

Outcome based community development practice – how did we get here and does it matter?

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Introduction:

In this paper I will review aspects of the progress of community development over the last 40 years with a view to understanding factors within it which have led to the current attention given to practice that sets clear and specific outcomes for performance.

Some might argue that the current concern with outcomes is merely a product of the association of community development with state initiatives that have themselves increasingly embraced a target performance culture. I want to suggest that whilst it is undoubtedly the case that there are major external influences on community work and development that have required it to engage with the predominant culture of the context for its practice, there is a strong internal dynamic within the occupation that has taken it in a similar direction. Yet this is a source of ambivalence – whose outcomes should we be and whose outcomes are we addressing – those of communities, those of the state or those that reflect the ideological perspectives of practitioners?

My argument is not so much that setting outcomes is a new phenomenon for community development but that the degree of specificity has changed either from grandiose and generalised aspirations or no attention to outcomes at all, to increasingly tight and specific performance targets – a trend which triggers a sense of ambivalence that if it is to be avoided requires adherence to established principles of community development.

Defining terms

But first let me define the terms of this debate. By outcomes I mean the specification of the differences that are intended to result from a given activity – in this case community development. Outcomes must be distinguished from outputs. Outputs are actions that we take or services we deliver – things we do, for example conducting a community appraisal, providing a capacity building programme. Outputs are the means of achieving outcomes. Outcomes are the changes or benefits that we hope will arise from these activities, for example well informed community leaders, able to use their knowledge of community needs in a skilled manner to effect change that improves the quality of community life

Whilst the definition of community development is frequently contest I will take the following as my starting point:

‘A process of strengthening individuals, groups and organisation to gain knowledge and power to work towards change in their communities.’
(*Banks S et al 2003 ‘Managing Community Practice’ Policy Press*)

Some ancient history:

Many people have located the birth of modern community development in the UK in the late 1960's, associated in particular with the Home Office Community Development Programme (CDP) and the broader context of the establishment in 1968 of the Urban Programme. At its launch the CDP had grand outcomes set for it. The Home Secretary described it as being:

‘To provide for the care of our citizens who live in the poorest or most overcrowded parts of our cities and towns. It is intended to arrest, in so far as that is possible by financial means, and reverse the downward spiral that afflicts so many of these areas. There is a deadly quagmire of need and apathy’ (James Callaghan: Hansard 1968)

The leading academic advisor described it as about: ‘forging a new theory of poverty in the urban twilight zone’ (AH Halsey 1968).

The challenge was no less than the arresting of community degeneration and poverty and the forging of a new theory to underpin intervention. On the first it could only fail because its emerging understanding of the theory of poverty undermined the credibility of its methods. The CDP did not create structural theories of poverty but it contributed to and embraced their development as an influential force in community development. As a consequence, it redefined the problems not as a ‘quagmire of apathy’ or the pathology of poor people but as a direct consequence of the function of the dominant social and economic structure, within which poverty was seen as functional to the interests of capital. Whilst individual differences no doubt affected the capacity of individuals to respond to their circumstances, the explanation for the concentration and location of poverty as a phenomenon was a product of global market forces and the complicity of the state in their operations.

As a consequence of the emergence of structural theories, community development became highly politicised and relationships between the state as sponsor of the CDP and the local projects was centrally characterised by conflict. This relationship was captured in the title of one of the many critical reports emanating from the CDP ‘Gilding the Ghetto’ (1977).

But practitioners struggled to find a practise that corresponded with the dominant theory they were embracing. Some came to see any association between community development and the state as a conspiracy to create an illusion of response to problems that could not be addressed by local actions. They became victims of what Specht (1975) described as ‘large hopes but small realities’. Others were unconvinced by the monolithic model of the state and the assumption that it was necessarily a malevolent force. But remaining convinced that community development must be about social change that addresses poverty and disadvantage they needed to review their understanding of what the feasible outcomes of community development might be.

Among critically reflective practitioners there was a loss of confidence and a need to reassess. Among local and central state sponsors, in many parts of the UK there was a retreat from the radical elements of the field. Yet alongside those whose dialogue came to dominate the literature of community development in the UK in that period was an on-going and substantial tradition of community development that found its

origins in the settlement and community association movements, community centres and community based adult learning and youth work. Though founded in part in critically conscious adult education, it had, through incorporation as a state service under the 1944 Education Act and the 1945 Education (Scotland) Act, become essentially apolitical in nature. Its activity was universalist rather than targeted and focused on running services in communities rather than achieving social change. The flavour of its approach, and the contrast with that illustrated in the CDP, is demonstrated by a 1944 Ministry of Education booklet that described the role of community centres as being for 'Neighbours to come together on an equal footing to enjoy social, recreative and educational activities...'

In Scotland the subsequent emergence of Community Education following the Alexander 'Challenge of Change' report (1975) has been criticised as having been based on a 'passive-objects-of-improvement attitude to people' and lacking any analysis of class or conflicts of interest (Kirkwood 1990 'Vulgar Eloquence' Polygon). Nonetheless the report ushered in an integrated adult education, youth and community work service but with strong ties to centre based provision.

To simplify a more complex picture it is reasonable to distil two dominant, contrasting but parallel trends. On the one hand, a relatively radical practice tradition with practitioners attracted by the achievement of change but unclear about what sorts of outcomes were really feasible, on the other a service oriented tradition within which the value of the activity was largely treated as self evident and therefore not requiring specification of outcomes. It would be misplaced simply to suggest that these orientations corresponded with particular employment settings though there were clear differences of emphasis and it is important to note that the differences were present between workers within the same agencies.

Some more recent history

Alongside the more conservative orientations, local government in Scotland was soon to foster the use of community development methods with the explicit intention of achieving social change through targeted attention to disadvantaged areas. The lead came in the form of the Strathclyde Social Strategy for the 80's and in acknowledging the structural socio-economic factors in relative disadvantage attracted a more radical perspective on the functions of community development. But the policy papers of the time also identified malfunctioning public service performance and 'problems associated with the communities themselves'. It did not adopt the naïve expectation that community development alone could address structural inequality ('as likely as a flea pushing an elephant uphill') and most of the outcomes specified for the strategy focused not on the external determinants of disadvantage but on factors such as; reducing crime, vandalism and emigration rates from areas and increasing the number and participation in local societies, clubs and community facilities. There was a certain dissonance between the image of the strategy as a means of combating structural inequality and the actual focus of attention. Perhaps as a consequence the specified outcomes tended to be presented in broad generalities that were not translated into specified outcomes that could be achieved in particular communities.

'Large hopes but small realities' remained a source of frustration but whereas this had been a disabling experience for many in the CDP, research conducted among

community workers in Strathclyde in the 1980's (Barr 1991) showed that in practice, for the most part, a reformist frame of reference was being adopted that focused on priorities emerging from local communities. However the role of community workers was frequently perceived as challenging and the research concluded that the resultant conflicts might have as much to do with the 'postures of community workers as the realities of what they do'. In this context specifying of essentially reformist outcomes seemed to be treated more as a sign of impotence - a challenge to a radical self image, than as rational analysis of the context and opportunities of practice.

As the Social Strategy progressed, for some, ambivalence about occupational self worth remained whilst others moved on to embrace a practice with more limited horizons as nonetheless purposeful and worthwhile. As criticism of the impact of community development within the social strategies grew into the 1990's they seemed to become more determined to demonstrate their value and apparently more open to performance accountability in relation to specified outcomes. It was noticeable for example when the outcome focused ABCD (Achieving Better Community Development CDF 2000) and LEAP (Learning Planning and Evaluation CDF 2000) planning and evaluation models were introduced from the mid 1990's they frequently received the most positive response in settings where workers felt under most pressure to demonstrate their value.

The last 10 years

In 1994 a wider research project was conducted that explored the contribution of community education services to community development across Scotland (Barr, Purcell and Hamilton). It revealed a lack of performance measurement and a degree of complacency deriving from belief in the self-evident worth of the activities undertaken. The research was widely regarded as threatening to the security of community education, particularly where centre based service provision was the dominant mode of operation. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, the research exposed the myth that community development was in practice universally present as an element of community education (especially where community education was in the ambit of education departments of local authorities). Secondly, the evidence pointed to a lack of clarity about the purposes, principles and outcomes of community development. Thirdly the evidence indicated that the most substantial outcomes for communities were arising where 'communities had acquired the greatest level of authority over their own affairs' including authority to define the outcomes that should be sought.

However there was good practice on which to report and this evidence illustrated a range of specific outcomes that might be expected from community development. These included: collective political development, communities with capacity, community influence and control over local services and facilities, engagement between communities and public agencies to produce more appropriate policies and services, structures for long-term action, community networks, reduced discrimination, economic development and material gains, personal development and empowerment. In the absence of evidence of systematic performance monitoring and evaluation it was recommended that the outcomes identified could become the basis for effective frameworks. It was this that led to the development of both the ABCD and LEAP materials.

It is important to note that both ABCD and LEAP were commissioned by central government agencies. The former in Northern Ireland, where the need was for accountability and performance evidence in the use of the large resources flowing into community development as part of the peace dividend, the latter in Scotland as a reflection of the interest of the HMIE in improved performance evaluation as recommended in the 1998 Ministerial Review of Community Education. A drive to outcome focus measurement can therefore be traced directly to the interests of the state, but it is essential to appreciate that the manner in which these frameworks were developed was through consultation and engagement with practitioners. Their willingness to participate in this way reflected changing attitude to performance accountability and, no doubt, given that it was clear that it was going to be required of them anyway, a desire to assert strong influence over the outcomes against which they would evaluate themselves.

But there is a further feature of the development of these frameworks that is worthy of note and that is their foundations in principles of participatory evaluation in which the interested stakeholder negotiate the criteria for and share in the process of evaluation. These were not top down frameworks but, perhaps as a reflection of the emergence of the idea of community partnership as a defining feature for the conduct of governance, they owned the principles of community development itself. To be acceptable an outcome performance approach to community development has to ensure that the specification of the outcomes reflects the aspirations of the communities that are the intended beneficiaries of the process.

And Now

It would be misleading not to acknowledge that there was resistance to ABCD and LEAP but the resistance was often related more to perceptions of the complexities of using them than the principle of accountability for delivering clearly specified outcomes. Both are now widely adopted and valued in the field. I believe this marks maturity and realism about the potentials of community development and growth of self confident belief in its value despite its limited capacity to address the structural underpinnings of many of the problems that disadvantaged communities experience. I believe this conclusion is supported by the reaction to the association of community development as a core instrument of regeneration policy in Scotland and by the evidence from the work SCDC has been conducting with community and agency representatives to develop the National Standards for Community Engagement.

When the Scottish Executive 'Better Communities in Scotland: Closing the Gap' regeneration statement was published in 2002 it emphasised the outcome based evaluation approach:

'We need to put in place *outcome measures* that allow us to track change over time in our communities so we can tell when things are getting better or if they are not'

Community learning and development was identified as having a key role but it was recognised that it was necessary to:

‘carry out more work to improve how we measure the effect of community learning and development services in building social capital and improving core service outcomes’

Whereas once this might have triggered alarm there seems now to be a recognition that the field needs to demonstrate its claims and a commitment to community engagement and partnership alleviates the anxiety that the outcomes will be specified for rather than with communities. Here the process of establishing the National Standards for Community Engagement has brought together commitment to participatory approaches that embrace outcome focused practice.

The Standards have been developed on a participatory basis; their content directly reflects the concerns of community and agency representatives involved in community engagement. A dominant feature of the debates informing their development has been a concern with purposeful practice, with specification of the results that should be evident and with the establishment of effective participatory monitoring and evaluation. The demand for this has come from communities and agencies – negotiating and specifying agreed outcomes and measuring performance against them has become accepted good practice that I believe reflects confidence and ambition tempered by realism.

The embracing of responsibility for demonstrating competent and effective performance is not before time. In my view the future funding support for community development depends on its ability to show that it makes a tangible difference. But it has to defend the principle that the difference it makes reflects the interests of the communities with which it works. The public service performance and target culture that has come to predominate is prone to contradicting its espoused values. Whilst partnership, participation and engagement are the buzz-words of the age, power, its uses and abuses, remains the critical issue. There is a curious ambiguity in current state policy between prescriptive social control, for example in relation to anti-social behaviour, and participatory governance. If we are to be committed to outcome performance evaluation it must be in the context of the values of community development. It is not acceptable for example, for agencies and government to agree and prescribe outcomes for regeneration that is dependent on the expenditure of local social capital without the participation and endorsement of communities. Fortunately for us the defence of community development principles for the conduct of outcome based practice is clearly set out in the current Working and Learning Together Guidance from the Minister using the formulation established in the LEAP framework: ‘empowerment; participation; inclusion, equality of opportunity and anti-discrimination; self determination; partnership’. The guidance notes that:

‘*All* (my emphasis) those involved in CLD have an interest in ensuring that the service they provide is to a consistently high quality. Quality assurance and improvement depend on rigorous self-evaluation of the quality of the service provided and the outcomes achieved’.

Community development is in a strong position but we need to defend it by demonstrating its value. If its value cannot be demonstrated it is not worth defending.

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