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Community Work, Community Development: Reflections 2009

– Anastasia Crickley and Oonagh Mc Ardle

The autumn 2008 publication *Towards Standards for Quality Community Work,* (Towards Standards Ad Hoc Group, 2008) aims to assemble in one place definitions and statements of the values and principles underpinning Irish community work. In this short article, using the standards and their development as a starting point, we focus on some of the features of the Irish community work tradition developed over the past three decades and of which the standards are themselves a reflection. Through the discussion we interweave suggestions on future issues and challenges.

Many reports on community projects and initiatives and policy proposals and challenges emerging from these projects, along with academic contributions from other associated disciplines, are available. Few however, with the exception of Community Workers Co-operative publications in the south and useful books north and south, including that by Sam McCready's *Empowering People: Community*

Development and Conflict 1969-1999 (2002) on the history of community development in Northern Ireland, focus on the discipline itself, a gap we hope this journal will hereafter fill. This does not mean that Irish community workers have lacked concern or capacity to analyse as well as act, and to contextualise both analysis and action in the light of global and national socio-economic environments, funding programme boundaries and, most important, collective community interests.

On the other hand, lack of written focus on community work itself means there is no body of so-called directly relevant literature against which to "validate" any comment we might make. For this reason, and because we believe that in a discipline concerned with change such conventions should also be challenged, we do not seek to endorse our comments by reference to what is available from writers from other disciplines in Ireland or writers about community development in other parts of the world. We do, however, use and cite insights and references where we think useful. Our attempt, like that of *Towards Standards for Quality Community Work,* is to ground what we say in our experience as practitioners and educators and in the collective reflections and discussions we have been privileged to share with community development practitioners, participants and funders.

Towards Standards for Quality Community Work was the outcome of a process led by an ad hoc group consisting of community workers, educators and other stakeholders from a variety of background agencies and institutions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, reflecting also north/south co-operation towards better understanding of community development and its contribution. The comments we make in the publication are generic, not linked to funders or programmes and therefore we hope capable also of overall relevance. In our discussion we use

the terms community work and community development interchangeably although there are limitations to the traditional understanding of community development, which focused on self help, a "rising tide to lift all boats" and an unquestioned agreement with authority. We are conscious that in Ireland and elsewhere, the term community development is used variously to describe the previously listed activities and others with considerably more aspirations and consequences.

Community

The aim of *Towards Standards* to contribute to a better understanding of community development is relevant and timely. The term community, as Margaret Stacey suggested in 1969 (The Myth of Community Studies, *British Journal of Sociology,* 20), can be subject to a variety of interpretations. Community can be, as feminists have articulated, a smokescreen for hiding oppressions, for example of women or of marginalised and minority groups. Focusing only on the overall disadvantages faced by, for example rural communities, becomes an easy mechanism for underplaying or ignoring the disadvantages, class divisions and marginalisation within those communities. What about Travellers who, as well as living their own community of interest, have been denied equal involvement in Irish communities north and south for centuries? Or new migrants and minorities on whose work so many communities depend, but who are often perceived as an add-on rather than essential part of the "real" community?

Ann Hindley's *(ACW Skills Manual,* 1997) understanding of community is helpful in focusing community beyond everything or nothing. She refers to "that web of personal relationships, group networks, traditions and patterns of

behaviour that develops amongst those who share the same physical neighbourhood and its socio-economic situation, or common understandings and goals around a shared identity or interest". We also think Raymond Plant's practical proposal *(Community & Ideology* 1974) to distinguish clearly between the real and the ideal community remains a good starting point for all concerned with community development. The idealised space has a nice feel-good political currency but is aspirational rather than a current reality. Starting with confusion between how things are and how we might like them to be is a bit like beginning with our feet in mid-air (as opposed to having them firmly on the ground).

Community work

Community work, as outlined in *Towards Standards,* is about that journey from the real towards the ideal, concerned with an analysis of social and economic situations and collective action for change based on that analysis. It is not reducible to just any form of activity, however meaningful, which happens in the community. Services provided in the community do not automatically have collective outcomes for all, for instance adult and community-based education is more likely to benefit individuals, helping them make important and useful individual progress. In effect community work is based on collective analysis of the issues to be addressed. It is undertaken as the result of collective decisions and has collective outcomes for the whole community.

The analysis, according to *Towards Standards,* is concerned with linking a socially cohesive society with one where human rights are promoted and all forms of oppression and discrimination challenged. This analysis, not least in the current challenging economic times,

needs to be linked to action which acknowledges the partial rather than solo role of community development in creating the conditions for that just and equal society. Programmes and actions also have a tightrope to walk between funders' requirements, urgent immediate needs and overall community interests. State and other funders' increasing concern that communities should not challenge the hand that feeds them in our view will not serve the development of that socially cohesive society aspired to by all. The creative tension and innovation of challenges from community groups and participants, and the confidence and capacities they generated, were a very important catalyst in earlier difficult times.

Community projects and initiatives which "start where the people are at", as Saul Alinsky *(Rules for Radicals,* 1971) used to say, but do not create space for analysis tend to burn out focusing on the myriad of immediate needs which present themselves in any marginalised community. They must identify and work towards overall community interests rather than continue to respond only to presented needs. Women experiencing domestic violence need the safety of a refuge, but their long-term well-being requires a society where domestic violence is unacceptable and unusual.

This understanding of community development and the elements associated with it is reflected in the definitions of key funders and stakeholders in Ireland, including Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Community Development Programme), Pobal, the Combat Poverty Agency and the Community Workers Co-operative in the Republic as well as the Community Development Review Group Northern Ireland and the Lifelong Learning UK National Occupational Standards for Community Development Work, quoted in *Towards Standards.* It is further reinforced in the Budapest Declaration agreed by statutory and non-statutory delegates from 33 countries

in Budapest, Hungary, in 2003. All point to community development as a unique activity. They present definitions which are challenging for everyone involved, particularly when put alongside what *Towards Standards* considers "the changing and often hidden nature of the structural inequalities based on race class, gender and disability to name but a few" which those concerned are called on to surface, analyse and address.

Discussion: Profession

The origin of recent Irish community work in local and strategic responses to inequalities, poverty and issues of concern was both vocational and professional, paid and unpaid, funded and unfunded. Over the past 30 years a distinct discipline has emerged. Concern to rightly include those undertaking community development work in an unpaid or voluntary capacity has been an important feature – being voluntary is not the same as being amateur. Confusion between inclusion and self-proclamation has emerged, however. By this we mean that those given community work positions or responsibility for community development management without any background in the field, sometimes automatically see themselves as experts, free to lead and define every and any task they undertake as community development. Such assertions are understandable from the point of view of individuals anxious to assert their legitimacy but they do little to promote the collective concerns of communities and may add to community development being perceived as confused and irrelevant.

Values and practice principles, such as those in *Towards Standards,* are essential for the process of developing the community work discipline, as are recognised education and training programmes. Community work should not

become the poor cousin of other social professions but should continue to avoid professional self-interest as a main defining characteristic.

Recognising that professional status does not have to be achieved in the same way by all, that routes can be and are found from individual consciousness raising to professional activity, and that community development is a different sort of profession was an important starting point in discussions about *Towards Standards*. We believe the time for soul searching is past. Communities need and deserve the best possible community work support, whether paid or unpaid, from their own members or someone else. Also, community workers without clear and progressively high level professional qualifications which facilitate mobility in their own field will increasingly find themselves managed and directed by colleagues from other fields who, at best, do not understand or, at worst, may be opposed to their interventions.

The recently reviewed *UK Occupational Standards for Community Development* and *Towards Standards* provide useful starting points for the comprehensive framework for professional endorsement of community development education and training which also facilitates routes from local participation to national management, as well as mechanisms for validating experience. Such a framework is now, we believe, an urgent Irish requirement if community development is to maximise its value for all. Flexibility is not impossible in increasingly flexible education and training regimes, but flexibility should not be confused with "anything goes", particularly given the further and higher education institutions' concerns to maintain and enhance numbers as education costs rise and pools of potential participants drop.

Youth work and social work have set honours degree level as the minimum standard for professional status in their

areas. Clear community work equivalences (however they are achieved and documented) and associated practice requirements are needed. The north/south basis proposed for work towards this end is, given worker mobility and cross-border links, useful. We urge that building on the good co-operation in *Towards Standards* is continued in the interests of quality and grounded processes and outcomes. Finally, many speak of integrating community development practices into their work. Imitation is said to be the highest form of flattery. A tribute to the success of community development can be seen in the way its methods and capacity to build participation in, and ownership of initiatives, has been adopted by a variety of other disciplines and areas of work. Community employment and health initiatives are interesting examples. However, using community development methods to help deliver a community-based health programme to have better impact should not be confused with the continuing need to focus on health and health services as issues about which communities seek to transform.

Discussion: Participation

The values and practice principles in *Towards Standards* provide a useful framework for maintaining a focus on the tasks and processes central to community work. They look deceptively simple but there are many difficulties and cul-de-sacs hidden in their implementation. Participation, for example, rather than consultation or representation as a method for bringing people's views on board, involves rethinking deep-seated ideas about how we organise. It needs to be distinguished from volunteering which foc uses on service to others. Participation may mean serving others but also allows for collective gain and for growth by the individual who gets involved. It also requires a focus on the interests of marginalised groups, which

are often obfuscated and hidden under their day-to-day needs which may require immediate attention but not change their overall situation. In the current economic climate, as fewer and fewer resources are available, even for the sticking plaster of essential services to meet people's needs, attempting to articulate collective interests may be daunting. Yet we remember that it was from the cash-strapped recession of the 1980s that community-based women's groups and Travellers' rights organisations emerged.

Participation also requires acknowledgement of the right to dissent in a spirit of mutual acknowledgement of the views of all stakeholders. Reducing participation to only self-help whether covered up in the language of active citizenship, social capital or asset-based community development is not useful if significant change is the hoped-for outcome. Active citizenship (not our favourite term in a Europe where many are residents without being citizens), social capital and asset-based community development are all tools which have their place. But tools are not neutral either and it is essential to get beyond their practical common sense surface to their less visible philosophical and ideological underpinnings. The roots of most problems faced by communities do not lie in the locality or in the group (for instance Travellers blamed for their own oppression) and cannot be resolved there.

Discussion: Power

Power is an important factor in any participatory process. The use and abuse of power, its transfer and transformation remain key features and much argued terrains in community development and community work. Tensions around power are, we believe, inevitable as is the resistance of power holders to passing or sharing it and our lack of capacity

or inclination to recognise and reflect on when and how we actually hold power. Being seen as a professional community worker and working in a professional capacity are in themselves a source of power. Working with marginalised individuals and communities multiplies this power, which can be further enhanced by status and privilege arising from gender, ethnicity, colour, sexuality, class, age, educational background and so forth.

Margaret Ledwith *(Community Development: A Critical Approach,* 2005) provides useful pointers on how community workers might use power for the benefit of those communities with which we work. She says: "Community workers are privileged to be accepted into people's lives in community, and with this privilege comes a responsibility to develop relationships that are mutual, reciprocal, dignified and respectful. These underlying values emerge from an ideology of equality, and they shape every aspect of our practice, determining the way that we plan and conduct specific projects."

This is a question of ethics. Ensuring quality and ethical community work means developing a practice which is conscious, analytical, reflective and strategic in achieving our aims through working from an ideology and practice of equality. Conscious practice involves critical awareness and evaluation of our work; linking goals with actions, actions with goals; reflecting on our values and how they shine in our practice; creating and participating in spaces for challenge and dialogue. Failure in this amounts to arrogance. Narrowing the gap between what we do and what we say we do, and working from a clear agenda and framework to ensure quality work will contribute to an ethical use of the power we hold. *Towards Standards* is welcomed as a step towards this end.

Ethically using our power also means maximising it, through shared power with others by working towards strong effective networks and alliances, across sectoral and geographical boundaries. While we are challenged to seek ways to maximise our power and use it ethically,, shying away from this potential means shying away from the capacity of community work as a force for the transformation of community and society.

To the future

Moving forward, we are reminded of the past ambitions of Irish community work and community sector organisations and of the way emerging practices and networks were shaped by the organisations of minority groups and communities. It was community groups and community workers north and south who played leading roles in securing direct targeting of local communities and community projects by EU Structural Funds and by the first Peace and Reconciliation Programme. It was Traveller organisations in the 1980s and 1990s which led the focus on racism in the Republic and the development of networks and initiatives to address it. At a European level, Irish organisations played and continue to play significant roles in the development of European networks and campaigns, EU legislation and initiatives to promote equality and inclusion.

Such achievements did not happen by accident and will not be repeated without strategic planning and consideration of the issues we have raised among others. Equality of engagement of women and men in community development is we think still assumed. We remain clear that equality of outcomes for women from community development initiatives is only possible where our issues are named and addressed. The old women's movement

mantra of "nothing about us without us" continues to challenge the "charisma" of minority and majority male community leaders globally but its relevance holds true for a variety of future challenges.

Ireland's anti-racism movement was unique in being started by Traveller organisations that continue to play significant roles both in it and the community sector. Similar engagement and integration of new minorities and migrants in community development initiatives needs urgent attention. Such initiatives cannot claim to be of the community or concerned with the values and principles of community work if their concerns are restricted to one section and their internal focus on equality and social justice is absent. All of this demands linking equality and poverty/social inclusion concerns to reflect people's lived experiences – experiencing poverty as migrant women has many dimensions which need to be addressed and acknowledged simultaneously. Human rights, always implicitly in the background of community work values and principles, provide also a useful explicit focus. Addressing rights issues needs to stay with the groups and organisations who live with these concerns and not be ceded only to the legal human rights experts whose skill is required but whose dominance can be disempowering. Such a focus on addressing rights which are denied can also be linked with claiming rights.

Conclusion

These comments about some dimensions of Irish community work seek to explore a few issues we consider important. Today's context for that exploration is difficult with cuts and rumours of cuts in community programmes and an atmosphere which, to the detriment of democracy, seeks to make constructive challenge illegitimate. In that

atmosphere community work's contribution and legitimacy requires clarity about what it is and what is required to do it, and honesty in addressing its internal dynamics. All of these we have commented on. In the end, the force which will continue to drive us forward is a commitment to expressing and spreading ideas of compassion, equality, solidarity and justice alongside a vision for a better and fairer world.

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