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## **Community capacity-building: Something old, something new . . . ?<sup>1</sup>**

### *Abstract*

Fifteen years ago, the term 'community capacity-building' was not to be found anywhere within the policy literature. Now it is used worldwide, particularly in the context of urban policy, regeneration and social development. The paper argues that the term has been introduced as part of a political fashion but that in practice it is difficult to distinguish it from the practice of *community development*. A critique, drawing on experience worldwide, suggests that its widespread use represents a continuing failure of governments properly to engage in 'bottom-up' development, is built on a 'deficit' model of communities which fails to engage properly with their own skills, knowledge and interests, and helps to obscure structural reasons for poverty and inequality.

**Key words:** bottom-up, community development, poverty, regeneration, top-down

### **Introduction**

Fifteen years ago, the term 'community capacity-building' (CCB) was not to be found anywhere within the policy literature. Now it is ubiquitous, particularly in the context of urban policy, regeneration and social development. Indeed, by 2000, a UK report described CCB as 'the New Holy Grail' (Duncan and Thomas, 2000: 15), noting that the government's major national regeneration programme contained more than 3000 separate CCB initiatives. Increasing use of the term seemed, however, to raise more questions than it answered despite the fact that, as Soares (2005) recently observed, 'any mention of civil society seems to include the term "capacity building"'. Why is this, what does the term mean and is there anything truly distinctive about the practice of community capacity-building? This article

reviews the origins of the concept, the way in which it is currently used, in the UK and more widely, and offers a critique of this usage within the particular context of Third Way governments.

### The nature of 'community'

In understanding the meaning of CCB, we have to address, albeit briefly, the contextual language associated with it. We need first to be clear about the term 'community' itself. This is also to be found everywhere in the language of policy and politics, particularly, it seems, where politicians wish to engender a sense of well-being and consensus. Yet it remains a term also loaded with contradictions and ambiguities. The American sociologist Hillery (1964) examined the literature fifty years ago, identifying several hundred meanings, arguing that the only distinctive common characteristic was that of social interaction. Stacey's influential paper, 'The Myth of Community Studies' (1969), indeed challenged the notion that there might be an entity that sociologists could recognize as 'community'.

In the early 1980s, one commentator viewed the then enthusiasm within many national governments for the word 'community' as a cynical and superficial gloss on policy programmes, describing community as a 'spray-on additive' (Bryson and Mowbray, 1981 cited in Craig, 1989: 9). Certainly, its usage within very many recent UK public policy programmes – in community safety, community policing, community health, community education, and so on – suggests that governments hope that it will convey a sense – if not the reality – of 'community' ownership of such programmes.

The idea of 'community' – along with other key concepts such as opportunity, accountability and responsibility – has been central to the development of what New Labour governments from 1997 have regarded as the Third Way approach to social and economic policy, steering a line between the policies of the Old Left (characterized by excessive state control and collectivism) and those of the New Right (marked by excessive individualism) (Powell, 2000). Although New Labour has constantly 'paid homage to the idea of community since 1997' (Nash and Christie, 2003: 22), the idea has been elusive and 'Blairism has had a long and largely abstract romance' (Benn, 2000 cited in Nash and Christie, 2003: 22) with the concept. As Nash

and Christie note, community appears to have greatest resonance when New Labour talks about poverty.

The UK government has made extensive use of the term 'community' within its flagship New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme which has been investing significant funding in 39 deprived 'communities', claiming to be putting these communities 'at the heart of renewal' (Taylor, 2003: 124). However, as Taylor notes, local communities (in this case, geographical areas defined in terms of a range of indicators of deprivation) were given little say 'in the criteria by which they [the programmes] will be judged' (p. 124), and felt excluded from effective control of the programmes because of the structures and top-down systems of decision making established by government. In many instances, local plans for regeneration were rejected by government (Nash and Christie, 2003). As Benington and Donnison (1999 cited in Lister, 2001: 432) and others have argued, the continuing focus on small 'deprived' areas, labelled in New Labour-speak as communities, 'can run the risk of diverting attention away from the wider political economic forces which cause and maintain the concentrations of poverty and unemployment in these areas'. Similarly, Taylor notes that 'community' can be invested with a variety of meanings that 'cover the faultlines of economic decline and community fragmentation' (Taylor, 2003: 2) and as a recent commentary noted (Mendes, 2006: 247), "'Spraying-on" community as a solution to social problems provides no guarantee of progressive outcomes.'

In a parallel way, those writing about – and practising – community development, have struggled over the past fifty years to define what 'community' means for their practice. In the current global discourse about community development, 'community' has three basic meanings: first, it refers to a *geographical community*, a collection of people living within a fairly well-defined physical space – a discrete housing development, a neighbourhood, a rural village or a refugee camp. This has historically been the most common usage of the term and one that has shaped the job descriptions of many community development workers.

Community development workers from both North and South, however, came to recognize from the 1960s that seeing 'community' simply as a geographical entity did not adequately deal with the realities of conflict or tensions between different interests within spatially

defined communities (Craig, 1989). These tensions might take the form of religious or ethnic conflict (as in Northern Ireland or Bosnia for example), disagreements based on class or age, or the desire of some groups to assert specific needs based perhaps on sexuality, gender, ethnicity or disability. Community thus properly incorporates axes of diversity which may generate conflicts. Much of the language of government fails to acknowledge this fact, implicitly denying that communities may be the site of contestation as much as of consensus (except, ironically, when the discourse becomes racialized). One example of this social fragmentation within a geographical community is apparent in the experience of the New Deal for Communities programme in Tower Hamlets which has been the context for conflict and competition for resources both between White and Bangladeshi populations but also between elements within the Bangladeshi population (Dinham, 2005).

The second cross-cutting type of community identified by community development workers was thus a *community of identity*. Within and between geographical communities there might be a wide range of communities of identity which may have differing needs and interests. Seeing community as a site of conflict between competing interests presents a challenge to the political approach of communitarianism, a political philosophy strongly promoted by New Labour. As Dwyer notes (2000: 28 citing Avineri and de Shalit, 1995), a 'strong sense of community, defined as "a body with some common values, norms and goals in which each member regards the common goal as her own" is, for communitarians, a basic need.' However, whilst 'community' is of central importance to communitarians, New Labour's communitarian-inspired view of community is one which, as Driver and Martell (1998) argue, is characterized by conformity, conditionality and moral prescription driven by top-down policy solutions rather than those developed through democratic dialogue from within communities themselves. Government does not therefore respond to agendas set from below but shapes policy programmes from above, for communities, and in terms of its own political agendas.

Thirdly, community workers have often found themselves engaged in relatively short-term work, focused on particular issues such as improving housing conditions, improving road safety at school crossings, or protecting aspects of the environment through campaigns around river pollution. These groups constitute *issue-based communities*.

## The practice of community development

This concept has also been used to cover a range of differing understandings of practice and outcome. The history of community development can be traced back to the 1950s at least (Craig, 1989) but in the late 1980s/early 1990s, many governments and international organizations 're-discovered' community development, although not always labelling it consistently as such. Thus the World Bank viewed community participation as a means for ensuring that Third World Development projects 'reached the poorest in the most efficient and cost-effective way, sharing costs as well as benefits, through the promotion of self-help' (Craig and Mayo, 1995: 2). Their programmes, better known for fiscal conservatism than for political and social risk-taking, frequently led, however, to the undermining of local community social and economic structures whilst appearing to advocate the importance of 'community', one example of the confusion that surrounds this and related terms such as community empowerment. The United Nations Development Programme commented (UNDP, 1993) that it had 'people's participation as its special focus . . . [It] . . . is becoming the central issue of our time' (Craig and Mayo, 1995: 2). In reality, however, these international and national agencies have given scant attention to issues of social justice, with respecting the dignity and humanity of the poorest, with their right to participate in decisions that affect them or with mutuality and equality, all principles that underpin the philosophy and practice of community development as it is understood by practice-based organizations.<sup>2</sup>

A wide-ranging definition of community development was agreed at a recent conference convened in 2004 by international community development organizations. This Budapest Declaration is significant because it was drawn together by delegates from more than thirty countries, mostly from across Europe but also from Asia, Africa and North America.<sup>3</sup> It is worth rehearsing the definition at some length because of debates about CCB which follow.

Community development is a way of strengthening civil society by prioritising the actions of communities, and their perspectives in the development of social, economic and environmental policy. It seeks the empowerment of local communities, taken to mean both geographical communities, communities of interest or identity and communities

organising around specific themes or policy initiatives. It strengthens the capacity of people as active citizens through their community groups, organisations and networks; and the capacity of institutions and agencies . . . to work in dialogue with citizens to shape and determine change in their communities. It plays a crucial role in supporting active democratic life by promoting the autonomous voice of disadvantaged and vulnerable communities.

To serve the interests of local communities, community development promotes local 'voice', encouraging the ability to be critical of established policy and political contexts. National and international 'community development programmes' often have not allowed this political space, as programmes from the ill-starred UK Home Office Community Development Project (CDP) onwards have learnt to their cost (CDP, 1977). Such programmes are not really, in the sense outlined by the Budapest Declaration, *community* development programmes because they allow little control by the community itself with, again, 'top-down' policy prescriptions taking precedence over 'bottom-up' community analyses. They also fail to understand potential divisions within communities with which community development workers have to work. As Oxfam noted (2004: 12), criticizing the badging of top-down policy programmes as community development and again pointing to the importance of understanding community as a site of conflict, although 'bottom-up' community development came from the 'realisation that development decisions made by professionals and those in power have not really worked, often misunderstanding or oversimplifying issues . . . and so devising inappropriate solutions' the use of community-led development can also be flawed by assumptions that 'communities are homogeneous and work automatically towards the common good' (p. 12). Oxfam went on to argue that much community-led development still 'ignores diversity issues within a community and many community management structures over-represent the dominant elite' (p. 12).

Community development is not only a practice, involving skills, a knowledge base, and a strong value base. It is also a goal, self-evidently the development of communities or, as it now appears fashionable to describe it, building the capacity of communities. This leads to the issue of CCB itself.

## Community capacity-building: Scope and definitions

Since the late 1990s, the term community capacity-building began to be used widely within both 'developed' and 'developing' countries to describe activities involving work with local deprived communities, to promote fuller engagement with social, economic and political life. As with the term community however, there was little clarity in its use; nor was it clear why it should have emerged so strongly into policy discourse.

The earliest sustained references to *capacity-building* in the literature date from the early 1990s, in the work of UNCED (1992), Agenda 21 and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (UNDP, 1991). Some commentators claim its origins lie (albeit later) within Europe (Kirklees MC, 2004). The UNDP definition focused on the role of the UN itself in supporting capacity-building. McGinty (2003: 5) suggested this was seen as to do with 'building capacity for the formulation of plans and strategies in support of sustainable development . . .'. This definition emerged in the context of water sector capacity-building which Srinivas (2005) suggests was about 'building the capacity of cities and urban areas to handle their environments [covering] human resource development, organisational . . . institutional and legal framework development.' UNCED (1992: 232) suggested that capacity-building 'encompasses the country's human, scientific, technological, organizational, institutional and resource capabilities' (see also UN, 1996). As McGinty later argued (2003: 5), however, 'the acknowledgment that the UN needed better capacity in its interface with communities was the point at which the discussion and models of *community* capacity-building for provider organizations and government shifted to a more participative mode' (original emphasis) and links with community development acknowledged. Capacity-building then elided in policy discourse into *community* capacity-building.

Within Europe, the first major allusion to CCB came with a report to the European Commission (EC, 1996: 68) regarding strategies for community economic development in areas of 'low economic activity whose members have lost the ability to compete in the labour market', i.e. disadvantaged communities. Banks and Shenton (2001) argue that the approach in the North initially relied heavily on US experience, following the Community Investment Act, which facilitated access by community-based organizations to advice and training

in 'the market', focusing, it appears, more on the provision of business and management skills to individuals. Some Northern thinking was also, however, increasingly influenced by the development literature where what had frequently been 'top-down' project work was increasingly replaced by a recognition of the need to 'strengthen people's capacity to determine their own values and priorities and organise themselves to act on this' (Eade and Williams, 1996: 64; see also Oxfam, 2004).

From these contradictory origins, the concept has been adopted in a wide variety of national and policy contexts, some more concerned with building the strengths and capacities of *organizations* (often, but not always, those that worked with 'communities') and others more specifically to do with CCB, that is building the capacity of *communities* themselves. Although CCB is the focus of this discussion, boundaries remain blurred: thus, building the capacity of organizations *within* deprived communities is seen to be a part of CCB. For example, Ahmed et al. (2004: 20), reflecting on capacity-building for faith communities, argue that it is to 'strengthen groups' organisational capabilities to enable them to sustain themselves in order to play a fuller part in civil society and community cohesion and engage more fully with public authorities.' The use of the narrower term 'capacity-building' remains common in the development literature from both North and South (e.g. Hailey et al., 2005; Hursey, 2005; James and CABUNGO, 2005).

By 2001, use of the term CCB had become widespread within many Northern countries, so much so that it was becoming the target of sceptical humour. At one UK conference of activists, it was caricatured as 'developing local skills in a way that ensures people are able to know what is missing' (cited in Beazley et al., 2004: 5). Another writer likened it to public participation, referring to an earlier definition by Arnstein as 'like eating spinach, because ultimately it is good for you' (cited in Beazley et al., 2004: 1). Indeed, the term had come to convey such a range of meanings that it was often seen to increase confusion rather than provide clarity, leading some activists to suggest it should be dropped altogether. There remained, however, a strong view that 'the broad ideas and activities described as "capacity building" . . . are essential in eliminating poverty' ([www.developments.org.uk/data/14/ms\\_capacity.htm](http://www.developments.org.uk/data/14/ms_capacity.htm)) making it difficult to dismiss entirely. In the context of its own need to be seen to be combating poverty, the first New Labour government had claimed to regard CCB as a 'key idea'

