Community Development in Scotland: have we lost our way?

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There are many excellent examples across Scotland of communities being supported by community development (CD) practitioners to address local needs and build community strengths. However the Scottish Community Development Network (SCDN) would suggest that there is less evidence of work that helps communities to analyse, understand and address the root causes of the issues that they are working on.

The SCDN 2015 annual conference: Revolution or Bust: How can CD reclaim its role for community development practice somewhere in the background of our collective consciousness.

Practitioners felt that their CD skills are underutilised, with key processes missing and that they are often hampered in their roles by anxiety of inappropriate censure, exacerbated by increasing job insecurity. In addition, practitioners feel that there is a general lack of understanding of the complex skills involved in community development practice. Practitioners feel undervalued, under-resourced and over stretched.

SCDN would ask that the current context in Scotland also evidences that CD has been sliced and diced into bit parts, colonised by agency agendas and sanitised to such an extent that “Community Development” is now the predominant practice with core values and principles, whilst practiced by many individuals, were being cast aside as the result of successive policy and managerial changes, thus leaving value based CD practice somewhere in the background of our collective consciousness.

We would raise the question: To what extent, within this context can communities work collectively to achieve sustainable, positive change? SCDN would assert that only by reclaiming our values, can we help communities to organise to achieve positive sustainable change and to challenge the predominant neoliberal agenda.

To allow a critical discourse of community development practice to be meaningful, it is necessary, in the current context more than ever, to define our terms. As Tom Slater points out in his excellent article, “The Myth of Broken Britain” (Moir and Crowther 2014), there is a general lack of insecurity. In addition, practitioners felt that their roles by anxiety of inappropriate censure, exacerbated by increasing job insecurity. In addition, practitioners feel that there is a general lack of understanding of the complex skills involved in community development practice. Practitioners feel undervalued, under-resourced and over stretched.

Many SCDN members feel that the impact of much of our current “Citizenship practice context is that communities are now less equipped to really understand the root causes of the disadvantage, social injustice and inequalities they live with.” (Moor and Crowther 2014)

In the process of compiling the ‘Reality Behind the Rhetoric’ report SCDN had engaged with 356 CD practitioners from 25 of the 32 local authority areas in Scotland, working (paid or unpaid) within a broad range of public and voluntary agencies and community organisations.

Across all of our engagements most practitioners reported they were operating within a top down environment, with externally determined outcomes and short timescales for CD interventions. They felt that there was little space to nurture independent community activity or to analyse implications of decisions, programmes or policy directives and that grassroots holistic approaches are rare.

SCDN believes that community development practice has been severely undermined, as evidenced by the number of CD practitioners who felt that there is a lack of understanding of the complex skills involved in community development practice. Practitioners feel undervalued, under-resourced and over stretched.

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These of you reading this article might remember a day when community development was founded on issue not resilience. SCDN would suggest that it is difficult if not impossible to practice community development without engagement with root causes and awareness of the wider social, economic and political contexts within which we work. Therefore SCDN will raise the profile of value based community development and continue to provide opportunities for CD practitioners to network, share ideas, knowledge and experience, and develop confidence in empowering practice.

Community development practice also seems to have lost its way in relation to the politically awakened population in Scotland. The level of discussion, debate and political engagement of Scottish people, in the build up to the independence referendum of 2014, was unprecedented. The subsequent huge increase in voting and the fundamental shift in political allegiances in the UK general elections in May 2015 demonstrated the potential that exists to work with communities to challenge a ‘business as usual’ approach to politics and policies.

We have also lost our way in relation to current policy priorities in Scotland. The Scottish Government has up to the election of May 2016 arguably developed a stronger focus on social justice and addressing inequalities. Current policy and statutory drivers, including the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the report by the Commissioner on Strengthening local Democracy, potentially provide a critical role for community development practitioners. And yet, grassroots CD practitioners indicate practice based value with government agencies, funders and CD practitioners themselves and by continuing to provide opportunities for CD practitioners to develop their knowledge and confidence as skilled practitioners.

SCDN will proactively seek out opportunities to develop awareness and practice of critical pedagogy. It will endeavour to form alliances with other similar alliances across fields of academic practice and always look to connect these networks to communities of theme and place who are integral to any meaningful progress towards greater levels of social justice.

SCDN believe that community development is at its heart an intrinsically global practice. In our journey back to the well spring of our values we call on our sisters and brothers across the globe to walk shoulder to shoulder with us on our journey. We know the journey is challenging and the road long and we know, “There is no path: the path is made by walking.”

References


www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Health/Healthcare/HealthcareLevels/AGNOTOLOGY/ProductionOfIgnorance...pdf
Scotland: the Reality Behind the Rhetoric. “Revolution or Bust: How can CD reclaim its role for community development practice somewhere in the background of our collective consciousness.”

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