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community development

**Gabriel Chanan**

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Gabriel Chanan

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([info@cwic.ie](mailto:info@cwic.ie))

In some ways the idea of having standards is anathema in a field like community development which relies so much on improvisation and flexibility. On the other hand the establishment of standards opens the door to greater recognition and support in official quarters for the CD movement and occupation. It should also help us to confront inconsistencies and limitations and protect the integrity of the discipline both from poor practice and from neutralisation by being incorporated into bureaucratic processes.

The recent revision of the UK National Occupational Standards (NOS) for community development has thrown up these sorts of challenge. I want to focus here on one major question arising from this process, namely how far CD should extend into working with official bodies.

A limitation of the previous version of the NOS was that it was expressed entirely in terms of fieldwork and from the fieldworker point of view. It reflected wide consultation with fieldworkers but not with employers or public institutions. One consequence of this was that it did not attempt to codify work with public institutions such as local authorities, health authorities, schools or police though in practice fieldwork often has to engage with these bodies and try to influence them.

Insofar as the NOS served as a guide to training and learning in CD this left the interface with the local state as a neglected, fuzzy and distrusted area, and trainees without specific skills to maximize that area of their work. The new version goes some way to remedy this by introducing a standard on partnership (and overall by being much shorter and less repetitive than its predecessor). But the NOS is, and can be, only a skeletal framework which needs to be populated by others – CD teams, trainers, course designers, curriculum developers – with specific learning content. In areas which have traditionally been neglected there is little specific material to build on, but this also makes for a major creative opportunity.

How should the 'new' areas be approached? Are there specific CD techniques and functions for working with and in public institutions, as opposed to simply helping those institutions achieve their own objectives? And what are the risks of CD getting more deeply involved with the internal mechanisms of public institutions?

Although much CD is funded, directly or indirectly, by government, too close a relationship with government is generally regarded as a threat. This may be simply because institutional processes are by their nature uncongenial to the way communities operate. Or it may be because the state is seen as a source of the inequalities and disadvantages that CD is dedicated to overcoming.

At its most simplified and doctrinaire this view may hold, with Marx, that the state is no more than a committee for the defence of the interests of the ruling class. The contradiction between this position and the fact that, as a community worker, you might be employed or funded by government is accepted as part of the tightrope-walking skill of working, in a time-honoured

phrase, 'in and against the state'. Right wing politicians might see this posture as subversion – and left wing community workers might like to think the same. In practice, though, CD, if it is effective, is democratic and reformist. It is a corrective to the social and economic polarisation that is generated by the accumulation of wealth. It operates on the basis that the state is not simply owned by the ruling class but is an arena where the interests of different classes, interests and views are formulated, come up against each other and negotiate short or long term solutions, albeit requiring immense determination and political skill.

Certainly those with money and privilege have great advantages in this process, and part of the purpose of CD is to compensate for these by providing technical assistance to those without these advantages. Even so, a good deal of the political process is not about confrontation between homogeneous blocs or classes but about negotiation between different interests of the same people. I'm both a taxpayer who wants to pay less and a service user who wants more provision; both a consumer who wants cheap goods and a worker who wants good wages; both an environmentalist who wants to reduce global warming and a car user who wants the convenience of my own transport. Much of the business of government is a dramatising of options in which all of us have competing interests. CD seeks to increase the leverage of progressive or disadvantaged positions but not to achieve categorical victory for a polar position.

The potential for CD influence on institutions is often in fine balance with the potential for loss of mission through being too close to institutions. In the Irish republic the absorption of the functions of Combat Poverty Agency into mainstream government looks, at least to the outside observer, like a major loss of CD capacity. In England the restructuring of the Community Development Foundation around larger responsibilities for managing government empowerment programmes may threaten some loss of CD ethos. Yet both developments may provide opportunities to influence programmes and systems at a more strategic level than was possible in the past.

This means that standards in CD are about progressive relative improvements involving both communities and institutions. How can we formulate standards and training content for this role? Can CD keep hold of its mission whilst exploiting the kinds of opportunity provided by governments and local authorities which are increasingly desperate to demonstrate that they can engage with their constituents?

An exceptionally fertile source for understanding these dilemmas is a book by John Abbott, an urban planner in South Africa, published in the mid nineteen nineties (Abbott, 1996). There are a few probable reasons why this penetrating analysis is not better known amongst European and UK CD practitioners. It is not obvious from the title that it is largely about CD. It is a long, challenging read, complex and unapologetically academic in the best sense of being both theoretical and well evidenced. If this has made it somewhat inaccessible, it deserves a user-friendly summary even at this distance in time. It is, for my money, one of the best analyses of CD ever written. Without pretending to do justice to it in a short article I want to draw a few principles from it as tools to help tackle our present dilemmas.

Abbott's overarching subject is not CD but participation. He identifies CD as one of three broad types of participation strategy: empowerment, CD and community management. Another way to look at it would be to say that these are three phases of CD, thus making CD rather than participation the overall category. It isn't necessary to subscribe precisely to his terminology to see what he is getting at: that there are three types of relationship between citizens and the state, three forms of participation which apply under different political conditions.

The first form of participation, the one which, following Freire, he calls **empowerment**, is the relationship where a government resists all citizen involvement and influence. This is most starkly the case where the government is a dictatorship, oligarchy or occupying power. This may include dictatorships of the left. Here, if people are striving to participate, they are forced to fight for this right against the government, often at great risk. This should not be confused with the UK government's current use of 'empowerment' to mean finding ways to stimulate the better use of existing rights.

The second type of relationship, which Abbott designates as **community development**, is where a government tolerates or encourages a degree of participation, whether as a matter of principle or reluctantly under pressure of events. Here there is therefore scope for activists, community groups and community workers together openly to make progress in improving community conditions and influence.

The third relationship, which he calls **community management**, is where communities have taken on responsibility for significant parts of the management of their own conditions by agreement with government, again either through principled cooperation or as the outcome of a struggle. Again, not to be confused with current UK use of the term neighbourhood management to mean management of, rather than by, neighbourhoods, albeit with community participation.

The three situations at times shade into each other, and the same government may move in different directions at different times or even in different programmes at the same time. That is one of the key points of the model: that the scope for CD is not a fixed quantity but varies in time and place according to how, at a particular time, the government of the country concerned positions itself in relation to participation. And this in turn is determined not only by ideology but also by specifics of national history, current political developments, economic conditions and contingent decisions of a particular government. A right wing government may make concessions to popular participation if it sees no other way out of a political or economic impasse; a left wing government may effectively undermine participation by manipulating it to serve a doctrinaire programme. In repressive conditions the impulse for participation is forced back into struggling against the state to achieve or recover empowerment. In propitious conditions participation can flow into CD forms, operating openly within the state, albeit still facing structural obstacles. Abbott sees management by communities as being in many ways the ultimate product of CD, a real sharing of responsibility, effort and ownership of local developments, physical infrastructure and social systems between communities and governments. In his extensive experience this comes about not so much through vision or idealism as through the inability of governments to solve

their own problems of provision and organisation, and their acceptance, whether reluctant or enthusiastic, of community-driven and community-managed solutions as a major part of the way out.

This conclusion is informed by Abbott's experience as an urban planner in cities of the South. The model is based on analysis of community-government relationships during key periods of change in Latin America, India and especially in South Africa, where Abbott was involved in developments during the transition from apartheid to the universal franchise.

His paradigm for community management is the acceptance by government of the *de facto* creation of new city areas through the unregulated and illegal growth of shanties housing thousands of people who have migrated from rural areas. This organic phenomenon all over the cities of the South is beyond the capacity of governments of any complexion to provide for or control.

Bulldozing the shanties destroys lives but does not stop the growth. But even genuine attempts to replace them with decent, planned low-cost housing, Abbott says, have never met more than a fraction of the need. Many Southern cities grow at a rate of 10% a year, most of it in the form of shanties on the outskirts and on the poorest land.

The phenomenon is encapsulated with a poetic touch in Barack Obama's autobiography:

*We came to the rim of a wide valley known as Mathare. Auma pulled off the shoulder and I looked out the window to see the shantytown below, miles and miles of corrugated rooftops shimmering under the sun like wet lily pads, buckling and dipping in an unbroken sequence across the valley floor.*

*'How many people live there?' I asked*

*Auma shrugged and turned to our aunt; 'What would you say, Aunt? Half a million maybe?'*

*Zeituni shook her head. 'That was last week. This week it must be one million' (Obama, 2004).*

Governments of left or right seem incapable of either stemming this tide or providing proper conditions for it in terms of water, sanitation, communications and transport, let alone safety and social services. The shanties are therefore, despite their immense poverty, areas of intensive community self-organisation and – where governments accept the reality of what is happening – negotiation for gradual improvement of conditions and post-hoc provision of infrastructure and public services.

What is the relevance of a model based on this essentially Southern phenomenon to CD in the north?

A key point of Abbott's analysis is that the scope for any of the three types of involvement is ultimately dependent on the position taken at a given time by the government in question. Abbott therefore rejects accounts of CD which implicitly posit communities and governments as wholly separate realms, as if communities could ideally become completely self sufficient, or as if governments and communities must necessarily be mutually hostile.

But as communities and governments come to negotiate around practical solutions to large-scale problems, technical issues become more prominent, and the various interests within communities become more differentiated. It is relatively easy to have a unified mass position against a government which is

blocking all progress. Where a government is prepared to look for flexible and creative solutions, the focus inevitably shifts to considering a variety of options, on which there will be diversity of opinion and effects both in government and in communities. At this stage, therefore the role of CD necessarily also becomes more diverse, supporting different sections of the population in meeting different needs and in compromising with each other on the big decisions which affect all. In European localities there is a tremendous variety of differentiated need and perspective, and the CD role is necessarily both to serve these in all their diversity and to find the common ground to exert a joint influence.

The European situation is profoundly different from that in the South but the principles can help us and there are some points of connection. Abbott's three types of participation recur in microcosm in many local situations. A particular local authority may in practice be either more or less resistant to community participation. This cannot always be predicted simply by its political affiliation – it has to be judged by concrete local experience. The more resistant it is, the more communities may have to fight for the right to be heard as well as for the particular issues that animate them.

Broadly, though, in European countries the basic rights of association and public debate are well embedded and we are in the 'middle band' of Abbott's three. The bigger question is whether we are or should be moving towards a European form of community self management.

The growth of European cities is less chaotic than those of the South, though there are occasional similarities, particularly in parts of southern and eastern Europe. The most prominent issues are less about basic physical infrastructure but equally about employment, safety, health and environment. The basic idea that these problems can only be solved by a combination of the action of governments and people is just as relevant.

In the UK this notion surfaced briefly in the first years of New Labour as the idea of a 'third way'. It reappeared again in such vehicles as the Home Office's 'Together We Can' campaign in 2006 and its enlarged successor programme in the department of Communities and Local Government which goes under the name of empowerment. This includes new duties laid on local authorities and many other public bodies to involve local residents and promote democracy. However, the idea of seriously sharing power between public institutions and local communities slips in and out of view in the implementation of these programmes. There is a constant tendency for them to default to a centralised interpretation of what such sharing would mean. The duty to involve is, in the legal wording, a duty for authorities to involve, at their discretion, a 'selection' of local residents 'in the functions of the authority'. Much of the narrative is about the role of residents in helping to ensure that the authorities deliver their responsibilities.

This part of the concept is about sharing power only in the sense of central government mobilising popular help to manage local government. But when government or other stakeholders put forward examples and case studies to explain what empowerment means in practice, as in the empowerment White Paper (CLG, 2008), the majority are not about people becoming involved in the functions of institutions but about people and authorities working together on new initiatives in neighbourhoods or small localities – developing new

amenities or injecting co-operative energy into an existing system which is failing.

Environmental, social and economic pressures seem to point inexorably in the direction of community influence and creativity becoming major factors in how localities are run all over the world. This principle has always been implicit in the community development ethos but most CD practice has been fragmentary compared to this vision, and the skills needed to do it are only now beginning to be codified, for example in the UK in the 2009 revision of the National Occupational Standards for community development. Hopefully this will help to prompt bolder and more coordinated local initiatives.

#### References

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[gabriel.chanan@talktalk.net](mailto:gabriel.chanan@talktalk.net)