

Book Review

Making Spaces for Community Development

Michael Pitchford with Paul Henderson,
Policy press 2008

'Making Spaces for Community Development' provides a brief historical context of community development over a forty year period using insights and reflections of experienced practitioners within the field to highlight lessons which inform professional practice, both currently and for the future. Throughout the period indicated, the book analyses the changes to the policy context which have created tensions, challenges and opportunities for community development, with particular reference to the shift towards a partnership model. The current emphasis, being driven by the government within the model of Community Planning, is towards a more 'technical vehicle of capacity building,' which attempts to depoliticise community development by delivering short term interventions and by engaging communities around service delivery. This is described by the authors as the 'professionalisation of the profession.' The book argues that the historic focus of community development work on social change will become weakened and lost if practitioners do not critically analyse both the policy context and their role, and ensure that the values which underpin community development (such as social justice, equality and empowerment) continue to inform practice. The book is not prescriptive, but encourages further discussion by raising key questions about current practice for debate.

The book clearly indicates the kind of constraints which have contributed towards the development of a more technical approach, such as the emphasis on the delivery of outcomes/ outputs to secure sustainability of an organisation and equally to satisfy the various funding stream objectives. This top down approach militates against community development practice reconnecting with the politics of communities and can instead simply deliver social policy for the government if not approached critically. The authors point out that this is a consequence of a growing emphasis on

the kind of short term interventions that disregard the processes of community development which are based on a more long term approach.

The book is a useful resource for current practice from both a theoretical and practical perspective. For example, there are six lessons arrived at from the insights and reflections of the featured practitioners, drawn from their experience of the 1970s and 1980s, and these six lessons compliment Mae Shaw's "seven C's for radical practice" (1997) to provide a useful practice framework which strengthens the role and position of community development. Within the current context, and corresponding constraints, these offer direction and a framework to create space for communities to understand and define the problems they face, such as the existence of increasing inequalities in marginalised communities, and to facilitate social change. Managing this tension created from pressures from above and below requires the practitioner to work within these contradictions and to renegotiate the landscape and challenge where necessary.

One of the strengths of the book is that it critically discusses the tensions and contradictions which exist within the current context and how these may play out in the future. Community development practitioners have always worked under constraints, but the shift from a confrontational/ campaigning role to a seat around the table within the partnership model has created further implications and greater pressure on workers to ensure the fulfilment of policy objectives. In exploring these tensions, Pitchford and Henderson stress the importance of not losing sight of our role, if community workers are to remain 'agents of social change' rather than become 'agents of the state'. The book recognises that community development is a political process and should not be regarded as a neutral activity.

A key function of the book is to galvanise a debate in relation to, 'where community development is today and where it is heading'. Does the book achieve this? It certainly is thought provoking and encourages practitioners to critically reflect on their practice, re-assessing

their aims and the direction of their work, from a national level to a project and individual practitioner level. The book is however rooted in the English context and although there are parallels to be drawn around the key issues for debate, such as the challenges currently faced the constraints of agency upon structure (eg government top-down emphasis on capacity building) my minor criticism is that it would have been useful to draw from some Scottish experiences to create a more balanced resource, particularly for those practitioners who are still engaged at a community, as opposed to a regional, level. There are plenty of them out there I'm sure!

In terms of where community development is heading, the book explores the implications of the shift to partnership and in particular the current model, Community Planning, and analyses the implications for current policy and practice. The book poses some key questions: can communities influence strategic decision making, and are social justice, poverty and inequality still key priorities for marginalised communities within this model? The resounding answer is no, although the book highlights that it is still possible when communities recognise the need to negotiate, and not just discuss, at a neighbourhood partnership level in order to maximise their influence and help set the agenda.

There are numerous resources available which provide a historical context in relation to community development between 1968 (the year referred to as the beginning of the 'Golden Age') and the present. However, this book does offer more! The reflections and experiences of practitioners who have worked within the field over a long period permeate the book, and usefully draw from the past to the present in a way which informs future practice. The book clearly sets out the tensions and opportunities for community development for the times ahead, and although these may well have been analysed within other books, 'Making Spaces for Community Development' is written in an encouraging way that manages to create some optimism for the future by arguing for the need to exploit those tensions and reconnect with both

people and politics, rather than just uncritically responding to policy.

Overall I feel the book achieves what it claims to do, encouraging debate and reflective practice. As the title suggests 'Making Spaces for Community Development' is the focus of the book, suggesting the need for community development workers to engage critically with the current context to redress the mantra of 'delivery' which prevails within the current context. The book conveys the clear message that as practitioners we have to create space if we want to support marginalised communities effectively to push the boundaries towards a social justice agenda, otherwise community development will continue to be weakened or even lost within the 'professionalisation of the profession'. Reading the book reaffirmed my own sense of personal responsibility as a practitioner within the field and I would recommend the book to students and practitioners as a useful resource to reflect on, and inform, practice.

Shaw, M (1997) Community work: Towards a radical paradigm for practice, *The Scottish Journal of Community Work and Development*, Vol 2

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