Reflections on community development, community engagement and community capacity building[i]

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Language is incredibly important because it can obscure and in some cases deliberately be used to obscure, the meaning of what is being done and the values which underpin it. There have been many examples of governments – here and elsewhere - hijacking the language of community development to suit their own political purposes.

It was for precisely that reason that in 2004, at the time of the accession of the A8 countries into the European Union, that the International Association for Community Development organised a conference in Budapest, which I chaired, and produced a statement, later known as the Budapest Declaration, signed up to by community work activists and policy makers from more than 30 countries, which attempted to define what community development is and is not. The specific reason for the conference was that the nascent national community development associations in countries like Hungary, Rumania and Slovakia were already struggling to convince their governments – used to centralised top-down social and economic policy-making - that community development required an entirely new way of approaching engaging with local communities and that without this new approach, community development as a method for supporting local people to express and act on their needs, would be discredited. With all its imperfections, the definition we drew together provides a useful touchstone for other groups wanting to hold on to the basic values of community development –

> Community development is a way of strengthening civil society by prioritising the actions of communities, and their perspectives in the development of social, economic and environmental policy. It seeks the empowerment of local communities, taken to mean both geographical communities, communities of interest or identity and communities organising around specific themes or policy initiatives. It strengthens the capacity of people as active citizens through their community groups, organisations and networks; and the capacity of institutions and agencies (public, private and non-governmental) to work in dialogue with citizens to shape and determine change in their communities. It plays a crucial role in supporting active democratic life by promoting the autonomous voice of disadvantaged and vulnerable communities. It has a set of core values/social principles covering human rights, social inclusion, equality and respect for diversity; and a specific skills and knowledge base.

The Declaration refers to the key salience of values; the autonomy of the voice of local groups; points to the different ways in which communities might be defined; and indicates that work needs to be done not only to help build the strength of local groups but also the capacity of local public and private institutions – such as local

government – to respond to the voice of community groups. Building capacity in this latter case is not about enhancing the already considerable power of such institutions vis a vis community groups, but their capacity to respond appropriately – which includes of course recognising, accepting and supporting communities to be equal partners, rather than as tokenistic cardboard cut-outs at the partnership table. In annexes, the Declaration also points to some of the key issues which community development workers have had to deal with and the contexts they operate in,: issues such as training and standards, theory and research, lifelong learning, the skills needed to work with so-called hard-to-reach groups (though I prefer to call them easy-to-ignore groups), ways of working in rural areas, in regeneration programmes, and over newer issues such as sustainable development and the environment.

A review of practice in the past sixty years which a group of us have recently published (Craig et al 2011) shows how far governments in the UK still have to go to understand the true meaning of this language of community development. To take a recent example, a few years ago the Westminster government published a White Paper on community empowerment. This sounded encouraging until one examined it in detail and discovered that the model being put forward was essentially a top-down model and that the indicators used to measure empowerment were ones which were quite foreign to those working in community development. Last year the final evaluation was published of the Westminster government's New Deal for Communities, probably the government's most substantial investment in community development for 30 years. This was intended, it was claimed, to give residents in a substantial number of the most deprived areas in England control over the way their communities were to be developed. But what does the final evaluation say?

The literature beginning to emerge from this well-funded national programme suggests that, despite a stated objective of 'putting the community "at the heart" of the initiative', in those cases where communities organised to demand greater control of policy and strategies affecting their communities, frequently pressure has been brought to bear for them to stay 'on message'; at the same time, a 'bottom-up' approach was undermined by monitoring and measuring requirements which crowded out the 'community' contribution and which emphasized rather meaningless Treasury-inspired numerical outputs as opposed to qualitative measures based on process and long-term outcomes – key characteristics in determining the effectiveness of community development and engagement. Such programmes have increasingly been – and continue to be - managed from the 'top-down' with financial management in particular as a mode of control to ensure that local community voices are marginalised. Typically, the NDC projects, in any case, defined the range of issues and policy options that were up for discussion, focusing on the targets needing to be met by local authorities, and ensuring that more fundamental policy challenges were firmly ruled off limits (as in the case of social housing, for example, where the role of local authorities in construction and maintenance was clearly restricted, whatever the preferences of the local communities in question).

This warm rhetoric of community control was thus, in reality, contradicted by the practice of government. In fact, looking back more generally at the few occasions that government has directly funded major community development programmes, it rapidly moved to close them down, as soon as the challenges posed by community empowerment became apparent, or distorted them to meet its own objectives.

Government support for community development and community empowerment has, sadly but predictably however, often been exposed as rhetorical. Too often, the messy, complex and frustrating practice of community engagement has been too difficult or challenging for government to respond to.

A more contemporary example, which points to some of the other difficulties inherent in regarding community development or empowerment as a marginal add-on rather than as a fundamental value base to policy is demonstrated by the English Department of Health's Delivering Race Equality Black and Minority Ethnic Mental Health Community Development Workers programme. Here workers were attached, usually in a marginal structural location, to statutory health bodies or, in some cases, local authorities. They were generally poorly-paid in comparison with other professionals in the organization – particularly health professionals - and thus accorded little status, managed often within an inflexible organisational context, by people with little or no understanding of community development approaches, and required to produce measures of their work which were set within a traditional target-setting and input-output culture. Hardly surprisingly, the work, though surrounded by the rhetoric of community empowerment and participation has not only failed largely to deliver significant improvements in BME mental health on the ground in most project areas but has also failed to achieve a significant shift in institutional approaches to or understanding of community engagement. Community development has thus, in most projects, failed on both fronts.

This in turn raises the issue of the training that community engagement workers receive. There is a paradox that, as governments apparently become more committed to community development and engagement, (reflected in an increase in the numbers of those employed with the term 'community' in their job title, which the UK government now believes to be around 20,000), the most recent national survey of community workers conducted under the auspices of the Community Development Exchange, suggested a substantial dilution of the profession in terms of experience, training and skills levels. The CDX survey highlighted a number of important but disturbing issues, including the short-term nature of many posts (many of them often lasting only 2-3 years), the low salaries (and thus presumably status) attached to the posts, the lack of training of many community workers, and the fact that almost one-third of workers were supervised by someone with no experience in community work.

Sarah Banks and others' book on Managing Community Practice (Banks et al 2003) found that the sustainability of community development at project level and as a profession remained then - and I would suggest now also, particularly at a time of the bankers-driven public expenditure cuts - a major concern as does the extent to which community development values are not incorporated into the mainstream thinking of a range of employing organisations. These survey data also suggested a considerable anxiety within the profession that a quarter of all community workers were appointed to posts where neither experience, qualifications nor training were requirements for the post. This suggested, at best, considerable confusion about the tasks facing community work and engagement, confusion reflected within contemporary discussion, and certainly a potential dilution in the professional focus of community work. It also again effectively downgrades the importance of community engagement.

Turning to another aspect of the language of community development, I wrote a review of the origins and use of the term community capacity-building for the OECD a few years ago (and have since also reviewed the use of the term and its approach in other policy areas such as housing, health, local regeneration, local economic development and environmental action) because I was intrigued to understand why a term, which only appeared in the public policy lexicon, and not just in the United Kingdom, so profusely and so suddenly, should have done so.

The answer I concluded was that it was driven in part by political fashion, with new governments wishing to distance themselves from the language of their predecessors. In fact there are frequent references in the CCB literature to the fact that it '…has its roots in a much older movement called community development'. The second, related, critique was that, as with the term 'community', the concept of CCB is applied uncritically – as the 'spray-on additive' - to a very wide range of activities, many of which have however little to do with the development – with community control of the skills, knowledge, assets and understanding of local deprived communities – which is at the heart of the definition of community development. Thus CCB is used in a contemporary context by organizations such as the World Bank, and by national governments (such as the Westminster New Labour governments of the early part of this century) to describe what are effectively 'top-down' interventions where local communities are required to engage in programmes with pre-determined goals – such as the privatization of public services within a context of tight fiscal control – as a condition for receiving funding, approaches far removed from 'bottom-up' community development interventions. This incidentally is not a million miles from the experience of the New Life for Urban Scotland programme which was represented in some quarters as a community regeneration initiative in the early 1980s but in reality turned out to be a top-down initiative which attempted to undermine the public housing polices of Scottish local government and drive many of those who were victims of the labour shake-out of the early Thatcherite years into low-paid employment.

Those working with local communities often question the motives of those promoting CCB 'from the top' and it is a question worth asking here in the midst of this very significant initiative, where many of those engaged in it may have relatively limited experience of the traditions of community development. For example, Beresford and Hoban (2005) have argued that 'capacity-building to develop people's confidence, self-esteem and understanding supports their empowerment and participation. [But this] is not the same as skill development to equip people to work in the way that agencies traditionally work': or, to put it another way, that CCB can be pursued by powerful partners to incorporate local communities into established structures and mechanisms rather than having to face the challenges to those existing structures which effective working with deprived communities presents. These challenges could, in fact, and do go to the heart of the reasons for deprivation and inequality. This again reminds us to be clear what the value base is of the work we are doing, however it is badged within the territory of community development. Diamond (2004), in the context of UK regeneration, notes that 'whilst these [CCB] initiatives use a new language, they are steeped in old practices. Changing structures does not of itself alter the power differences inherent in local neighbourhoods where community groups are cast as "dependent" by regeneration managers seeking to meet performance targets'. Diamond notes that the capacity-building approaches of local authorities studied

marginalized alternative views to those in the mainstream, sought to co-opt local activists and, through existing practice, individualized rather than collectivized local communities' experience, very much in line with the Third Way approach of New Labour. Evidence from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA also shows that the ability of the community to act on its own behalf, to work on issues which it identified, and at a pace and in a manner which it determined itself, was compromised by the government's need to promote its own social and political agendas.

The most fundamental critique of CCB is that it can be based on the notion of communities being 'deficient' – in skills, knowledge and experience. This 'deficit model' … 'pays no attention to the capacity of institutions to overcome inherent barriers to engagement' i.e. the problem lies not with communities but the institutions, structures and processes which affect them; and secondly, definitions of CCB built on the deficit model again 'give no indication of an endpoint. What is capacity being built towards or is it an end in itself?' This is a question that has plagued the theory and practice of community development, reflected in New Labour's continuing emphasis on measuring programmatic outputs in terms of its own narrow quantitatively-defined goals rather than on community process and outcomes. Essentially, although it is possible to identify the characteristics of 'strengthened' or 'resilient' communities (skills, knowledge, organisation etc), the fundamental aim of community development is – consonant with its value base - to ensure that greater political power lies with local communities. The endpoint might thus be, to quote Beazley et al (2004), 'less comfortable, more empowered and awkward but self-determined communities' and a process which maintains that situation.

The term community capacity-building might again be seen as useful therefore where it applies equally to the lack of capacity both in neighbourhoods and of powerful partner agencies to listen to, engage with and share power with communities effectively. Do such powerful agencies – local authorities, health boards, and so on have the capacity to 'lose face, cope with residents' decisions going against them?' and so on. This 'deficit' approach to CCB, where it underpins a government's approach, can be criticized because it assumes a social pathology approach to communities which lack skills and abilities: learning these qualities would allow local community residents to be 'good citizens' in terms identified by government and 'for those in power, this model of capacity-building is useful. It poses no threat. It is top-down, paternalistic, and deflects attention away from the need to change the existing institutional and economic structures. It is a view that serves and supports the status quo.'

Such an analysis of CCB from the perspective of the values of community development, would suggest that a view of communities as somehow deficient in certain skills and capacities to enable them to engage effectively with other actors in local governance misses the point. Communities have skills, ideas, capacities: but these are often latent or unacknowledged. Local and central governments often come with their own agendas which they attempt to impose, however subtly, through partnership working, or more crudely, directly on local communities, often using funding requests as levers for compliance. The task for powerful partners in this kind of CCB partnership working should be to listen to communities' demands and respond appropriately, most of all when what local communities are demanding may be in conflict with external agendas; and thus for the former not to continue with

predetermined goals and programmes. This may not just be difficult for powerful partners, it may be precisely what – despite the rhetoric of CCB – they are not interested in because they have other agendas. There are in any case many structural difficulties in partnership working for local communities and those representing their interests. The weight of academic evidence on partnership working suggests that, without a huge degree of care and compensatory resourcing and support, communities are unable to compete with the most powerful partners, in terms of resources – of money, personpower and political influence – in setting policy and practice agendas. Simply bringing people to the table does not necessarily mean that they have an appropriate level of influence over the direction of policy.

My critique of the dangers of CCB is actually no different from my critique of community development and they can effectively be seen as more or less the same thing. But additionally, under this new umbrella term, not only has a similarly wide range of activities found shelter, many of which have little to do with the goals and values of community development, but that many of the old tensions and difficulties of community development – of manipulation of communities, misappropriation of terminology, co-option of activists, conditional funding and state-controlled power games such as divide and rule – have emerged. Local, regional and national governments and international bodies have used the rhetoric of community development or CCB for that matter, possibly even community engagement! – to buy continuing political space enabling them not to respond appropriately to the demands of the dispossessed or to obscure the structural reasons for continuing poverty and inequality.

But it doesn't have to be that way. To respond effectively to local communities' demands would mean powerful statutory bodies giving up much of the power which they enjoy. The sorts of questions which community engagement workers might well ask could include: who defines the capacities which communities need and why? What control do local communities exercise over the capacity-building process? And who defines what a strong community would look like? As Banks and Shenton (2001) put it, 'we need to question whose purpose capacity-building is serving and ensure that local residents are not mere puppets in the regeneration game played out by large national, regional and local agencies. "Community development" may be a more acceptable term and a more useful approach to promoting social and economic change in neighbourhoods.' But community development, like CCB, can be manipulated to serve government's interests. Neither is essentially a neutral technical process: it is about power and ideology and how these are mediated through structures and processes. As with the terms community and community development, the term CCB is used to hide a false consensus about goals and interests. In reality they are all arenas for political contestation. And, as with these earlier terms, CCB can be manipulated by governments to give a false sense of community ownership and control. The message for local communities is thus 'beware the Greeks bearing gifts.'!

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[i] From a speech to Linked Work and Training Trust Conference on Better Community Engagement, 8 March 2011