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centre



Supporting best practice in community development

## Community Development Values

## Community development values

The theory and practice of community development has always been informed by a set of values and principles. This value base is important in defining the people and places where its efforts are concentrated, the way it works with people, and the sorts of outcomes that it seeks. The values of community development can be considered under three broad headings: the things it challenges; the ideas it promotes, and the thinking it influences.

### ***Community development challenges exclusion***

Community development is committed to combating social exclusion, poverty, disadvantage, and discrimination. As such, it should not be considered as a value-free or universal approach. It is based on a recognition that some people, some groups and some communities are excluded from social, economic and political opportunities for reasons of lack of wealth, cultural oppression, physical obstacles or prejudicial attitudes. Its focus is with groups and communities that are excluded due to one or more of these causes, and its role is to work with such groups to achieve change.

Thus community development promotes social inclusion. In emphasising the need to tackle the consequences of poverty, disadvantage and discrimination and to promote social justice and participation, social inclusion expresses ideas that have long been shared with community development. Social inclusion can be promoted through the activities of providing support to the development of individual capacity, and building community capacity to generate social, economic and democratic activity and opportunities.

Achieving social inclusion is therefore an active process of people participation. It is not something that can be done to people but must be done with and by them. It is a participative and dynamic process of learning, action and reflection.

### ***Community development promotes strong communities***

The second set of values informs the way such change is understood. Community development reflects and promotes a number of ideas. These include:

- **Full citizenship:**

Many groups are effectively disenfranchised through the lack of opportunity to participate in decision making, or the failure of decision makers to recognise or respond to excluded voices. The idea of full or active citizenship recognises that the health of communities, and society as a whole, is enhanced when people are motivated and able to participate in meeting their needs. Active citizenship is not based on the idea of do-gooding or benevolent philanthropy but ideas of mutuality and reciprocity which are the "glue" that binds people together and underpins the very idea of society. The expression of shared responsibility evidenced in practical action is to be found in all dimensions of community life - politics, sport and recreation, care, art and culture, religion,

the environment, health, economic development - and, at its best, involves participation across boundaries of race, age, gender and disability.

- **Community led collective action**

Community development is an approach to change that depends on building solidarity and support through emphasising the common aspects of individual problems, and the capacity of people to work together in their common interest. The worker supports the development of community leadership and encourages the building of a collective, accountable approach. Collective action in communities includes small-scale and large-scale activities to meet local needs, as well as action to lobby for change.

- **Participative democracy**

Widespread, active participation in public affairs is a good in itself, as well as a means to achieving best value and effectiveness in administration of public services. A participative approach can lead to a better understanding of needs and issues, clarity about who benefits from, and who is excluded from, services, and can develop better ways of targeting scarce resources. It can also lead to innovative ways of meeting needs, including partnership arrangements through which communities can develop, administer and benefit from running services.

- **Empowerment**

Most forms of exclusion are based on lack of power and influence, and imposed solutions are at best paternalistic and at worst oppressive. Community development has at its heart a commitment to empowerment: encouraging communities and groups to learn how power relationships operate, and to develop their ability to deal with the problems.

- **Problem focused learning**

This is the core approach taken to empowerment. Community development is based on the idea that people learn from the experience of tackling their own problems. It seeks to encourage people to think about the causes of problems, act on those causes, and learn from the outcome. Similarly policy on lifelong learning recognises that developing skill and understanding needs to be a continuing process. In part this reflects the value of continuous individual and community self-development and improvement. Equally it recognises that technological, social, economic, environmental and other forms of change require new skills and understanding. Hence lifelong learning is functional to the employability of individuals and the needs of the labour market and the national economy. It is also a source of personal fulfilment, achievement and self-realisation, and as such, a basis for building strong communities.

- **Preventative action**

Much public service provision is based on dealing with problems after they have occurred. While recognising the importance of this, community development seeks to identify the underlying causes of problems and to deal with these, rather than with their manifestations. Strong communities have capacity to identify potential problems and take preventative action.

- **Collaboration**

Community development involves collaboration between interest groups, government and citizens. Some approaches to work in communities only emphasise self-help: things they can do themselves in their own interest. Others seek to confront and challenge power holders directly. Neither of these approaches lead to partnership or collaboration. Community development emphasises collaboration. Communities may be forced to adopt a confrontational position to get an issue recognised. Once it has been, it is usually in the interest of both the community and the decision maker to identify and implement solutions. Similarly, many activities that start out as self-help will begin to engage with public agencies for funding or other forms of support. Once this happens some form of collaboration is almost inevitable. It is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of communities (and other collaborators) in such relationships.

***Community development influences policy***

Finally, community development seeks to identify and define issues of public concern, and influence public policy in relation to those issues. It is a value in itself that it seeks to inform and influence public policy in this way. It has a particular role in making the connections between private troubles and public issues. In doing so it reflects all the values discussed above, but seeks to reflect them in the way that public issues are identified, and in the way the formulation of policy is influenced.