

Outcome-based funding for community groups: Professional contradictions and challenges

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Introduction: continuity and change

Whilst this seminar is concerned with the impact of a particular kind of change within a new policy environment, it is important to emphasise that there is also much that is enduring – both positive and negative. In the first instance, there are *always* professional contradictions and challenges, and *always* should be because community work (whatever its changing nomenclature) is a contested activity. If contradictions and challenges were somehow neutralised, then this would be an indication, to my mind, that its distinctive capacity to be critical of itself has become dangerously incorporated.

An historical analysis of professional community work in the UK in general would indicate that there are a number of key continuities which have been reflected in almost every community initiative under successive governments. The most significant ones are:

- *Recycling of community in policy* – the way in which community has been a tool of policy, a means of delivering policy for the last 40 years or so.
- *Technical rationality in management of policy* – whether co-ordination of services around strategic objectives or 'joined-up-thinking' which emphasises technical solutions to pressing social and political problems.
- *A deficit model of community* – a pathology of the poor, as distinct from a politics of poverty, looking to the poor as both the problem and the solution.
- *Democratic discourse* – the language of partnership, empowerment, participation and so on, which pervades policy.

It is important to emphasise these continuities because they still structure the parameters within which community work is defined, implemented and evaluated. It is also important because it serves to historicise community 'solutions' – to insist that they are not new, however much they are proclaimed as such. This knowledge should give us a confident basis on which to engage *critically* with current policy developments rather than accept them unquestioningly. But it is equally important to identify significant policy changes, not least because they provide the framework within which these continuities are reconfigured.

Of primary significance, signalled in the topic of this seminar, is the changing relationship between community work and the state. The restructured managerial state repositions communities and professional workers in quite a different way, with significant implications for both. From being regarded as, at best, complementary to welfare services or at worst marginal, under the new governance regimes community development becomes central to the overall management of welfare – an indispensable instrument of policy. This brings new problems and possibilities for community workers. Whilst it is argued by some that community development ‘has come of age’ in its role as a strategic arm of the state, others are concerned that community development workers may increasingly become unwitting carriers of the new welfare order, charged with the responsibility of remoralising communities into its logic. I count myself as one of the latter group. It is therefore important to assess the constraints and opportunities this new context presents.

I am going to concentrate on what I consider to be three of the most significant issues which arise from thinking about professional contradictions and challenges in light of the move to outcomes-based funding, and how these have changed: first, community engagement; second, what I have called the curriculum of community work. Third, the meaning of professionalism and, ultimately, the relationship between all three. I am going to try to do this by reference to my own personal and professional experience as a community worker up until the early 1990s. I want to make it clear, however, that I am trying to chart the changes and to make sense of them, not to indulge in nostalgia about some mythical golden era of community work which should be revived.

Effective community engagement

In reading the Scottish Executive’s Guidance on Regeneration Outcome Agreements, I was struck by the emphasis on ‘effective community engagement’, for which standards have been drawn up to be ‘rolled out’ (hateful term) nationally. This is a concept which has always had some meaning for me, but I do not recognise it in this guise. When I was a community worker, effective community engagement meant a number of things, including the following:

- making relationships;
- ascertaining what were the real issues facing people;
- recognising and negotiating between competing claims;
- working alongside people in a sustained way to enable them to articulate their own, often contradictory, experience of policy, question problem definitions, reject deficit models of themselves and present alternative interpretations of their social reality;
- providing educational resources which encouraged people to understand and challenge inequalities of power and where necessary to try and change them – both from inside democratic structures and from outside, through community action.

It seems to me that in the current context, although the conditions facing communities – poverty, marginalisation, inequality – have not substantially improved (in fact material inequality has by general agreement worsened) the assumptions which I had of my professional role no longer hold true.

Making relationships, surely at the heart of community engagement, seem to be much more circumscribed in the current context, precisely because they are tied to delivering outcomes. Relationships, as I understood them, were made on the premise that community workers had something to *offer* as a public service – often the only resource a group had – rather than something to *demand*. In the new world of community engagement, that relationship seems to be turned on its head. Rather than government and its institutions serving the people, communities are expected (indeed, required) to serve and be accountable to institutions of government. Accountability has virtually become a one-way process – upwards. One commentator has, perhaps more accurately, called this process ‘accountingability’. This changes the basis of relationships from one of dialogue and a process of negotiation to contractual obligation. People in communities become objects of – or, worse – obstacles to the process. Systems that should be instrumental in supporting collaborative educational practices become an end in themselves rather than the means to social and political change. Process becomes a substitute for purpose and we are all dragooned into making this process work through various bureaucratic audit and surveillance schemes – and we dragoon communities into feeding the system. I hope I can get away with some collegial teasing if I talk about one giant LEAP backwards!

A student, writing an essay recently, expressed the problem well: she talked of the need to ‘humanise’ community work. By this, she meant that human relationships and human need should be at the centre of practice, not predictive targets which itemise and objectify human experience and force people into systems which tie them up in knots. It is not surprising if communities do not feel they have ‘ownership’ of the process. Relationships are distorted and curtailed if they are mediated through powerful top-down structures which make predetermined outcomes a condition of funding. A significant byproduct of this way of framing participation is that there is a serious danger (always a potential in community work) of creating an ‘involvement elite’, ruling out unwanted voices which might be awkward or simply slow up business. Ironically, these awkward customers were precisely the kinds of people we wanted to work with!

The curriculum of community work

My second area of concern is what is happening to what I call the curriculum of community work – the kind of work we undertake with particular people in particular communities. In my experience, ascertaining what the real issues were, and for whom, was more than a matter of needs assessment based on predetermined indicators of disadvantage; it was a matter of political and educational judgement. By this I mean that the starting point was the presumption that communities were *not* homogeneous and that different interests had to be at least understood, if not reconciled. This was often a messy calculation – balancing educational potential with political reality – and no doubt there were some spuriously over-politicised judgement calls, as Alan Barr never tires of telling

us. Notwithstanding the problem of radical rhetoric, however, we did try to make distinctions between problem solving (where the problem was defined elsewhere) and problem-posing, recognising the oppressive nature of deficit models of community and seeking to reframe social problems in political terms; to show the critical relationship between cause and effect. Admittedly, there was variability in degrees of competence and effectiveness – there always is - but there was also room for political debate and argument.

I would argue that the culture in which we currently operate has become seriously depoliticised – on the surface at least. It has become positively unfashionable to talk about the politics of community work. One consequence of this curiously depoliticised discourse, it seems to me, is that communities are now being locked into a very narrow view of what they can engage with and on what basis, with the active compliance of the community work establishment. The Scottish Executive, supported by Communities Scotland, is explicit in its preconditions for outcome-based funding: that only those groups that are prepared to address government priorities need apply. And only then by invitation, through particular state-sanctioned forums. Whatever else has been decentralised, the power to define what is (or is not) on the agenda has certainly not been. I have heard from several sources that within Community Planning frameworks, for example, it is almost impossible to raise those issues which are of greatest local concern: in one area a school closure, in another a PFI hospital. These issues do not of course map onto those all-important government targets which rule them off-limits. More significantly perhaps, they raise wider moral and political questions about who benefits and who loses in a market-driven economy.

The net effect is not to empower, as the policies claim (at least, not in the sense of making more powerful), but to regulate and contain real or potential dissent. One commentator has more accurately described the current practice as ‘centralist localism’, a typical Third Way formula that decentralises responsibility whilst centralising power – the worst of all worlds. There is already evidence that communities are engaging in a significant degree of self-censorship in order to retain status or funding, increasingly following state-led agendas, caught up in the ‘smothering embrace of partnership’. What is democratic about that?

All of this has an effect on the way community is understood and how communities – natural or contrived - relate to professional community workers. To return to my own experience for a moment, we were concerned to justify our interventions to the communities we worked with – not only through our employment under particular policy initiatives, certainly not as impartial or objective experts, but as committed allies, albeit professional ones. In this sense, credibility with local people was a key indicator of effectiveness, and that involved a presumption that we were on their side. I’m not convinced how much of a consideration local credibility can be in a context where workers are subjected to continuous restructuring, reorganisation and redeployment. In fact, in such a context a sense of identity with a place or a group becomes a positive handicap. Added to this, many professional community workers complain about lack of time for engaging directly with people on *any* basis; constrained by the straitjacket of

performativity which leaves no time for the *real* work which is increasingly left to casualised, low-paid sessional workers.

What is more, there is a scandalous gap developing between a core elite of highly-paid community education managers and a periphery of practitioners who are required to 'deliver' at their behest. In this process, many community workers are becoming, and are feeling themselves to be, seriously deskilled. They are no longer confident about involvement at the grassroots in sustained educational engagement for social and political purposes, however competent they may have become in managing or being managed by the enabling state. One cause of this has been a gradual erosion of that grassroots engagement with marginalised groups which helped workers to remember what they were there for. This constant reminder of the persistent reality of inequality and injustice was what fed an impatience for change. The absence of this crucial link leads to a kind of complacency which is suffocating for community work practice.

According to one dictionary definition, engagement is 'an act or condition of being activated'. My experience as a worker was that people became activated when they were angry about something and wanted to take action, or when they wanted to celebrate something they were proud of, or when they became conscious of injustice through collective forms of action, or when they wanted to learn about something that would make a difference to their lives. The problem with much of what passes as community engagement now is that it doesn't sufficiently engage people's active, creative side. Active citizens cannot be created by top down, often alien, structures. One familiar consequence is that those who are prepared to become involved tend to be the 'usual suspects' because they are easier to get on board. They know the ropes (many of them women who already carry a double burden of caring and work). Aside from issues of fairness and representativeness, there are also real questions about sustainability.

What all of this suggests is that there is a strange logic at work here. I think that logic is built on a fundamental fallacy: that community engagement (indeed democracy itself) is simply a consensual process, which can be 'rolled out' and delivered through a range of managerial procedures concerned with outcomes, outputs and monitoring - not a political process of deliberation and negotiation between different interests which is just as likely to produce dissent. The problem with rolling out standardised packages is that you can end up crushing everything else. You can roll over history, politics, solidarity, creative idiosyncrasy, motivation, established cultures of participation and, most importantly, the potential of people to act as social and political agents in their own right, not just as objects of policy. *Concept* recently produced an alternative briefing on Community Planning which was entitled 'Joined up thinking or stitched up thinking?' I can't think of a better way to express what I mean here.

A fallacy, according to the dictionary, is 'something that is believed to be truth but is erroneous. An argument or reasoning in which the conclusion does not follow from the premises but which nevertheless carries some force' - a kind of plausible nonsense.

There is an ancient elephant joke which seems to express this well.

Q: How do you disguise an elephant in a cherry tree?

A: You paint its toenails red.

Q: How often do you see elephants in a cherry tree?

A: Never

Just shows how well they're disguised!

The edifice of 'capacity building' for example, which is needed, it seems, to support 'community engagement', and is the key role of community workers in this new world, seems to me to be the same kind of plausible nonsense. The logic runs something like this: people need to build capacity to take part in structures which are meant to represent their interests but which they are not capable of participating in because the structures are too complicated. If participatory structures require capacity building to make them work then surely they are the wrong structures. Meanwhile, the fallacy gets further and further from reality, but too much time, energy and political credibility has been invested to admit the gap, never mind reverse the policy. Michael Carley has nicely characterised this as the DAD formula – decide and defend. Perhaps communities need to develop the capacity to say no - to expose such fallacies for what they are

One of the key sources of power for the managerial state is absolute public and private adherence to a particular kind of technical rationality. Of course, this is also what makes it seriously vulnerable to what somebody has called 'small rebellions'. For example, asking 'why?' in a culture which is fixated with 'what works' and 'good practice' has become a subversive act, because the system simply cannot deal with the question. Finding ways of refusing to accept the limitations of the managerial model of community work is, therefore, one of the most important professional challenges. If you choose to do so, you may be in good company. Outcome-based regimes are coming into disrepute in all kinds of 'modernised' public services, most recently the police. It is ironic that the Scottish Executive is embedding (another hateful word) this culture in its governance mechanisms just as it is being abandoned, or at least reconsidered, elsewhere – including in the private sector - because it simply doesn't work.

What the fallacy of outcome-based funding hides - the real truth – is the politics of public policy. It hides the reality that the restructured, hollowed out, privatised, enabling state needs communities to substitute for publicly provided services; to become part of the market culture which dominates all public services; to compete for contracts in privatised services. It needs the voluntary sector to be tied into compacts with government and the private sector which may give it more of a particular kind of status but which seriously undermines its traditional independence. Communities – an historically elastic concept which can now accommodate any number of competing interests including the private sector - are becoming a substitute, an alternative, a surrogate for a depleted state welfare system. To all intents and purposes, communities are becoming an arm of the state. This is not community government but government *through* community – the dispersed state, presented as a more democratic alternative. The rather obvious politics of this position is disguised when deoderised by the community aerosol in a way which discourages dissent and keeps out troublemakers. In this process, politics becomes seriously depoliticised.

A real irony, therefore, for all of us is that more involvement could in the end mean less democracy, if democracy is understood as more than a set of managed institutions; if democracy is understood as a political process in which different interests are contested. Historically, democracy is not something to be handed down from above as a gift from policy makers, but something to be demanded from below by those who have been excluded through inequality, oppression or discrimination. In this spirit, the social democratic paradigm reflected in Alexander and Gulbenkian recognised that the mediating role of community work would inevitably create tensions which meant that choices had to be made in certain situations. Community work has surely still an important role in acting on the side of the powerless, and this necessarily means identifying, and where necessary acting against, the powerful. Perhaps making power visible is one of the key challenges for the so-called 'empowering profession'!

Reclaiming professionalism

All of this is rather uncomfortable for professional community workers since they feel hoisted on their own petard of 'community empowerment'. Community work has always been a strange hybrid profession but it carries within itself a central contradiction which makes it both promising and promiscuous (in the sense that it will go with anyone!). This is what makes it attractive to politicians across the political spectrum.

The central contradiction, as David Jones put it nearly 30 years ago, is that 'while from one side community work is concerned with the encouragement of local initiative and local decision making, from the other it is a means of implementing and expediting national policies at local level'. In practice this means that community work can be drawn upon to give credibility to projects which may be inherently controlling as well as those which may be liberating. The tensions this inevitably generates are nowhere more apparent than in moves towards outcome-based funding which inevitably merges contested interests into a form of corporate consensus. It is not that different interests are necessarily or always in competition or conflict, but that they are different. And yet these tensions and contradictions are not being voiced (publicly anyway) within the professional community – nor indeed within the academic community. Have we become so accustomed to stumbling through the trees that we can no longer see the wood? Has our capacity for some degree of relative autonomy become seriously compromised by our willingness to conform?

It is in the contradictory space between community work as policy and community work as politics (top-down and bottom-up, crudely) that there is still a strategic position to occupy. When community as politics confronts community as policy (or vice versa) then there is an opportunity for a form of community work which is relevant to people's real interests and which addresses and may even change policy. In this case, community workers are agents of a creative dialectic rather than merely instruments of policy. This is a role that must be theorised, and reasserted with those who sponsor, fund and manage community work. This is, after all, one of its most distinctive features. Can you think of any other state employees directly charged with the responsibility of contributing to the extension of democracy?

It would indeed mark the new Scottish settlement out as something distinctive if it were to display the foresight and courage to engage seriously and openly in genuine democratic participation with its various publics – to rediscover its own sense of political agency rather than acting as neutral stakeholder. The actions of people in communities in pursuit of their own collective interests (as distinct from the objectives of policy) need to be seen not only as the legitimate expression of active citizenship but also as a positive contribution to democracy. The real question is whether politicians and policy-makers can grasp the challenge of ‘democratic renewal’ as a political process in which communities and professionals are regarded as equal allies and creative actors in the building of a new and inclusive kind of democracy, neither as servants nor as supplicants but precisely *because* of their different experience and interests and expertise. Dissent should be regarded as a sign of healthy democratic life, not as a problem to be dealt with or managed. Democratic participation, after all, is something which happens in social and political struggles as much as in structures or institutions. An open political culture would allow the community work role to be about expansion rather than closure: activating ‘voice’ rather than managing diversity; exposing political problems rather than delivering outcomes and targets.

Of course all of this means that we need to re-engage with politics with a big P as well as a small p. There is an urgent need for macro-level analysis – to recognise the way in which macro systems act to structure local conditions and choices, particularly in the context of economic globalisation. We have all been subjected to the TINA model for so long that perhaps we have forgotten Tawney’s observation that what rich people call the problems of poverty, poor people could with equal justice call the problems of riches. Making the connections between the macro and micro, the public and private, the personal and political, was what I considered to be my core skill as a community worker. Outcome-based funding explicitly breaks these connections by keeping everyone’s nose to the grindstone of targets - looking down instead of up and around. The Home Office report *Firm foundations: A Review of Capacity Building* rightly advocates taking ‘the long view’, which is certainly not compatible with short timescales and unrealistic demands. It should also have advocated taking the *wide* view which is not compatible with preset agendas and performance monitoring.

I want to make four suggestions and an observation:

- We need to rethink what we mean by involvement - it’s not too late
- Community development once represented a spectrum from campaigning to service delivery, with the emphasis on education and learning. We need to broaden our view of what is legitimate professional activity and reassert the autonomy of community workers to make professional judgements which are competent, critical, creative and defensible.
- We need to reclaim our sense of professional identity and dignity as public servants. This means that the notion of professionalism needs to be extended to

include the capacity to express and contest professional and political *purpose*, not just to act as functionaries.

- We need to revive the moral basis of community work. Community work is essentially a moral activity concerned with social justice. Its educational purpose, it is claimed, is concerned with social change – and that assumes that we have some analysis of what is wrong.

Finally, an observation - and here I draw on the recent work of Katherine Ecclestone of the University of Exeter. It seems to me that there has for some time now been a deep feeling of demoralisation in community work – in two senses: first, loss of morale in the ability to do a meaningful and valued job, but second, and more profoundly, *de-moralisation*, the loss of a moral framework of social justice through which community workers can act as committed and engaged professionals, not simply ciphers of policy. If we submit to the economic and technocratic model of democracy which is implicit in outcome-based funding, then it seems to me that we surrender that moral ground once and for all.