

# Chapter 1

## Community Development

### Traditions of Practice and Contemporary Contexts

*Ann Ingamells*

*Why does one write about community? For whom? With whom? In the midst of what company? From inside what collectivity? Given what traditions? From what "location"? Given what self understandings? ... To what extent is the writing one's own map for the direction of movement? How many voices can one bear in the writing/planning?*

Lugones (1998, p. 466).

Twenty years ago, Kelly & Sewell began their book about community building by saying:

*Writing this book, we have been conscious of the lifetimes of human experience that have shaped what we now understand community building to mean (1988, p. 2).*

The editors of this book begin with a similar sentiment. We see in our practice the traces of the many: people, colleagues, mentors, educators, community stories, practitioner accounts, that have influenced us over many years, yet we also recognise at the heart of our practice, a tradition, that we colloquially call 'a developmental approach'. This book is a collection of narratives and commentaries through which we hope to both make

this 'tradition' evident and nurture its continuance, whilst recognising that tradition is never enough, is partial and is contested.

Any story, told by one or more narrators, is limited in the possible levels of meaning it can locate itself at and convey. Personal experience, method, technique, purpose, practice orientation, organisational context, funding regimes, conflicting agendas, competing philosophies can be revealed or eclipsed. Each story reflects *a* telling rather than *the* telling. New dimensions of the story can be brought out by different tellings from people differently positioned, and/or by reading it through one of many possible lenses. Each chapter of this book that tells a story is followed by a commentary chapter that brings different or additional readings to what is going on.

By way of introduction, this chapter considers the nature of a tradition of practice and the elements of this particular tradition. Chapter two unpacks further components of the approach. This chapter also considers the ways in which a tradition of practice changes in response and reaction to shifts in the socio economic and political environment.

The term 'tradition' has several meanings. We use it loosely here to mean an orientation, an intellectual heritage, a set of values and assumptions and a cluster of particular practices that hang together and are sustained by a group of people, in our case, in a particular place, over time (Hope-Simpson & Westoby, 2009). Traditions are often influenced by schools of thought centred in, and taught from, universities over a period of time.

The intellectual and philosophical traces of this particular approach to community work are from people-centred humanist traditions (such as Buber, 1965), non violent schools of social action, such as discussed by Gandhi, (Fischer, 1962) and emancipatory schools of thought such as Freire (1997) and Illich (1973). The practice tradition emphasises change driven by community members from the bottom up, in a way that brings private concerns to the public world and democratically negotiates the terms of change between diverse groups. The normative distinction of the developmental approach resides in the conceptualisation of who the primary actors are and how change happens. This tradition positions community members (rather than workers) as the primary actors, beginning with the poorest, most marginal, disadvantaged or those most affected by adverse policies. Change is pursued through relationships and through the transformative power of dialogue. The practices include equipping the actors for their role in change and creating the kinds of structures that enable and sustain participation and bottom up agendas and decision making.

The method at the core of the approach begins with the horizontal linking of person to person, group to group, through dialogue and conviviality (community building) (Westoby & Dowling, 2009). Aspirations of the group are expressed through existing, changed or new structures to the public world. Analysis and reflection indicate the trajectory of change, and facilitate new patterns of thought and action. Strategies vary between creating alternatives, bringing new people/energies/ideas to old forms,

through dialogue across power differentials confronting issues and seeking new solutions, negotiation, lobbying, campaigning and as a last resort seeking to apply pressure on resistant and entrenched interests, albeit within respectful and non violent ways.

Even within the developmental tradition there have always been differences of emphasis between identifiable groups. Some groups stayed closer to the horizontal work, committed in their communities to building solidarity with people who are usually marginalised and excluded (Andrews, 1996). Other groups moved more to the work at the intersection of vertical (social structures) and horizontal (community relations) emphasising the effort to bring about wider changes that make institutions more responsive to community articulated need and aspiration (Davson, 2000). Between these have been those with a place base, or specific group focus, both concerned to enhance residents identity with a place, fostering awareness and resident voice to secure better resources and supports for a range of groups, mindful always of the least advantaged, in a local place.

Community development is embedded in many disciplines of practice from agriculture and environment through nursing, rehabilitation, engineering and planning, education, sports, recreation and arts. Perhaps one of its most familiar homes has been social work. Connie Benn (1981) is often credited as the practitioner who first gave a clear articulation of the developmental approach in social work, yet her critique is relevant to many professions and most public servants. Her observation was that professionals tend to set up a situation in which the power stays in the worker's hands, and therefore the worker remains in control. When it came to more empowering ways of working, she argued that such professionals know very little 'about redistribution of resources, participation techniques, consumerism, or even how to change social structures' (1981, p. 92). Professionals, she claimed, acted as if the cause of poverty or disadvantage lay in the personal defects of individuals.

Benn argued for a developmental approach which has three aspects:

1. Social change can only be achieved if a group has four kinds of power -
  - power over resources
  - power over relationships
  - power over information
  - power over decision making.
2. The techniques to obtain these powers are - participation strategies, self help mechanisms and deprofessionalisation.
3. The following elements are essential to the approach -
  - that it be directed to change in society's institutions, rather than change in individuals
  - that it be resource-oriented, rather than problem oriented

- that it lead to self-actualisation, rather than to stigmatisation of the individual
- that it be a means of social change and not a means of social control
- that life choices be made freely by participation, and not imposed by professionals
- that professional workers be accountable to community and consumers and not to their peers
- that decisions be made by participants
- that individuals determine their own life-styles, rather than having their lifestyles decided by discriminatory and discretionary provisions.

Benn was clearly talking about an approach to professional practice which has been built on over the years to include empowerment, anti-discriminatory and strength based approaches. Yet, whilst the theory is increasingly espoused and articulated, practices in the field often make less headway. In the narratives of this text, community members continue to encounter many barriers to determining their own lifestyles, practitioners continue to find it difficult to engage people in a sustainable way and organisations find themselves concerned more with control than empowerment.

The strong functionalist underpinning of western society has a predisposition to identifying a problem and acting to fix it. This is what Kelly & Sewell call a linear approach. It relies on binary thinking which positions the problem as out there, usually in 'the system' and quite separate from the people experiencing it. Kelly & Sewell (1988) argue that life is always more complicated than this. They say the developmental process counters this cultural tendency towards linear expression, through processes that are cyclical, multi dimensional in thought, action and relationship. In this journey, a professional needs to learn to work alongside the people, knowing that no one can do the journey for another, and that readiness and capacity for change will develop over time, and that the goal of the action will change along the way. Expanding how one thinks is a crucial part of this developmental journey:

*To build community, we need to be able to work with many different kinds of people, organisational structures and action emphases. We also need to be able to ... expand our thinking to more than one pattern...Locked into one logic or pattern of thinking, we make and accept judgements solely on the basis of what is familiar, whereas with an open mind we are open to both new ideas and to the way we process those ideas.*

(Kelly & Sewell, 1988, p. 12)

The developmental approach then is about shifts in power, in thinking and in personal and social agency. It combines the logic of horizontal relationship building, person to person in the community, with the logic of relating from the horizontal to the vertical structures of society. Carmel Daveson (1996, 2000) has been key to the articulation of these quite distinct movements. The movement from private to public requires firstly the relationships between community members and secondly, when agreements

are clear and the group is ready, the shift to relating structurally. For Daveson (1996), however, the shift to relating structurally is not a shift to adversary mode. She, like Kelly & Sewell (1988) view the kind of binary thinking which posits us against the system, as outside the developmental approach. The developmental approach takes a relationship building approach to change and the challenge is always to see how far the process can go by working on and within the relationships whether along horizontal or vertical axes.

Not all proponents of the developmental approach are against adversary measures, rather they see them as a measure to be taken when all efforts to bring about change through developmental and democratic processes have failed. The developmental approach pushes the democratic process as far as it can be pushed through relationships, dialogue, and negotiation. It connects horizontal to vertical informally through existing relationships and through formal channels. It applies pressure through concepts of fairness, justice, human rights, better governance, better value for money, more finely attuned policy and so on.

As such, the developmental approach, as Daveson (1996) points out, may be more akin to a social movement than a professional or even grass roots activity. Indeed, those who embrace the developmental method tend to advocate bringing the whole self to the process, as opposed to fragmenting the self across professional and other roles (Andrews, 1996; Daveson, 1996; Tennant, 2000). There is evidence of this too in the narratives that follow. When the formal work pathways are blocked, practitioners maintain the convivial after work relations, and they seek other ways of continuing the trajectory outside of work, for example by research or other collaborations.

This book grows out of such a tradition, but whilst the past may inform current practice, it does not constitute it. The stories show how people draw eclectically on a range of resources to respond to or shape the moment. Hopefully the stories indicate that a tradition can guide practice, but a tradition or approach is not something that can be *applied*. Context is never inert, relationship dynamics are complex, and responding to a given set of dynamics is less about getting it right and more about making choices, acting within constraints and sustaining momentum.

### Contemporary contexts

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, community workers found some compatibilities between their method of approach, community people's willingness to get involved and the willingness of government and other authorities to engage with communities. Social justice provided the discourse of rights and access, fairness, equity, and participation. Always imperfect, there was nevertheless enough fit between the developmental approach and the broader political philosophy to provide leverage for some change. But gradually the socio political context was changing. Community

infrastructure was being professionalised through delivery of welfare services. Managerial mechanisms of standards, accreditation, accounting mechanisms and risk management were making it more difficult for paid workers to engage bottom up with people. Insurance companies required volunteers to have job descriptions and tighter attachment to service delivery goals. People were constructed as either clients, consumers or volunteers; community members began to disappear from the available subject positions. Advocacy became high risk for funding approval and the networks of agencies that had supported each other's community efforts were being positioned as competitors. Instead of community organisations being a mechanism through which communities had a voice, they had become part of the bureaucratic chain of service delivery.

One might imagine that communities and their workers would be angry, resistant and outspoken about these shifts. Some have been, and most also see that they are in some ways complicit with the new agendas. The creeping parallel force of consumer, market oriented individualism, has somehow redefined the good citizen as the person who provides their own private housing, superannuation, healthcare, training and children's private school education. Few of us remain unaffected by this collapse of collectivism in favour of market-individualism. Community work effort then seemed to battle encroaching forces with little groundswell of wider support. As some opportunities for community work closed off, however, there appeared to be new openings.

Urban and community renewal, along with place management, were emerging as new government programs of engaging communities. These seemed to offer new and exciting opportunities for communities to participate. It transpired, after some time, that community engagement meant people from the community getting involved in making government agendas work. It meant government engaging with business and corporations. It meant that communities were being transformed by 'development' agendas that were not their own. Community held agendas became more difficult to articulate and sustain. Community members whose interests were served by the new agendas (e.g. their own property values might increase) got involved; those whose interests were not served, voted with their feet. This drove a further wedge between those with and those without resources in each community, with the least advantaged pushed further to the margins (Ingamells, 2007).

Industrial conditions within the community sector have added to the challenges. Community work remains the most poorly paid of the social professions, with those working at the local level least resourced. There are no senior positions for community workers, despite the complexity of the work. To move up the ladder is to move into management positions. So, potential community workers have to make hard decisions. Sometimes paying the mortgage and feeding the family take precedence. This then is a low point from which to reflect on the work. However, the stories indicate some of the ways workers are engaging with the challenges, reorganising their personal and community lives to hold in with the issues, move

sideways to include other kinds of activities in their broader repertoire of work and drawing on the literature to sustain, what is often pointed out, that contesting the status quo never comes easily.

The shift to consumerism and market affects us all. We become: less likely to recreate in local community groups and more likely to go to the gym; less likely to improvise music in a participatory way and more likely to consume or provide market based experiences; less likely to care for each other's children and more likely to use private childcare; less likely to shop locally and more likely to choose the Westfield shopping mall. Whilst it may be that community building does occur within gym, private school and even shopping mall, nevertheless we become less invested in the well being of the wider collective, the links between us become obscured, and cynicism about the relevance of community takes hold.

Even as the ties of collectivity are obscured by the rhetoric of individualism and consumer choice through the market, we remain firmly and inevitably connected to each other and to the planet. We are connected through the social arrangements made for the care of our children, their education and their safety in parks, streets and other facilities, the quality of our healthcare, the infrastructure through which our working life is shaped, the security of our superannuation investments, and the quality of arrangements for our old age. We are connected through the internet, media and telecommunication to an interdependency which exceeds anything which has gone before. We are connected through our mutual dependence upon the ozone layer, oceans, air, water, ice caps and biosphere of our planet (Burkett, 1998).

Of course, many community groups have emerged in reaction to these global changes and in response to these contemporary ways that we are connected. People are expressing alternative values through minimising consumption, buying locally, becoming active around climate change, shifting gender roles, changing lifestyles and habits to express the changes they would like to see. These are however happening at a social distance from those places where disadvantage is most prevalent. Meanwhile as more people are excluded from broader social processes and seek support at the local level, funding goes increasingly to large non government or private organisations that have little attachment to, or presence in, place.

A tradition of practice inherits ideas from the past – truths that were shaped by past conditions. To defend core beliefs against change, is to become irrelevant to living in the present. Only through stories can we discern the continuities and discontinuities of tradition as it informs present practice. Each instance of practice then is a determined effort to take the accumulated wisdom of the past and transform it through action in the present. In this way, people come to know the way their world works, and add to their tools and tradition as the present demands. The guiding force of the tradition becomes the stake around which new understandings and practices gravitate, and in our tradition, this is to value and nurture the impetus to recognise, acknowledge, affirm, enable, animate, and skill-up,

those parts of all of us which care for the people and places and circumstances of which we ourselves are a small part.

The narratives of this book, are all set in this context of globalisation, managerialism and individualism. Agents, external to the local community, in each story want to harness community energy in the name of some agenda of their own. The external agenda and the internal agenda sit uncomfortably together, with many of the resources on the external side. Practitioners of this space between what is internal to a community and what external agents want of it, are working on many fronts at once to build and sustain connections. There is a pressure to tell simplified success stories of practice, but the narrators have resisted this pressure. The stories show the struggle, the effort, the learning and the varied feelings that accompany the work. Each of the story narrators is on a journey, stepping into and out of the fray. The learning goes on and in a sense, none of the stories is finished.

The risk is that people will read these narratives and think it is all too hard. We hope the book will encourage people towards greater involvement, not because the stories promise success, but because they matter. We hope people will be encouraged to nurture the efforts of themselves and others to contribute to collective life, 'as if people mattered', and as if all people mattered equally. And, we might add, as, Jim Ife (2002) did, as if all people understood how interrelated people and planet are. We live in a dynamic, complicated, multi-layered world, where injustice persists and conscious efforts at change are hard wrought. Yet, equally we live in a world of people, ideas and resources to assist transformation. We hope this book will encourage people to step into the more complex areas of practice and share their successes, disappointments and learning along the way.

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