Conference Report

March 2006 ● Edinburgh

Community development
everywhere and nowhere?

Introduction

This conference was organised as a partnership between the Community Development Exchange and the Scottish Community Development Network.

The theme of the conference emerged in recognition of concerns expressed by community development practitioners in Scotland and other parts of the UK about a growing gap between social policy and community development, and the need to make links between the two. These concerns were clearly expressed by participants at the 2005 SCDN Conference, and this event was designed to build on those discussions.

The questions underlying the conference included:

- If in relation to social policy community development is implicit in everything but explicit in nothing, have we 'won' the argument or has it been lost in translation from policy to practice?

- Why are communities and practitioners still articulating concerns around not being listened to and the inability to influence decision makers, when so much of social policy is based on and makes reference to participation, empowerment and social justice?

- How do we address this in terms of a raised profile for community development and more widespread and meaningful community development practice?

- By focusing on community development principles and purpose, and providing clarity on what it is, can we highlight the differences between community development and other processes such as community capacity building? Can we address the confusion people sometimes feel between these different processes?

- Power imbalances often occur when language itself is disempowering. Has the inclusion in social policy of language which is familiar to community development practitioners, such as 'participation', distracted us from addressing the continuing lack of real power in communities?

In light of these complex questions, the keynote speeches and workshops were designed to explore the links and tensions between policy and practice in more depth, and provide practitioners with opportunities to debate and discuss them. Conference participants certainly found plenty to talk about!

The following report provides a flavour of the key note speeches and panel questions. The full text of the presentations and workshop reports are available on the CDX website at **www.cdx.org.uk/resources/cdxresources** and the SCDN website at **www.scdn.org.uk**.

Akwugo Emejulu

What George W. Bush taught me

What's going on?

Practice Issues

- We are working in an outcome-focused, results-driven, 'what-works' environment, where effective monitoring and evaluation is seen as a cure-all for the woes of community development

- Despite heroic claims to the contrary, many of us are funding-led rather than needs-led

- Our techniques – but not our values – are being co-opted by various agencies.

Political and Theoretical Issues

- Alienation of citizens from the political process eg declining voter turnout and levels of trust in institutions, questioning ability to make a difference

- Economic changes have lead to increases in poverty and inequality eg changing labour market, weakening of social protection for the most vulnerable

- Our guiding principles are in flux:
  - Feminism: young women are suspicious of feminist claims and ideals
  - Anti-racism: people are questioning the relativism that multiculturalism requires
  - Socialism: redistribution of wealth and power are not seen as realistic political and economic solutions to social problems.

- Changing nature of the political Left eg abandoning the idea of a strong state and a turn towards market-based solutions

These factors lead to the questioning of CD work: is it really making a difference?

What can be done? Lessons from George W. Bush!

Organise, Organise, Organise!

- Reclaiming the power and purpose of CD requires a return to basics

- Unsexy, frustrating, old-fashioned community organising is the bedrock for any kind of social change

- Vibrant political participation is born out of strong independent community networks.

Understand 'Big Tent' Development Work

- Social change takes place when a critical mass of people take action

- Need to put aside differences and form alliances with other progressives and radicals in order to gain power. In-fighting need not always fracture the Left.

Embrace Your Inner Troublemaker

- Understand the political landscape in which you live and work

- Question and challenge policies and practices that do not foster effective CD work.

- Try to change your organisation's working practices but if you can't – leave. Don't let bad CD work happen in your name.

Conclusions

- Need to accept that there has been a fundamental shift in the political landscape. If CD is to remain relevant we must update our theory base, politics and our practice.

- CD must return to community organising. Our project must be to build a groundswell of support for social justice.

- The power of CD work lies in its politics. A depoliticised profession is a death sentence.

Akwugo Emejulu is taking up a new post of lecturer in the Community Education Division of Strathclyde University, after working for some time with the Linked Work and Training Trust.

As a native Texan, Akwugo has worked as a community development worker, researcher and trade union organiser across the United States and the United Kingdom. Currently, she is managing a research project which is exploring how Minority Ethnic identity impacts on individuals' career choices and aspirations in the Scottish public and voluntary sector.

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Sel Williams

A political manifesto for community development

Selwyn Williams is a one time builder's labourer, research biologist, teacher, teacher trainer, university lecturer. All time community activist. Currently ostensibly some sort of economics lecturer. In reality, concentrating on community development. Joint coordinator of the Community Development Unit at the University of Wales, Bangor, responsible for community development courses in the community and in college at pre-higher education, graduate and post grad levels. Current chair of the Education and Learning Committee of Community Development Cymru. Lifelong socialist and Welsh internationalist. He is 60, married, one son and daughter and granddaughter. Fluent in English as well as Welsh.

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Sel presented an initial draft of 'a political manifesto for community development', which is intended as the start of the development of a manifesto for radical community development across Britain and Ireland.

The manifesto proposes to set up a new organisation with the provisional name of the Political Community Movement (PCM), which would be independent of government or existing organisations such as CDX.

"Outside state contained 'politics' there is much hopeful political activity e.g. around globalisation, peace, the environment, alternatives to the 'new' imperialism in Latin America and so on. Across the world there is a wealth of community activity and potential that can contribute to social transformation."

"We need to express an alternative community vision and philosophy and recapture a language of feelings and emotions, practices, meanings and words."

The manifesto included 15 statements for debate and discussion, including:

- A fundamental aim of community development is the development of the social conscience and political consciousness of individuals and communities.
- Community development is based on a set of principles and values.
- To fully realise the principles and values of community development requires fundamental transformation of communities and of society.
- Community development is a key to the political task of transforming society.
- Increasingly individual human rights are being eroded and need protecting. There are also collective human rights; the rights of communities to develop and thrive.

Mae Shaw

Community development – everywhere and nowhere? Rediscovering the purpose and practice of community development

On defining community development

"There isn't, nor can there be, a clear and final definition of community development, because there are different ways of making sense of what it's for and why it matters. There are different meanings and interpretations which come out of different historical traditions and political positions."

"The trouble with claiming some kind of professional exclusivity is that community development becomes something we all have to agree about. This means that we have to negotiate a lowest common denominator which rules out all the difficult questions and necessary complications which keep it alive."

On purpose

"Without some clarity about purpose (why?) the community development approach becomes obsessed with process (how?) which can be claimed by anyone and everyone.

"I want to remake an old argument which is nonetheless relevant – that community workers are positioned both 'in' and 'against' the state."

"There is a difference between capacity building and community development. Capacity building is essentially a technical process – unless it goes alongside an explanation of why communities need their capacities built and what has caused their incapacity."

"You can't do community development through consultations which facilitate the managerial state, nor from behind a computer. It seems to me that, in order to be proactive, critical and committed, you need to identify

work (policy-led or not) which offers potential for:

• connecting cause and effect

• collectivising issues and taking action

• turning private troubles into public issues

• exploring contradictions in policy

• being relevant to peoples' experience

• broadening issues to generate alliances and solidarity"

On radicalism

"Community development was once seen as marginal to policy, but has become increasingly central. Some celebrate this new found status, but it clearly also gives cause for concern. Perhaps this is because the onetime radicals have now turned respectable. Maybe for the most part they were always respectable. Community development supporters have always claimed it to be more radical than evidence would support.

This is one of its enduring problems. Its history indicates how it has in effect - if not intention - been anything but radical in many instances. Community development has consistently been used to pre-empt trouble and deliver policy objectives, rather than to challenge power and engage with democracy in any critical way."

"This assertion of a monopoly on radical ideology and moral high ground is one of the key impediments to developing the kind of competent critical and committed practice which will challenge the current regime."

"We need to have some humility. We need to understand that community development is not a truth claim about our benevolent capacities to bring democracy to disadvantaged communities. It is a historically situated and theoretically contested practice. In other words, it comes out of particular historical circumstances, theoretical traditions and its meaning has been contested over time."

On values

"In carving out a legitimate place, community development has historically laid claim to distinctive values of empowerment, democratic participation and social justice. However, in a context in which empowerment has virtually become government policy, and the World Bank demands self help and participation as a condition of so called 'aid', there is increasing unease that these sacred values may have been appropriated for the wrong purposes."

"I am not arguing that values are unimportant - the reverse. They must be argued over and given meaning and they must always be subject to challenge and revision in changing contexts and dialogue between different accounts. Social justice means different things from left to right of the political spectrum and to feminists, anti-racists and various other marginalised groups and positions."

On language

"In presenting the world in only one way, other ways are ruled out and become impossible to think about. Communities find themselves having to operate within an alien language, often facilitated by community development workers, which does not allow them sufficient opportunity to voice their own real issues and concerns. 'Best value', 'fit for purpose', 'what works', 'inputs', 'outputs' - you cannot talk about inequality, injustice, poverty and hurt in this language.

"One very simple thing would be to ban all managerial language. Don't talk about 'fit for purpose', 'rolling out', 'cascading' and all the other stuff – and certainly don't compel community groups to do it. Forcing ourselves to talk properly to each other, like human beings, would begin to highlight some of our differences as well as our commonalities. Then we might have something real to argue about."

Mae Shaw worked for 15 years as a professional community worker in a range of settings, and is currently a lecturer in community education at Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh. She is editor of ***Concept***, the Scottish journal for the field of community education. Her published work includes ***Radical Community Work: Perspectives from Practice in Scotland*** (1997) and ***Community Work: Politics, Policy and Practice*** (2004). She has been a member of the editorial board of the Community Development Journal since 1995.

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Questions and discussion

- Mae noting an increasing interest in the political aspects of community work, and that this means more than just political institutions. She stressed the importance of 'talking back to democracy', and opening new political spaces.

- Akwugo felt that we are in an optimistic time, akin to the 1950s where the movements began that led to the changes of the 60s and 70s. She felt that we are at the beginning of a process, and have to build towards mass participation.

- Sel spoke of pessimism of the intellect but optimism of the will, and felt that the most important thing is to do whatever he can to contribute to change.

- Delegates expressed concerns about how to practically engage in more radical bottom-up work when they feel under so much pressure to deliver policy-focused outputs and outcomes.

- In response, the speakers urged delegates to 'embrace their inner trouble maker', and take a bolder approach to partnerships – breaking out of the constraints we impose on ourselves a lot of the time. Take people at their word – if policies or people talk about 'empowering citizens' or participation, then say 'OK, lets do that' and do what's required for real participation.

- Delegates wondered whether CD workers' becoming more proactive about their agenda for social change inevitably meant reducing the voice of communities.

- Akwugo argued that being a community development worker meant being in conflict, potentially with both communities and policy makers. If the community is speaking with racist, sexist or homophobic voices then yes, community workers do have a role in reducing that voice.

- Mae felt that if community workers were imposing their agendas on communities, there would be more evidence of social change than there is! She argued that there is no neutral position for community workers or anyone else to take – adopting a position and claiming it is neutral is itself a political position. If you are clear and up front about your position, people can tell you to stay or go.

- Community workers have no option – if they are employed by the state or funded through public funds to 'deliver' empowerment, then they are inevitably in a position of tension and conflict.

- Sel argued that community workers have to keep their values and survive in a hostile environment, and that people have been doing this in various roles for centuries. We shouldn't get into moralising positions, because we all have to survive as workers. The key is to turn the conflict into something creative, not to ignore it.