and, not only cut public services, but require local volunteers to deliver more and more themselves. This of course, will simply ensure that existing inequalities in the quality and scope of services are exacerbated.

The claim that ‘throughout the New Labour period, CD practice has become more aligned to government policy priorities’ needs at the very least to be examined in detail; and we need to ask the question why, if it is the case, this is so? But it is also redolent of a perspective from the centre: there are many CD workers who would actually challenge this assertion. Their difficulty is that they are trying – as CD workers have done for many years - to promote other perspectives in the face of government’s (of whatever stripe) refusal to listen to them or accede to their communities demands and priorities.

To take another important example, we know that funding for autonomous BME community organisations has always been disproportionately small compared with the needs presented by these communities, and that funding for community work with such populations has been circumscribed, the more so since community cohesion policy has been introduced. The present rounds of cuts will exacerbate this situation substantially but the paper lacks any kind of analysis to suggest that this might be the case or how institutional racism, reflected both in community cohesion policy and more widely in many aspects of government policy and service delivery, underpins this situation. Community cohesion indeed, rather than reflecting, as the paper suggests, a desire to enhance ‘community-based approaches’ is an approach which seeks to obscure the racist basis of much policy-making. It is certainly not driven by a concern with racial justice, one of the underpinning values of community development. Where programmes have been constructed apparently to deliver racial justice, as I found in an evaluation of the Department of Health’s Delivering Race Equality programme, in reality the focus on work with BME groups has remained quite marginal to the concerns of those delivering mainstream services. There can be little doubt that the present and future rounds of expenditure cuts will bear down disproportionately on minority groups, amongst others; this suggests important roles for community development in defending marginalised groups, arguing against broad brush programmes of public expenditure cuts and the privatisation of public services, but this approach is not addressed substantially in the paper.

These are, I have to say, hardly extraordinarily innovative political questions: many community workers addressed them in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, and it might be rather useful if a paper of this kind were to dwell on the lessons of the past including, perhaps, those which community development has learnt from the past fifty years of state involvement. There have been relatively few high level enquiries into the nature of community development since the Gulbenkian reports of the 1960s and this might have been a good opportunity at least to digest experience since then. This is particularly the case as there are now significant issues – such as the use of community development in rural areas (and the almost total absence of training for this work), the role of community development in relation to racialised minorities, gender issues in community development, the relationship between community development and social movements, or the tensions inherent in government community cohesion, for example - which have emerged in the past twenty years but are not addressed.

One important contextual aspect, which again has haunted community development throughout the fifty or sixty years of its life as a recognisable practice within the UK is the issue of the boundaries between civil society (Third Society or whatever), state and market. In the current political context, we find that the former two are being pushed back to enlarge the role of the market. Apart from the most obvious criticism of the market, which is that it does not deliver social justice but rather leads to increasing inequalities and thus places itself in direct opposition to the fundamental values of community development, it seems clear that the proposed marketisation of community development activity demonstrates little understanding of what cd is actually trying to do.

I am also, as you will have gathered from this, concerned that there seems to be no discussion of the question of the values underpinning community development, surely the starting point for any discussion of the practice and future role of community development, particularly where government has quite deliberately muddied the waters by representing a range of activities as community development which have, in fact, little connection to the value base of community development. CDX has for some years published a statement about the values of CD which have been widely accepted, and at the international level, the Budapest Declaration of 2004 provides a parallel framework. Given the confusion about the way in which the language of community development is often hijacked by government, and the various ways in which practice has been manipulated and colonised by government over the years, a fundamental statement about the value base of community development seems to me to be a sine qua non for an inquiry of any sort. This is urgent as, as the various recent surveys of community development workers have shown, although there appear to be thousands of people practising what is called community development, most have had no formal training in the area, and very many are managed by people who have had no community development training or themselves practiced in the field. No wonder there is some confusion about what community development actually is and the government can get away with labelling much as community development which is far from being the case. Those concerned with community development have to avoid being co-opted into that process. The paper does at least recognise that this leads to a process of dilution but needs to go much further in distancing itself from many of the ways in which government has sought and clearly continues to seek to adapt the language and practice of community development to suit its own political agenda.

I hope I have given some indication of my anxieties about the proposed way of working of the panel or the scope of its work as presently set out by CDF. I propose to send this to several members of the panel whom I know professionally but would be happy for you to table it at a future meeting. Perhaps CDX might like to think how it can involve its wider membership in this debate more effectively. I would also be happy for you to publish this letter on its website. I am sending this letter to various members of the panel with whom I have had some acquaintance in the past but would be happy also for it to be circulated more widely as, I hope, the starting point for wider discussion in and outside the panel as to its goals and working methods.

Best wishes

Gary Craig (Professor)