

**Retford Rural Services Conference: January 8 2014**  
**Rural Communities: development and organising ... state of play in 2014**

**Community development in England: a short history**

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Thank you for inviting me. Community work is under attack: again. This of course is part of a much wider and deeper ideological attack on autonomous and radical ideas and action by the present government, most recently by Michael Gove who claims that left wing academics of which I am proud to be one, are rewriting the official history of the First World War claiming that it was neither just nor necessary and certainly not to the benefit of the mass of the British population. We have been here before but I think it is important to learn the lessons of history, even our own history and therefore aim to give you a quick Cook's tour of the history of community development. I am going to speak about English experience, most of which is urban in its setting but I will also say something very briefly about the state of play in rural communities as later speakers will focus on this; I am sure much of what I say will resonate with experience in other parts of the British Isles and indeed also in Ireland where autonomous community development is right now under very serious attack from the state. And I want to situate what I have to say in the context of wider international debates about the development of community development over the past period as UK experience is but one part of a global picture.

There are instances of action which might be described as community development (but were not so described) from the late Victorian period such as through the Settlement Movement, where well-meaning intelligentsia from universities worked in poor neighbourhoods from a settlement house base such as Cambridge House, Oxford House, Toynbee Hill and so on; where activists from a community base organised workers in low paid exploitative sectors such as the work of Annie Besant in the match factories; or the organising of the Unemployed Workers movement in the 1930s. Community development was not then a formal name nor was it a paid occupation with proscribed rules and standards though the values of community development, as it later developed, were to underpin this work: values of equality, respect, social justice and local democratic control.

Even as the actual profession of community development emerged into the daylight in the late 1940s, its goals were not as at first sight they might have appeared to be. Community development was first articulated as a professional field of practice – drawing on a range of extension and adult education work in colonial settings – by the United Nations which in 1948 suggested that there could be a movement for change emerging from within communities, rather than being imposed from outside and which pointed to the growth of community organisations separate from government agencies. Community development was, according to the UN, 'a movement to promote better living for the whole community, with active participation and if possible on the initiative of the community ... by the use of techniques for arousing and stimulating it.' Leaving aside what is rather quaint language, this sounds quite promising. Yet the emergence of community development was shaped very much by the work of adult education workers such as Batten, who later tried to transplant his

particular understanding of community development from largely rural colonial settings into a developed urban setting.

Whilst this work of adult educationalists and extension workers made some educational and material gains *for* local people (as opposed to *by* them), the political context in the colonies remained one of control exercised by colonial powers; the choices available concerning priorities and political direction were controlled by this context, where economic development – for economies largely controlled by non-indigenous industries (particularly the mining and processing of minerals and foodstuffs) - was rather more significant than the social and political development of the masses. Thus, as a Cameroonian writer observed, ‘comprehensive programmes were introduced in schools to enhance collaboration between education, agriculture and health education. This collaboration was emphasised to enable the dependencies to increase the production of raw materials ...’ or, in the rather more direct words of Nkrumah, in his landmark 1962 book *Towards Colonial Freedom*, ‘any humanitarian act of any colonial power towards its ward is merely to enhance its primary objective: economic exploitation. ... the attitude of Britain towards what they call participation by colonial peoples in colonial government and public affairs are half-way measures to keep them complacent and to throttle their aspirations for complete independence ... these merely serve as a means to one end: the perpetuation of foreign rule upon colonial peoples and the economic exploitation of their material resources.’ Ambiguity in the language of community development already ruled OK.

Community development was thus born with a huge degree of ambiguity hard-wired into it. This remains the case and, as we can see over the past sixty or so years, the ambiguity has been exploited directly by governments which have left little scope for full participation by communities, or, by the manipulative use of language, have promised communities something which, in the event has never intended to be delivered, full participation in issues affecting their lives, and some control over the forces which shape their communities. It is worth remembering *en passant* both that community development workers have often fallen into the trap of promising more than they can deliver, and of using the rhetoric of far-reaching change in quite inappropriate situations. Thus, Alinsky’s community organising approach for example, of which a lot has been heard in recent years in England as supposedly informing the Coalition government’s approach to community organising, as Jalna Hanmer once observed, ‘seemed to offer the possibility of people themselves through collective action bringing about far-reaching changes but if we look carefully at the theory which sustained his tactics we find a simple belief in pluralism, a belief in the land of plenty where there are no zero sum games, where one person’s gain is another another’s loss, merely players who do not know how to get their share of the unlimited jackpot. In a more realistic model of pluralism, limited resources and zero sum games are actually the order of the day.’ This might have been written today in spades when limited resources and zero sum games are indeed the order of the day with the rich doing very well at the expense of the poor. We might also recall however that community workers have been able to use this ambiguity to good effect on occasions.

Community development in the UK through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s had a fairly low profile, being used to help new town residents establish active community life and build voluntary sector organisations although unpaid activists used community development tactics in a number of urban settings to confront housing exploitation as, for example, in the post-war squatting movement or the Notting Hill Workshop. The first real test of this ambiguity came, however, when the Home Office established the Community Development Project in the late 1960s. The origins of the project were perhaps, as later papers revealed, less

ambiguous than simply muddled as it seemed to be an attempt to achieve several goals at once including reducing child poverty, confronting inner city decline, and heading off the possibility of disturbances in the wake of Powell's infamous Rivers of Blood speech.

What became clear is that the community workers appointed in twelve disparate areas (themselves chosen as a result of political horsetrading) were tasked largely with exploring the 'inner city problem' in a way which would reduce tension but in a mode which was essentially controlling rather than liberating, that is that solutions were sought which started from the premise that inner city decline was largely down to the inability or unwillingness of inner city residents to organise themselves and accept the poor working and living conditions on offer. This 'blaming the poor' perspective was particularly important at a time when the International Monetary Fund was imposing huge cuts in public expenditure and thus services on the UK. What government did not want was an analysis which suggested that inner city decline, the move away from a well-paid manufacturing sector to finance and services with poor working conditions and low pay, a lack of investment in inner city housing and a general deterioration of the city environment was in fact due to the flight of capital to more profitable fields overseas and the steady decline in both services and expenditure overseen by governments of all persuasions, rather than to the actions of feckless benefit scroungers. This may all sound rather familiar. Of course today's feckless scroungers are in reality the reckless bankers supported by the ideological right wing bigots; in the 1970s, they were the captains of manufacturing capital taking their profits abroad.

The story of the CDP, its controversial analysis and its rapid closure by a government appalled by the cuckoo in its consensual community development nest, is pretty well-known (but in passing let me tell you that I have been working with a colleague in North America to post all the major reports such as *Gilding the Ghetto* and *The Costs of Industrial Change*, free of charge on a new web portal whose details Angus can make available to anyone interested.) Most CDP workers lost their jobs but went on to find new roles inside the state apparatus where, acting on the insights provided by the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group in their seminal work, *In and against the State*, perhaps the epitome of ambiguity, and from Derricourt and Lambert's chapter in the book *Community Work and the State*, they found interstices in the state machinery which allowed them to continue to promote the values of community development and the drive for organising against a capitalist state whilst working within it. More widely, community workers, of whom there were by now many thousands, also found themselves in the front line of cuts; the late 1970s and early 1980s saw many of them lose their jobs, mainly from government terrified by the quasi-marxist analysis emerging from the CDPs or from local authorities which had either swung to the right behind Margaret Thatcher or simply lost the funding which could sustain what was still seen as a marginal and expendable occupation.

At the time, however, in a hugely insightful commentary on the post-CDP period, Paul Waddington challenged the view, in the context of the major shifts produced by the 'developing crisis of western economies' which had been underway since the 1960s, that 'the end of the post-war era with its confident expectation of steady growth and full employment and its consensual faith that social democracy and liberal reformism offered an adequate framework for the solution of all important social problems'. Similarly Cynthia Cockburn, in her seminal work on corporate management and community development *The Local State*, had identified the deeply ambivalent nature of community work in the emerging context, but particularly the way in which the local state was becoming less local in its political loyalties whilst, simultaneously, 'the community approach' was becoming a central policy strategy in 'reproducing the relations of authority' through cheaper and more ideologically effective

means, a perspective which has perhaps reached its apogee, despite all its inherent contradictions, in the Cameronian notions of community organising, localism and the Big Society. Building on this analysis, Waddington also presciently observed that there would always be a need for community development workers, to manage the tensions between governments and those that they govern, in democratic societies. These tensions of course exist very strongly now – and are becoming most apparent in the deteriorating wage levels experienced by most, pressures on housing and the undermining of a secure labour market - although whether community development as a profession is now too fragmented and weakened by years of attack to provide appropriate leadership is a moot point.

What forms might this variant of community development take, if the welfare state, as we knew it then, was radically transformed if not actually dismantled? Clearly it was then, in Waddington's view, too early to tell. Now, with the ways in which community development rhetoric has been used by successive governments, and the outlines of the governmental use of rhetorical ambiguity to manage dissent becoming more obvious, the ways in which community development is to be used to manage dissent are more easy to delineate.

Ironically, whilst community development as a practice was being dismantled by government at home through the 1980s, and attention to it competed with the growing consumerist movement on the one hand and autonomous identity-based social movements on the other, it was taken up rhetorically by major global organisations in the 1980s and 1990s but also as a means for obscuring their real motives. Community empowerment – the new buzz phrase - was becoming more critically important and yet more problematic in the face of increasing poverty and widening inequalities all over the world. Although there had been a growth in the numbers of types of organisations practising various forms of community development, the terms community empowerment and community participation were increasingly being hijacked by national and international organisations to badge programmes which had, as it turned out little commitment to the empowerment – i.e increasing control of power and resources – by and for local communities. The World Bank, for example, saw community participation as a means for ensuring that Third World development projects reached the poorest in the most efficient and cost-effective manner, whilst the range of structural adjustment and anti-poverty projects imposed on national governments actually involved the poorest in making ever greater contributions to financing those programmes, for example in terms of fees for housing, health and education. Even the United Nations Development Programme commented that it had 'people's participation as its special focus. ...[It] ... is becoming the central issue of our time'.

In reality, however, these international agencies and national governments, driving the process of structural adjustment, too often failed to give effective attention to issues of social justice. Whilst the language of empowerment was becoming ubiquitous, the reality for the poorest communities was very far removed. Empowerment was something of double-edged sword, then, encompassing 'top-down' agendas that were being dressed up in terms that would have resonance for and appeal to local communities and those working alongside them, as community development workers. As another example of this hijacking of language, the 1990s saw the emergence of the term community capacity-building. This claimed to build the capacity of communities to control their own destinies and became used world-wide as something new, particularly in the context of urban policy, regeneration and social development. In reality, the term was introduced largely as part of a political fashion but in practice it is difficult to distinguish it from the-then current practice of community development. Drawing on experience worldwide, an analysis I undertook a few years back suggested that the widespread use of this newly-fashionable term (which has now largely

disappeared) represented a continuing failure of governments properly to engage in '*bottom-up*' development, was built on a '*deficit*' model of communities which failed to engage properly with their own skills, knowledge and interests, and helped to obscure structural reasons for poverty and inequality. Like all political fashions, it seems now, as I have said, largely to have disappeared from political discourse.

One response, from community development theorists in the 1990s, was to introduce the notion of community practice, which took on the notion of working in and against the state to argue that it was possible to inculcate the values of community development in a wide range of human service arenas, including social work, housing, health and local economic development. This however tended to overlook the very limited opportunities these professionals had – even in programmes badged as having a community development orientation, such as the community health development workers or the community 'race' equality workers employed by the Department of Health - for true engagement with local communities or the increasing controlled environment in which they worked, particularly as they largely came to operate within the growing tradition of time-limited makework programmes of one kind or another. The UK government's New Deal for Communities, presented by new Labour as their flagship participative anti-poverty policy, provides a particularly acute example of what happened when professionals sitting between state and community tried to give community control some meaning. Those management committees which encouraged real community management found themselves under top-down pressure to return to more recognisable 'top-down' management arrangements, and management committees were quickly packed with the compliant with no links to local communities. The New Deal, as with the language of the government's White Paper on Empowerment, was once again revealed to be a top-down exercise in community control. All of these top-down programmes of course had a particularly rosy view of the meaning of community, failing to understand potential divisions within communities with which community workers have had to work, divisions which might be overlaid with issues of 'race', class and gender.

As community development came under attack, both directly and indirectly, so too did the level and quality of training. Training for community development workers, despite moves to regularise qualifications and provide national standards, and despite the valuable lobbying work of the Standing Conference for Community Development, later the Community Development Exchange, and the national Federation for Community Development Learning, became more patchy and more marginalised, often becoming incorporated within wider courses such as youth work training or social work training courses. Nowhere was this more apparent than in training for rural community development workers which had never received the attention it deserved as James Derounian and I found in a study in the mid-1990s. Gaps in rural training were identified as: patchy provision; lack of training specifically around Rural Community Development; lack of provision for community activists/volunteers; the provision of short courses and degree courses but not much in between; lack of accreditation for short courses; lack of funding/priority for government and other funding agencies; and lack of a coherent approach to RCD training. The conclusions of this study suggested that, although there was a reasonably large spread of training in community development, there were obvious gaps in terms of training not being related to *rural* community development and not specifically around activists and volunteers. A contemporary study found that provision was rather better in some other EU countries although the overall level was still limited. There are clearly a number of really important issues to be faced now in rural areas to which community development can make a key contribution: these include the shifting demography of rural areas; rural; racism; the increase in rural poverty (with a much broader definition of

what rural poverty actually means); and the position of migrant workers, most of whom are living near or in and working in rural areas.

Trying to roll back this continuing if at times covert assault on the true meaning of community development has proved to be a huge task, at national let alone international levels. The International Association of Community Development, taking advantage of the accession of East European countries in 2004 with their yawning gaps in civil society, devised the Budapest Declaration, subscribed to by activists from 30+ countries, who asserted the primacy of the value base of community development above either its practice, skills or knowledge. This helped stimulate the growth of national associations for community development in some east and central European countries. This – and similar Declarations from conferences in Australasia, Africa and Hong Kong - was also an attempt to address, at a global level, the ideological and linguistic confusion surrounding the use of the terms community and community development. In another hopeful development, the community asset movement positions communities not as inevitably deprived, incompetent and inactive but as possessing resources, knowledge and skills which can be seen as a positive base for locally-led community development work. We should also place our limited English experience in a wider context: between 1990 and 2000, the number of countries represented in the volumes of the Community Development Journal increased by 35 to almost one hundred, proof that the death of community development has indeed much been exaggerated. The IACD thrives on modest means and is holding a major international conference in June next year in Glasgow which promises to be a lively event: so get yourselves there!

In the UK, as I mentioned earlier, the present government has had yet another go at mystification and confusion through its much-vaunted Big Society programme – Cameron's big idea – and the Locality programme, which, whilst arguing for the practice of community organising – even at times invoking the spirit of (admittedly a misunderstood) Alinsky – turns out to be a cover for voluntary activity to fill the gaps created by the huge cuts in expenditure now decimating services everywhere. And there is a bipartisan view of community in Westminster which, paralleling the attacks on those who are not within the declining bubble of being hard-working decent people, sees community through the lens, as Martell and Driver put it, of the territory of conformity, conditionality and moral prescription. Unfortunately most of the key organisations which might have contested this territory and the definitions it represents have either had to close or have been neutralised.

So, more confusion, more misappropriation of language, more top-down programmes posturing as community-led ones. What should community workers do in the midst of these pressures? First, remember that community development is not a neutral intervention but an ideologically contested one. Next, following on from this, continue to ask yourself, who side are you on?: and if you are unsure, check back to the core values of community development, values which are about social justice and equality, respect and democratic control. Then look at training provision: ensure that community workers are properly trained and properly instilled with those values: most of those with a community title in the UK have no such training, no understanding of its basic values and are largely technicians, managed by people who have no idea what community development is really about: no wonder that many community workers are demoralised and confused. A community worker's job should be to challenge and critique, not to be compliant or serve the interests of the rich and powerful. Build alliances – there are many not badged as community development workers, in a variety of positions, who share the values of community development and would prove useful allies in differing struggles. Read your history and learn from it: we have indeed been here before and come through struggles like the present one. There is plenty of good literature around

now; many of those present today have contributed to do it! Beware the Greeks bearing gifts – or indeed the Trojans (and their horses). Or indeed any governmental body. Recall Waddington's argument: the state will always need community workers, whatever they are called. It's what you do with that implicit power, and on whose behalf you act, that matters!

So, this whole talk might be seen as an elongated metaphor for what is happening to community work at present: the one message you might want to take away has a resonance with the horsemeat scandal of recent times. When you are offered what purports to be a community development programme, simply, don't believe what it says on the tin!