

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Community Development in the 21st Century: A Case of Conditional Development

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Summary

During the last 5 years, the UK government has increased support for and resources to community development projects and strategies. These interventions have been deployed to assist the state address key issues of social exclusion notably at neighbourhood level. The thrust for tackling social exclusion and therefore the growth in community development can be linked to New Labour's adherence to a neo-liberal agenda. The two articles and the working paper considered here reflect this expansion of activity and articulate some of the central issues and challenges facing community development. The central problem for community development appears to be that whilst it has secured a more prominent place within contemporary social policies, it is in danger of losing its ability effectively to address the expressed needs of local communities. Hence the development we are witnessing can be considered to be a case of conditional development.

Keywords: Community development, globalization, New Labour, practice

Introduction

Since the publication of two *British Journal of Social Work* Critical Commentaries on community work in 2000 (Popple, 2000a,b), much has changed in the field. These new developments are reflected in the choice of work for consideration in the commentary here. Whilst the term community work continues to apply generically to a range of interventions in communities and neighbourhoods, most paid 'community workers' now describe themselves as community development workers. Similarly, government agencies and funding bodies are increasingly using the term community development in place of community work in order to emphasize the *developmental* aspects of the work. In the last 5 years, there has been an expansion of locally based interventions in communities and neighbourhoods and an increase in the employment of paid community development workers. For example, the government has created the £800 million Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, available to the most deprived local authorities. In addition, the government is providing £400,000 over 3 years from a Community Empowerment Fund (>£35 million in total) for communities in each of these areas, specifically for community involvement in Local Strategic Partnerships. Further, the government has set aside £50 million to be spent over 3 years to provide small grants for community organizations in deprived areas. All these will be utilizing the skills of community development. In particular, community development has been given a key role in assisting deprived communities in capacity building and in securing valuable resources (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001, see also www.socialexclusionunit.go.uk). However, before considering the articles and the working paper selected for this Critical Commentary, it would assist the discussion if we briefly remind ourselves of the developments that have occurred in the last 5 years in the global context, together with the dominant features of New Labour's policies which have led to the changes which have impacted upon and influenced the role of community development in the UK.

The global context

Internationally, a major and defining feature of the last 5 years has been the effect on the world economy of the acceleration of globalization. Whilst globalization is a contested concept, there is general agreement that it involves 'increasing and deepening interconnectedness of societies in different parts of the world' with 'rising activity and power of multinational companies' (George and Wilding, 2002, p. 2). Further, there is broad agreement that globalization is 'not a condition or a phenomenon; it is a process' (Sweezy, 1997, p. 1).

National economies are now increasingly influenced by global changes in investment and labour relations. The outcome has been governments progressively encouraging and rewarding inward investment to their countries by loosening economic restrictions, increasing tax advantages, restricting trade union activity and implementing minimum wage rates well below average and mean

industrial and commercial earnings. In parallel, directors of major publicly quoted corporations have been allowed to receive annual incomes and bonuses well in excess of average earnings. A prevailing feature of globalization has been the role played by the US administration in influencing and redrawing international arrangements through ideological and economic power.

New Labour

The UK government, like administrations in the vast majority of other countries in the world, has adopted a neo-liberal approach to economic affairs. The kernel of this approach has been the transfer of as many decisions as possible to the market in order, in New Labour's view, to maximize 'choice', extend democracy and, most importantly, to increase the UK's international competitiveness and efficiency.

New Labour was elected to power in 1997 on a manifesto that promised to modernize Britain. Three years previously, Tony Blair had begun to modernize the Labour Party in order to make it more in tune with the voting population and to make it electable. Blair's view, and the view of those around him, was that Britain needed to jettison its insular and conservative approach to trade, commerce and the public sector and to make itself a leading advocate of free trade and to become more receptive to new ideas and new ways of doing things (Dodd, 1995; Leonard, 1998). The 1997 manifesto chimed with the majority of the electorate who voted into power a party that wanted to both modernize and re-energize the UK economy, whilst rebuilding the moral basis for a more cohesive society. A central theme of this project was the 'third way', which as a concept is continually being contested. However, the view from one of the keenest advocates of the concept, Antony Giddens, is that it represents a 'modernised social democracy' (Giddens, 2001). According to Driver and Martell (2002), Blair believes the 'third way' 'offers an opportunity to advance traditional centre-left values using new policies that reflect the changing circumstances of the modern world' (p. 72).

Whilst pushing ahead with free market neo-liberalism, New Labour has created a form of social democracy which maintains their traditional support from sections of the working class and those employed in the public sector whilst ensuring the British economy responds to the new challenges and directions demanded by the dynamic of the international trading system. To do this, and to deal with the deleterious fall-out from growing inequality in the UK, New Labour has actively acknowledged the limitations of individualist approaches favoured by neo-liberalism and embarked upon a 'One Nation' project aimed at reducing social exclusion whilst maintaining and extending the confidence of the population in market forces. This has been a tricky path to travel, but the government has trod it reasonably successfully, enough to make it politically electable in 2001 and again in 2005. At the recent 2005 election, however, the Labour Party was elected with a reduced parliamentary majority of 67 seats.

A cornerstone of New Labour's ideology has been 'joined-up thinking' and co-ordinated strategies to tackle deprivation and social exclusion. Influenced by the writings of Antony Giddens (1998), and in an attempt to distinguish it from the Conservative Party's version of neo-liberalism, Tony Blair has been keen to create a 'stake-holding society' based upon ideas emanating from 'communitarianism' (Etzioni, 1993, 1995, 1998). 'Communitarianism' is again the rhetoric of the 'third way', and is prominent in these developments, as are commitments to partnership, accountability and active citizenship. To drive these strategies, the government established in 1997 the Social Exclusion Unit, which since May 2002 has been located in the cross-cutting Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), and has been instrumental in working to the targets related to social justice and neighbourhood renewal. It is in this context that UK community development in the first decade of the 21st century needs to be viewed. Many of New Labour's projects and schemes which are focused on regeneration and social exclusion have at their heart the role of community development. In a number of neighbourhoods, New Labour, through its agencies and projects, is now deploying community development strategies and techniques to meet two major objectives. One is to encourage and develop local initiatives and decision making, often challenging local authorities whom New Labour considers as failing, to address issues of social exclusion satisfactorily. The other objective for community development has been to assist in the smooth delivery of nationally developed policies at the local level.

In order to explore in more detail contemporary UK community development, two journal articles and a working paper are considered and critically commented upon. Each offers a different but important assessment of community development.

Community development in the UK

The first article considered is that by Alison Gilchrist (2003) which appears in the *Community Development Journal* Vol. 38, Number 1 and which outlines some of the key challenges presently facing UK community development. Gilchrist, who is currently employed by the Community Development Foundation (a non-departmental public body supported by the Active Communities Directorate of the UK Home Office), titles her article 'Community development in the UK—possibilities and paradoxes'. In this article, Gilchrist argues that to its credit the government has focused on some of the UK's most deprived communities and has targeted additional resources to tackle high levels of unemployment, poor health, low educational achievement and rising crime. Gilchrist reflects that whilst consulting local people when addressing problems at the community level is not new, the demand from New Labour is that communities need to be *involved* in the decision-making, design and delivery, and local development plans. To assist this process, resources are being made available for community capacity building. Gilchrist sees this as a move from technocratic

strategies for regenerating deprived neighbourhoods and a positive 'way in' for community development.

The author then outlines the challenges for community development in this new world. She argues that the drive to both train and support community members should be located alongside mechanisms to hold them accountable to the wider community. At the same time, local authorities need to consider how their processes and language discriminate against local people effectively engaging in decision making at that level. This requires local authorities to change their practices and procedures if partnerships are to be successful. These dilemmas are discussed by Geddes (1998) and Craig and Taylor (2002).

Gilchrist's central criticism of New Labour is that 'insufficient attention is paid to the importance of community participation in its own right, rather than as a vehicle for delivering government objectives'. Her argument is that more resources are needed to invest in strengthening community networks, local events and small grass-root groups which she believes 'are the foundation for civic renewal and participatory democracy'.

This is a first-rate short article which I recommend for gaining a better understanding of the challenges facing contemporary UK community development. Although Gilchrist is critical of the government's promotion of an individualized approach to community involvement through its schemes to reward 'community champions' and 'social entrepreneurs', she believes New Labour is making a reasonable fist of its policy and practice in communities. However, she agrees with Craig (1998) that there is a need to reclaim the ideology of community development as a 'radical quasi-profession' whilst 'developing a praxis that incorporates a sound analysis of opportunities and threats'.

Policy, politics and practice

A welcome new working paper in the Social Sciences and Policy Series which similarly considers some of the key issues facing community work/development in the UK is that written by Mae Shaw. In this paper titled *Community Work: Policy, Politics and Practice* which is jointly published by the Universities of Hull and Edinburgh, the author argues that the notion of contradiction is a fundamental one in any consideration of community work. The thrust of Shaw's well-judged paper is to better understand the contradictory nature of community work as a social and political practice. After wrestling with the difficulties of defining what is meant by the term community, Shaw examines the antecedents of both community and community work. This is a deft attempt at unravelling the knotty issues of identifying where the practice started and what influenced its development. Shaw argues that the 'crucible years' for community work were those from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. This was the time when, against the background of the ruinous impact of the massive industrialization taking place in large areas of Britain, the welfare state began to emerge as a distinct project. The collectivization of

critical services, however small scale, was increasingly thought necessary and morally justifiable. Intervening more effectively in local community life was driven by the work of the Settlement movement led by Canon Samuel Barnett who challenged the 'scientism' of the empirical research of Charles Booth and others. This was in all senses the commencement of organized traditional community work which was later developed by British Colonial Office personnel returning to the UK from colonial postings (Popple, 1995). This workforce had used community development techniques in the 'dual mandate' of integrating colonial territories into the capitalist system by stimulating the growth of democratic political institutions on the British model.

Shaw then moves to consider the role community work plays in both delivering and challenging the New Labour agenda. Recalling the discussion in Wright Mills (1970) of 'personal troubles' and 'public issues', she comments that community work has a role to play in assisting citizens to express new forms of collective identity and interest. She continues that the actions of communities in pursuit of their own collective interests need to be seen as both legitimate and a measure of the health of a democratic state.

Based on a review of the literature and on interviews with key actors in the development of community development theory and practice, Shaw has produced a valuable working paper. As well as offering an incisive and detailed review of the historical antecedents of community work, Shaw argues that community work theory must be regarded as contextual, contingent and provisional. The only reservation I have with this well-argued paper is that it has no examples of contemporary community work to support and underpin the views expressed. It would have helped to have at least one case study which provides a background against which to relate the theoretical issues outlined. Notwithstanding this, Shaw's paper is a valuable contribution to the community work academy.

Community development in action

A journal article that provides an insight into how community development can be used to cultivate local social capital and to make the best use of the resources available to regenerate an area is that by David Waddington (2004) in *Social Policy and Society* Volume 3, Part 1. Titled "'Making the difference" in WarsopVale: the impact of government regeneration policy and community development on a Nottinghamshire ex-mining community', Waddington offers an informative article on the impact of a colliery closure on the local community and the role played by local residents, community development workers and representatives of regeneration agencies in securing real improvements in resources for the community. His work emphasizes the role played by the local authority, voluntary organizations and regeneration agencies in working to develop local capital and to enable the area to gain successfully from New Labour's coal field policy.

Waddington highlights the role of key actors as important when working with local residents. He argues that to achieve success at the grass roots, the motivation and input of key actors at the neighbourhood level can lead to major funding agencies assisting in the regeneration of areas blighted by economic decline. He argues that because communities have to compete for scarce public resources, the greater their local social capital the more enhanced is their chance of securing significant funding. The role of community development, he argues, is therefore central in this advance.

Conclusion

Community work/development in the UK is in a stronger place than it was when I last wrote the Critical Commentaries for the *British Journal of Social Work* 5 years ago. The value of community development has been recognized by New Labour as a vehicle for its work in tackling social exclusion, educational attainment, ill health, poor housing and crime. As argued elsewhere (Popple and Quinney, 2002), the approach taken by New Labour is distinctly more progressive than that pursued by their Conservative predecessors; however, there are drawbacks for communities as the present government's agenda is predicated on its adherence to neo-liberal economic policy and to neighbourhoods responding to their programmes in a prescribed manner. Where communities are at odds with New Labour and contest their 'modernizing' policies, such as in the case of the closure of the Govanhill Pool in Glasgow (Mooney and Fyfe, 2004), they can be sidelined. This can place community development workers in difficult situations where they have to balance their responsibilities to their employers with the expressed needs of local communities. So whilst community development is now better placed within government social policies and has much to offer the pursuit of greater democracy and 'democratic renewal', it needs to be considered within a wider global context of New Labour's neo-liberal policies. The expansion of UK community development has therefore been a case of conditional development and there is still much to be done to ensure that the activity really does meet the needs of communities rather than the needs of the wider politics of the state.

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