
This paper is an extract from an article entitled Romance and other challenges to the professionalization of community development in South Africa: a viewpoint to be published in *The Social Work Practitioner-Researcher*, Vol. 23 (3), 2011. Permission was granted by Prof Jean Triegaardt, editor of the journal

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS FOR SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONALISATION

The challenge then is to find ways in which more and more of those who are powerful and privileged can be enabled to work to start and strengthen processes which in turn enable and empower those who are weak and deprived (Chambers 1993: 14).

INTRODUCTION

I think we all should feel like the late Moses: here we are on mount Nebo, looking down on the promised land of the professionalization of community development. Will we be allowed to enter? Most of you, who are less grey than some of us, will; of that I am certain. With the partnership that we experience during this summit the future looks good for creating a professional cadre of community development workers.

We may be impatient, with high expectations and idealism. I therefore want to pause for a moment, and take stock of the use and abuse of community development in the past, and to moderate our idealism and romanticization of community development.

McCay (2001: 183) correctly points out that such romanticization “should provoke concern and critical commentary ... not wild claims and over reliance on a few good stories”. This paper, then, is in essence a plea for realism. I want to argue that “The state should employ community development workers to facilitate the empowerment of communities and not to run development projects on behalf of the state” (De Beer & Swanepoel 1994: 629).

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The history of community development is one of political rhetoric, of cooption and sometimes further marginalization of the poor. Community development professionals (CDPs) live and work in an environment over which they seldom have full control. The challenges they face include

- understanding the role of the CDP/W in community development
- political interpretations of community development
- performance agreements that require quantifiable results
- budget constraints and
- uncoordinated activities that constrain community development.

These challenges are expressed in the macro environment, and while the CDP may not be in a position to control them, they must at least be aware of them.

In this paper the designation “(CDP is used to refer to the proposed cadre of professionals. The designation “community development worker” (CDW) is used in the more general and historical sense to denote someone who facilitates or thinks that they facilitate community development.

POLITICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

There is a very old book that everyone interested in politics and community development should read - *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. In this book the animals of the farm overthrow the farmer and establish a republic. Now the pigs become the ruling class, with comrade Napoleon as the dictator. So when the animals started complaining about lack of participation comrade Napoleon made it clear to them that all animals are equal and that he would be only too happy to let them

make their own decisions. But sometimes, he said, you might make the wrong decisions, comrades, and then where should we be? (Orwell 1993).

So comrade Napoleon - the government in the story (and I do not equate government to pigs!) - claims to want the people to make decisions, but reserves the right to make better decisions just in case the people make mistakes. We have seen this in the history of community development in South Africa.

As Minister of Community Development the late PW Botha used the UN definition of community development, to justify the group areas Act as being essential in settling people in their own areas as a precondition for development: “the ideal should as far as possible be to protect each racial group in its own proclaimed areas against the infiltration by other groups” (Botha 1962: 4).

Years later, in the early 1980s community development was used as a method to clear up “black spots” and relocate people from so-called white South Africa to the homelands (De Beer 1984).

Nevertheless, during those times there were many other people and groups who clearly understood that in community development the community should be central in making decisions affecting their own lives. Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement is one example (Stubbs, 1978:108) Various NGOs who later became part of the United Democratic Front (UDF) practised community-based development: the Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA), assisted communities in their struggle against forced removals; Grassroots, which worked in the early childhood development field; and the Africa Co-operative Action Trust (ACAT), established as a non-denominational Christian development organization.

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However, everything appeared to change after 1994. Because of the pre-1994 history most development NGOs and CBOs were aligned with the political ethos of the new democratic dispensation. Yet these close alignments to government led Boule (quoted in Ballard, Habib, Valodia & Zuern 2005: 623) to warn that NGOs and CBOs were “falling into the trap of being restricted to delivery”. Delivery to meet the needs of the poor seems to have influenced former President Mbeki’s views on the role of community development workers:

Among other things, these [community development] workers will help to increase the effectiveness of our system of local government, strengthening its awareness of and capacity to *respond to the needs of the people* at the local level (Mbeki 2003: 2) (emphasis added).

Here we have a view of people as clients. This delivery interpretation is contrasted with one that recognizes the need to make people in communities free:

[W]e have also taken the firm position that we must work continuously to move as many of our people as possible out of dependence on social grants, on the basis of access to opportunities that enable [them] ... to become gainfully employed (Mbeki, 2008).

What these brief notes show is just how fragile and open to interpretation the idea of community development is.

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE CDP IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

This section identifies just two of the possible many mortal “sins” a CDP can commit. One is the sin of motherhood; the other is the sin of outsider expert.

- *Motherhood*

Donnison (1993) sees community as a fine “motherhood” word – one that produces a warm glow in the listener and elevates the speaker to the moral high ground. Will the CDP become a mother

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to the community? Or will they be at the forefront of enabling and empowering poor people to use their assets, make decisions and achieve development goals as identified by individuals and communities? Does the CDP as an “agent” have her own agenda or is it the people who decide and control the process?

A more radical interpretation of community development sees the CDP as an enabler of the process of empowerment. Self-mobilization is accepted as the defining characteristic of community development and people “define their felt needs, identify possible solutions, set goals and mobilize local resources to achieve their goals” (Karki 2000: 10). This means not to focus on the deficits or needs of people, but on their strengths and assets.

The CDP has an important role to play as an enabler and supporter of self-mobilization. When people’s capacity is built to take full responsibility for their own development they will enjoy ownership of development and execute it in a responsible and enlightened way (Swanepoel and De Beer, 2011: xviii).

-Outsider expert

The culture of organizations tasked with community development, and the mindset of CDWs may become an obstacle to authentic partnerships with communities. This leads to the sin of being an outsider expert.

“Staff might believe that their knowledge is superior to indigenous knowledge. The assumption is that they know the issue better, have the money, and can do the work faster. Staff may resist empowering local people if it threatens their jobs or if they have to share power and control” (Russel & Harshbarger 2003: 127).

However, experience will show CDPs/CDWs that poor communities are not unintelligent and without survival strategies.

For example, the Tinjojela medicinal plants project in Barberton, Mpumalanga is a local example where the community (in this case traditional healers) saw the project coming and harvested as many benefits as possible while the funding lasted. When funding ceased, the project died (De Beer 2009: 444).

The CDP should be aware that communities see the mothers and the outsider experts coming. The community, or at least some of its members, know how to play along and “harvest” these welcome resources. There is nothing devious about what they are doing: their actions form part of a very intelligent and very human survival strategy.

CHALLENGES TO THE NEW PROFESSION

Only the future will show whether the professionalization of community development has been achieved successfully. Three things favour this endeavour. First, there is a strong movement of people at community and NGO levels who understand and practise community development. Second, the importance of community development is acknowledged by government, as revealed by the existence of policies and institutions favouring it. Finally, dedicated training for community development became a reality with the establishment of the (professional) bachelor of community development degree.

However, some obstacles lie in the path to the successful undertaking of community development as a profession. Even when professionalization is achieved the job of CDPs will be made difficult by the following challenges:

Political rhetoric

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As may be expected (and as was briefly shown above), political ideology and rhetoric constitutes one of the most significant challenges for community development. Once a concept is captured and drawn into the mainstream debate by politicians, a mindset is created that allows the political interpretation to flourish. The danger is that community development may become one of the metaphors or images used to manipulate orderly change as perceived by government instead of it being allowed to focus, as it is meant to, on the empowerment of communities.

Tensions between job descriptions and community needs

Will the CDP be working with communities as organized groups, or will they be social workers in a different guise? The grassroots-level challenges faced by CDWs/CDPs require an approach which is community-driven and may institutionalize solutions in community groups. Whereas social workers work predominantly with individuals and problems associated with poverty, the CDP works preventatively, with groups, to counter the effects of poverty.

Most job descriptions require tangible and quantifiable outcomes. Achievement of these outcomes is used in annual performance appraisals.

Yet working in community development often requires outcomes of an intangible nature, for instance the building of self-esteem, strengthening of participation and informed decision-making by the community. These outcomes are difficult to quantify, and take longer to achieve than an assessment period – for instance a calendar year. Because of the nature of the “soft” outcomes, very low values are assigned to them (if they are acknowledged at all).

In the end these measurable outcomes become the monuments built by CDPs/CDWs, but the achievement of the unseen abstract human needs remains unacknowledged. What is required is an assessment mix that measures not only product, but also process outcomes.

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Budgetary constraints

Most organizations budget on an annual and itemized basis and this is the point where budgetary constraints for implementing community development arise.

When the budget becomes a blueprint according to which outsiders decide and will plan what they regard as being in the interest of the community it becomes directive and a stumbling block for community development. , This is because a directive budget counteracts an empowering and participative process of community development that allows for decision-making power to be vested in the community.

Lack of funding, or funding allocated to activities not identified by the community, results in failure to support activities identified by communities

The establishment of a revolving fund that is not linked to fixed annual budgetary procedures may contribute to making community-based development real. A fund of this kind, earmarked for community-based development within the ambit of local government entities, will be an empowering tool to finance projects that are identified by and grow from within communities over a period extending beyond the confines of annual budgets.

Lack of coordination

Coordination of community development is one of those issues that are crucial to the success of community development but seldom explored in practice, research and publications.

Coordination of development efforts is the keystone of community development. It should provide a framework for collective development action (Selsky 1991). When we talk of a

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participative, empowering approach to community development in which communities take ownership, coordination of efforts should logically take place at community level. In South Africa local government is, correctly in my view, responsible for community development. A strong process of coordination, supported with well-trained staff and relevant resources, should at local government level form the focus of implementation.

PROFESSIONALIZATION AND A NEW PROFESSIONALISM

The challenges discussed above are not exclusive to the professionalization of community development in South Africa, nor are they confined to the themes discussed. They are equally relevant to social work and education, to name but two professions, and are encountered in other countries such as Kenya, Malawi, the United Kingdom and Australia. In short, professions are more and more becoming services provided to clients and subject to performance appraisal and market regulation.

In the social work profession, for instance Dewe, Otto and Schnurr (2006) ask whether de-professionalization instead of further professionalization is the leading trend.

Evidence-based knowledge and best practice, enforced by government, may, according to Dewe et al. (2006): “have considerable potentials to limit legitimate courses of action in social work practice, to narrow legitimate forms of and to simplify the task of making choices in uncertain and unpredictable contexts”.

The consequence is a decrease of the professional input of the social worker and a diminishing of her/his autonomy; they simply follows predetermined rules and “recipes” prescribed, administered and assessed by bureaucrats, whether they fit or not.

In the field of education Patrick, Forde and McPhee (2003:11) lament the undermining of the autonomy of professional teachers that resulted from Thatcherite neo-liberal reforms. These reforms gave rise to a situation where teachers' "sole task is to carry into practice the advice and instructions of others, and whose input into the framing of curricula is severely limited".

Managerialism is another cause for concern in these professions. It leads to an overemphasis on quantifiable results; it narrows professional discretion and ties the professional to rule based working routines.

In charting a way for CDPs we can learn from the lessons to be derived from other professions. Community development is a human science and a relatively new and evolving area of specialization. It should guard against normal professionalism values and biases which are urban, industrialized, quantifiable and high technology (Chambers 1993: 1). Normal professionalism defends itself against innovation and reproduces itself in teaching and practice. In community development, however, the CDP is not providing a service to passive clients. They

- work as enablers, advocates and conduits, in service of the community
- do research, but also take part in activities
- find them in a world of poverty which is continuously in flux and where borders constantly shift.

The world we live in, characterized by extreme affluence and extreme poverty, are also a world in which existing human enterprise should be supported and enhanced to promote self-development.

CONCLUSION: NO ROMANCE IN THE QUEST FOR A NEW PROFESSIONALISM

Chambers (1993: 1 et seq.) proposes a “new professionalism” – one that puts people, especially the poor, first. It is a paradigm that promotes learning from the poor, decentralization, adaptive planning, empowerment and local initiative. CDWs and CDPs will recognize the characteristics of the new professionalism as the principles on which community development is based.

Will we find the milk and honey of a “new professionalism” when we enter the promised land?

You may say that in this paper I am preaching to the converted, and in this you may be correct. In my more than 30 years as academic and researcher I have met many CDPs who understood and practised community development with the community at the centre; who compassionately identified with communities and found common-sense ways around difficult obstacles; who understood and knew how to apply the principles of community development; and who were (and still are) frustrated by the challenges discussed above.

They do not pretend to be “miracle” workers, saving communities from their plight. They facilitate and enable empowerment so that communities gain more and more control over their own future.

The question is: will the CDP – and the institution representing her/him – be able to foster and maintain an environment, within the context of the challenges discussed, in which the CDP can blossom as a “new professional”?

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