



Community Development: Current Issues and Challenges

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2006

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: CURRENT ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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July, 2006

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ISBN: 1905485-15-8

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About the author

Anna Lee is manager of the Tallaght Partnership and a former Chairperson of Combat Poverty Agency. She has been involved in anti-poverty work and in community and local development over a number of years

FOREWORD

The Combat Poverty Agency Act, 1986 specifies Combat Poverty as a centre for the provision of information and training on community development. Since its establishment in 1986, Combat Poverty has supported and promoted community development as a way of tackling poverty, according to its remit.

This policy discussion paper presents an overview of current issues in community development in Ireland. It argues the importance of having both the 'authentic' voice of people living in poverty and a robust representative voice in the development of policy. It outlines the challenges and inherent contradictions that often exist when social change is cited as a main objective of community development. Dealing successfully with these challenges and contradictions is a mark of a mature democracy.

The paper was commissioned as part of the *Having Your Say* Programme, a three-year initiative (2005-2007) that has the overall aim of strengthening the policy voices and practices of people and communities living in poverty.

Combat Poverty acknowledges Anna Lee's work in producing this policy discussion document and anticipates a lively debate as a result.

August 2006

1 INTRODUCTION

The right of people, including those living in poverty, to participate in the formulation of public policy decisions is now generally uncontested. In fact, this right is supported by law in a number of areas. However, exercising effective participation in ways that result in tangible, measurable, positive changes is a difficult and complex matter. It is linked, on the one hand, to the ability of people to use existing opportunities to participate and to have additional such opportunities created. It is linked, on the other, to a commitment and ability on the part of government to make the required changes in public policy, following such advocacy.

Rights are not taken seriously unless the duties that underpin them are taken seriously; those duties are not taken seriously unless there are effective, committed people and institutions to carry them (O'Neill, 2002).

Proponents of community development view it fundamentally as enabling people who are marginalised to have a voice in the democratic process. They view community development activities as having the potential to effect changes that will combat poverty and social exclusion and address power imbalances in policy making. In other words, at its best, community development is seen as a powerful force for social and political change.

This paper discusses the contribution of community development to tackling poverty in Ireland, and it examines the relationship between community development and the drive for democratic participation. The discussion is reinforced by an analysis of the issues and challenges arising from the author's experience of community development in Ireland. The final section of the paper sets out some ideas on establishing more effective community development and advocacy for social change.

2 COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: MAIN CONCEPTS

Empowerment and participation

At the centre of all definitions of community development is the idea that it has the capacity to develop a voice for the voiceless; that those who experience isolation from the political process can be brought right into it and enabled to participate effectively in the democratic process. It is this idea that creates the impetus to achieve social change and to fight against poverty and social exclusion.

A brief review of the literature reveals that an understanding of and a commitment to empowerment and participation are at the core of community development. Combat Poverty Agency in *The role of community development in tackling poverty* defines community development as:

enabling or empowering people to actively work for social change which will improve the quality of their lives, the communities in which they live and/or the society of which they are a part. It is a collective process that recognises the interdependence of people. It helps people to identify and articulate their needs, and influence the decision-making processes and structures that affect them, their communities and wider society (Combat Poverty Agency, 2000).

The document goes on to describe a role for community development in relation to public policy:

In a community development context community activity focuses on change, initially at local level. Valuable lessons are learned from local activity and ideas emerge which provide new ways of responding to community needs. Groups reach out and develop links with others, form coalitions and lobby or argue for change at national and regional level (ibid, 2000).

Activists in community development view it essentially as a process leading to social change. This is evidenced by the responses of those who participated in the research presented in Powell and Geoghegan (2004). Of those who participated, 59.3 per cent characterised their work as being 'about trying to accomplish fundamental social change'. And again, 53.3 per cent agreed with the statement that 'Our work comes from a belief that society is unequal. We are working for equality.'

Examples on the ground

There are many examples in Ireland of community development being an effective process for developing the voice of marginalised people, building on the key concepts of empowerment and participation. Combat Poverty Agency, in *Action on Poverty Today*, provides descriptions of diverse groups of people and their articulation of their issues and needs.

These descriptions include the following:

- The Family Diversity Initiative works to promote awareness of the different types of family structures in Ireland and the need to change policy and services so that all family types are valued and treated equally.
- The Southhill After-School Club works to show local people how to make local services operate for them.
- A community health forum has been established in Lifford/Castlefin, Co. Donegal.
- In Tallaght the citizenship group Active Citizenship Tallaght assisted 400 people to check the electoral register, in order to clarify their electoral rights and/or register as voters.
- The Childhood Development Initiative has prepared a challenging proposal to enhance the lives and well-being of children in the communities of West Tallaght.

There are many examples in Ireland of community development being an effective process for developing the voice of marginalised people, building on the key concepts of empowerment and participation.

- A network of migrant women workers has been established to strengthen their voice and to support them to build quality participation in their local communities.

Examples of such work in local communities and with groups at risk of poverty can be found throughout the country.

Examples at national level

Community development organisations in Ireland have been active on the national scene. Firstly, they have been to the fore in making submissions to processes such as the annual Budget, the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS), and the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF). Secondly, they have supported people to participate in policy development opportunities at national level. Networks of community development, anti-poverty organisations such as the European Anti-Poverty Network, One-Parent Exchange Network and the Children's Rights Alliance operate at national level. These groups have consistently and effectively developed and presented policy positions, drawing on the experience of people in poverty, and have led campaigns for positive change.

3 SHARING POWER IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Community development: an accepted influence in the State

The process of giving voice to people living in poverty is by now accepted by policy makers internationally. The OECD has identified the benefits of hearing the voice of the poor in relation to strategy information, analysis, planning and implementation. Policy that has heard the voice of those living in poverty is likely to be more relevant, better targeted and as a result more effective. Giving voice is therefore increasingly recognised as a key element in the functioning of democratic systems.

It isn't just a question of the alienation of people from the local democratic system which worries both central and local government, it is also the awareness that other players have something to offer (Chanan, Garratt and West, 2000).

In Ireland, the potential of community development to inform and enhance policy making is likewise accepted. The harnessing and realisation of this potential is occurring at all levels of Irish society, as the following examples demonstrate.

Effective local partnerships and RAPID groups are underpinned by strong community development actions in their areas of operation. They rely on the knowledge and understanding of those who live in target communities and who are members of groups known to be at risk of poverty.

The reform of local government has given a formal role to the community, including people living in poverty, on County Development Boards and

Strategic Policy Committees. The successful operation of this role has positively impacted on policy development and implementation at County and City Council level.

Other examples of the influence of the community development process include: the work of the Community Platform in relation to national partnership agreements; the acceptance of NESF recommendations that have been advised by the voice of people living in poverty; and the referencing of the NAPS priorities in the formulation of wider public policy.

In terms of social policy, community development occupies a previously unheard-of position of importance (Powell and Geoghegan, 2004).

The limits of that influence

Positions of importance are not, however, necessarily positions of power. The place of community development in Ireland could be viewed as close to that of the President – important, influential but not powerful! At national level the strong and consistent growth in the Irish economy has enabled a number of policy changes to be made without any significant challenge to the status quo. We might well query whether in fact these changes would have happened anyway, without the identification of issues by the community development sector.

Positions of importance are not, however, necessarily positions of power. The place of community development in Ireland could be viewed as close to that of the President – important, influential but not powerful!

We might also usefully query why the partnership consensus models involving the sector have failed to deliver the social changes that might have been expected in the continuing strong economy. For example:

- There are doctor-only medical cards but no increases in medical card guidelines.
- There are moves towards a 'green card' system for categories of skilled workers but continuing problems in relation to work permits.

- Absolute poverty has been reduced while income inequality continues to grow.
- There has been a significant expansion in childcare services but service providers to low-income users have to rely for staffing on labour market work-experience programmes.
- Public policy has focused on reducing registered unemployment but has failed to provide the supports required by lone parents and people with disabilities to assist them in accessing work and reducing their risk of living in poverty.

The partnership consensus models fall short of the ideal of consensus. For example, in April 2002 members of the Community Platform felt obliged to walk out of a plenary session of the Partnership for Prosperity and Fairness conference because the policy changes they had successfully placed on the table had not been implemented. It would seem that, while at the level of policy making a position of influence has been bequeathed to the community and voluntary sector, there is little evidence of a real sharing of power.

This view is corroborated by Powell and Geoghegan (2004) who report that only 29.4 per cent of the community development activists who participated in their research felt that the community and voluntary sector had 'a real say in decision-making in the partnership process'. Importantly the authors also found that

... when community development activists were asked about where (then) decision making power lay, if not with them, they argued that local partnership arrangements have tended to reinforce and extend the power of State officials to the detriment of both elected representatives and the community and voluntary sector.

The fault line in current practice

There is little evidence that community development has been able to rebalance existing policy-making structures. In relation to the new national agreement which was finalised in 2006, it was a challenge, despite the consistent efforts of many organisations involved in anti-poverty work, to involve the media in highlighting poverty issues that should be addressed. And in the past, ensuring the inclusion and implementation of such issues has proved to be an even greater challenge.

There is a need for the community development sector to reflect on its practice in relation to giving voice to people experiencing poverty. Tom Inglis (1997), writing in the context of adult education, explored ideas of empowerment and emancipation, ideas that raise important issues for community development practice:

In the debate about people becoming empowered and freeing themselves from power, there has been an absence of discussion about the nature of power.

Inglis attempts to clarify the nature of power and the distinction between individuals being empowered within an existing social system and struggling for freedom by changing the system. In particular he challenges the notion that freedom and emancipation can be attained through personal transformation.

These issues are echoed by Powell and Geoghegan (2004). They report that the statement 'Our work is about promoting self-help' was selected by 52.5 per cent of their respondent community development activists as an accurate description of their work. Having explored with the respondents the reasons for their involvement in community development the authors identify five main themes. These are: 'notions of "care"; experience of poverty; through, and connected to, formalised politics; a response to social class; and religion'. They conclude that:

community development appears to be firmly rooted in liberal, humanistic values, with an emphasis on the value, capacity and worth of individuals rather than in explicitly radical collective ones.

Inglis argues that this is insufficient to address power in modern society. He suggests, in relation to education, that teachers should not just seek to surrender their power but should actively encourage subversion and transgression of power. The corollary of this is that community development activists should be less focused on negotiating the sharing of power with those who have it and more on moving beyond the limits set for them and those with whom they work. This is indeed a challenge.

4 COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN IRELAND: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The past 15 years in Ireland have seen some achievements in the area of community development. However, there seems to be a growing disenchantment, among activists, with the view that community development is an important influence on public policy and an awareness that this disenchantment is linked both to the sector itself and to the wider context. Activists are conscious of a double-edged sword: the sector has achieved status; it has been brought in from the cold to participate in State partnership. Yet, they contend, this achievement has tended to work against the very foundation of community development – pushing through radical social change, against the wishes of the status quo. They pose the question: Is the commitment to community development as a means of achieving positive social change being undermined even from within the sector itself?

This section examines some observable changes in the approach to community development in recent years. These changes have positive aspects, but the downside is also discussed. They can be listed as follows:

- A shift towards partnership and consensus-building models
- Emphasis on the local level
- The programme approach

- A focus on the short term
- A reliance on public funding
- Staffing: a move towards managerialism

A shift towards partnership and consensus-building

Mobilisation strategies such as large demonstrations have long been viewed as effective mechanisms for social action. They have been the lifeline of community development workers. However, recent examples are rather limited and have tended to be replaced by partnership and consensus-building models. The new models have brought good results. Nevertheless, the sector has argued, reliance on such 'new' models has led to a reduction in collective action in relation to key issues, while absorbing significant time and energy. There is a lack of debate on the continuance of poverty, inequality and social exclusion and on the strategies required to combat these negative aspects of social life.

There is in fact a growing concern among activists that the opportunity to participate has become an end in itself and would be threatened by a strongly articulated analysis of social change, even though such analysis is fundamental to effective community development work.

Emphasis on the local level

The factors that give rise to poverty are generally neither created nor solved at local level. It is important therefore that strong links are created and sustained between local action and national decision making. This is another difficult and time-consuming area. Effective anti-poverty strategies require integrated action at, and between, all levels of information and decision making.

There is a strong commitment to the development of integrated action at local level, despite significant time and resource implications. However, this commitment is not so clearly evident at the national level. There is a continuing mistrust between the local and the national that makes the transfer of learning from the local to the national difficult and that impacts negatively on the development of policy. More effective models need to be developed to ensure the integration of the local and the national, but there is an understandable reluctance to spend further time and resources on this work without evidence of a commitment to agreed outcomes.

The programme approach

Many community development organisations have become involved in the delivery of services as a mechanism to secure resources to support their work for social change. It is difficult, however, to sustain both types of activity in a single organisation. Service delivery is generally easier to see, is more likely to be funded and its impact is easier to measure.

While the putting in place of programmes such as the Community Development Programme and the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme has been an important support for community development in Ireland, it has also created difficulties. Programmes have the potential to significantly strengthen individual projects. They can facilitate the sharing of learning; the identification of good and poor practice; the building of a wider collective voice; the more effective use of resources; a more thorough input to public policy debates. It is questionable, however, whether either of the two programmes mentioned above has realised this potential.

The programme approach has contributed to an increase in specialisms and the development of separate issue-based and geographically-based projects. The context of the work is increasingly defined at national programme level rather than by local priorities. The management and accountability obligations of programmes can, and do, divert and dissipate the energy required for direct community development work. The recruitment and effective deployment of staff is time-consuming and challenging, particularly if difficulties arise.

It is, of course, essential that there is clear accountability for the use of public resources and for the creation and maintenance of decent working environments. However, the obligations of the sector should be relevant and appropriate. There is a real risk of 'programme paralysis' where the primary focus becomes the challenge of sustaining programme structures rather than of constantly reviewing, and reshaping where required, programme actions to address poverty and social exclusion.

A focus on the short term

Programme support for community development is generally provided on a short-term basis in cycles of three, or fewer, years. This timeframe leads to

strategies that are demonstrably achievable within such a timeframe and a potential reluctance to commit resources over time to difficult and complex issues. There is, however, no short-term solution to poverty issues.

The constraints of short timeframes may also impact on evaluation mechanisms. There is evidence that quantitative indicators are given greater weight than qualitative indicators, not least because the latter may be more difficult to document and measure. For example, an evaluation mechanism that measures the number of young people in contact with a project does not differentiate between a project that engages with a small group of participants to provide them with intensive supports on a daily basis and one that meets large numbers of young people once a week. It simply looks as if the second scenario is offering better value for money.

A reliance on public funding

It would appear that the community development sector has come to rely on public money. This is also potentially problematic. There is an inherent conflict in a situation where the State provides resources to organisations whose stated aim is to change the State, even though such provision is also an important statement of the State's willingness to be criticised and to hear the voice of those who experience poverty and exclusion. Considerable skills and resources are required to use this contradictory position to good effect.

There have been some examples of funding lines coming under threat because of differences between funders and activists in relation to the way resources have been used. This has included a reluctance to fund research work, although quality text-based research is a key tool in the development and articulation of a social change proposal. It has also included a reluctance to fund actions aimed at informing and influencing wider public opinion.

Staffing: a move towards managerialism

Effective community development is labour intensive. The task of building the self-confidence and the capacity of communities to make alliances, be 'subversive' and achieve positive outcomes is a time-consuming and resource-consuming process. It is 'doing' work. It requires skilled workers, on the ground, involved on a daily basis with individuals and groups.

It is notable, however, that the community development sector, like many public services working with those who are living in poverty, is creating more opportunities for managers – in response to programme demands – and for specialists such as policy workers. The sector is failing, or is unable, to adequately invest in and retain skilled workers directly charged with building voice and capacity.

5 COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: A WAY FORWARD

Community development has the potential to effect changes that will combat poverty and social exclusion. Its role, above all, is to advocate for radical change in the structures that keep people poor. The analysis so far has pointed to the fact that the sector is not realising its full potential. The question remains then whether alternative approaches and processes can be put in place to build the effectiveness of community development as a powerful force for social change.

This section examines a number of possibilities in that direction. It includes a brief discussion of the following elements:

- Emphasis on the collective
- Investment in the acquisition of skills
- Certainty about the mandate
- Developing the 'authentic' voice and the representative voice
- Building relationships with the political system
- A balance between political action and service delivery
- Focus on new models of service delivery
- The practical application of empowerment

Emphasis on the collective

Strength is found in collaboration with others, and it would seem that community development will gain from further collective action, alliance

building and shared analysis. Such an approach will help to rebalance policy making in favour of those who are poor and excluded. It will also help to make individual groups and organisations less vulnerable to the potential withdrawal of funds. Such work is costly in terms of both time and resources.

Investment in the acquisition of skills

To ensure the optimum impact of the voice and experience of poor people on policy making, continuous and systematic investment is required in the acquisition and development of the necessary skills, knowledge and competencies, e.g.

- The development of community work skills, knowledge, principles and methods
- The development of strategies to enable empowerment, participation and representation
- The building of management, organisational and programme development skills
- Training in policy development, social analysis, influencing strategies and lobbying
- The acquisition of communication, networking, media and PR skills
- Access to technical skills and knowledge, including research, evaluation, legal issues and information technology
- The agreement of and adherence to quality standards in relation to the way work is carried out.

Such investment will support slow and systematic work, work that is not easily amenable to quantitative measurement. A resultant stronger impact on the causes of poverty is a persuasive justification for this investment. On the other hand, the failure to invest will undermine current public policy commitments to reducing poverty and exclusion.

Certainty about the mandate

Challenging dominant interests in relation to policy that reinforces poverty is a difficult task. It requires that the community development sector is very well informed, confident and, ideally, invulnerable. The sector and individuals within the sector need to be clear about the genesis of their mandate to speak on behalf of their community on poverty and other issues of concern.

This is another complex and potentially contentious matter, giving rise to debate about issues such as the following.

Does a mandate flow from the decision of a funding agency to support a community development initiative, even though there may have been limited community consultation about, or involvement with, the decision? Is this a sufficient mandate? Who mandates an organisation working at community level that is challenging that community about how it should respond to anti-social behaviour, for example? Who should hold the community development sector to account and about what? Do individuals on, for example, a Partnership board, a local drugs task force, the management group of a community development project, represent themselves or others?

How open has the sector been to supporting the direct voice of those living in poverty? How many early school leavers/ drug users/ vulnerable lone parents, etc are represented on the structures put in place to support them? Does this matter once there are clear and open methods of consulting with them and feeding back to them?

The sector seeks transparency and accountability from others. Therefore, it needs to be clear and confident about its own practice if it is to realise its potential and become a strong agent for social change.

Developing the 'authentic' voice and the representative voice

The community development sector has been challenged, and challenges itself, in relation to how it presents/represents itself. Does it support and enable the voice of the 'real' poor, or are the voices those of self-appointed 'do-gooders'? The 'authentic' voice of those with experience of poverty and social exclusion is very powerful; an 'I' argument is hard to refute. It is, however, difficult for individuals or groups of people to make arguments for social change based on their own individual, family or community experience. It can be personally very challenging, particularly if no consistent support is available, precisely because it is a personal contribution.

There is the risk of the argument being dismissed because it is linked to some sort of personal, family or community 'deficit'. Or the State may recognise the argument but propose a resolution that applies only to the individual/s making

the argument – addressing the problem but not the cause. A self-appointed approach to articulating the concerns and needs of the sector is not helpful.

The representative model, on the other hand, can facilitate the agreement and presentation of a shared single perspective, or of a range of perspectives, about a social policy change. Persons acting in a representative capacity do not have the same personal pressures as those drawing from their personal experience. The validity of this voice is generally linked to numbers. Representation necessarily involves communication with a certain percentage of people. This process is time-consuming and can complicate participation in decision making – many decision-making structures expect their members to make decisions without reference to their wider group.

Allying the ‘authentic’ and representative models would seem to be an essential aspect of an effective future for community development and merits further support. This might best be progressed through the development of a deeper understanding of participative democracy, its principles and values.

Building relationships with the political system

The development of models of participative democracy that can strengthen the policy influence of those living in poverty can complement and deepen representative democracy. Government is where policy decisions are taken and the Dáil is where they are enacted. The political system has been somewhat ambiguous about committing public resources to the work of assisting people to represent themselves and express a potentially oppositional voice. The term ‘poverty lobby’ has been frequently used in a disparaging way by senior politicians. The sector might usefully give more attention to building effective relationships with the political system.

A balance between political action and service delivery

The White Paper *Supporting Voluntary Activity* describes community development thus:

... an interactive process of knowledge and action designed to change conditions which marginalise communities and groups and is underpinned by a vision of self-help and community self reliance (Government of Ireland 2000: 49).

Current community development practice is struggling to maintain a balance between a focus on process, where 'the way the work is carried out is as important as the programme of development being undertaken' (Kelleher and Whelan 1992), and the development and delivery of services to communities. It is important that this balance is found.

The development of the voice of people who experience exclusion, who live on low incomes, in poorly resourced communities, is key to the achievement of effective social change. But the development of the quality of their daily lives is also important. They need to have access to reasonably paid work; to live in a community where they feel safe; to have accessible and competent supports to ensure their inclusion.

The development of the voice of people who experience exclusion, who live on low incomes, in poorly resourced communities, is key to the achievement of effective social change.

Achieving this balance is challenging and is made difficult by the demands of programme and service management and the related 'bureaucratisation' of community development organisations.

Focus on new models of service delivery

The pressure to provide and deliver services is linked to concerns about the availability of appropriate public services. The community development sector is well placed to make the case for the fair provision of improved public services to address poverty and exclusion. The sector is also placed to develop, with the support of the State, new models of service delivery through the development of the social economy.

Community development work needs to adjust to changing the economic realities of globalisation by widening its focus to incorporate sustainable economic life in communities beset by unemployment, marginalisation and poverty (Powell and Geoghegan, 2004).

The practical application of empowerment

There is a need for discussion and debate about how a commitment to the empowerment and full participation of people who experience poverty and exclusion is realised in practice. As the sector has become more formalised and bureaucratic this commitment has meant that people active in their community organisations are having to deal with onerous responsibilities as company directors and employers.

This responsibility is particularly evident in the community childcare sector. People living in designated areas of disadvantage, who may themselves be experiencing poverty and/or exclusion and who are in need of childcare services, are managing medium-sized enterprises providing services to some of the most vulnerable members of their community. These enterprises usually have highly complex funding and staffing arrangements.

There is an urgent need to develop and test approaches to empowerment and measurable influence that do not require people to write cheques and to hire and fire staff.

6 CONCLUSION

This paper has presented views about the contribution, value, and power of community development as a process for giving voice in Irish public policy to people experiencing poverty. It has examined the issues and challenges related to this work. Positive changes have occurred, and even if they fell short of the expectations of those seeking radical social change, they would not have happened without the identification of issues by the community development sector.

However, the partnership consensus models involving the sector have failed to deliver the social changes that might have been expected in the continuing strong economy. While community development has empowered poor people, it has failed to change the balance of power in their favour. The voice of those in poverty has been heard, but only up to a particular point.

While progress has been made, there needs to be a reappraisal of the strategies being used to give voice to marginalised people. Participation opportunities need to enable future actions and not simply be opportunities to input. The sector needs to develop a vision of how it might manage the future development and delivery of key services. The voices of 'trouble makers' need to be heard within community development and incorporated as part of it.

While community development has empowered poor people, it has failed to change the balance of power in their favour. The voice of those in poverty has been heard, but only up to a particular point.

Community development has to continue to present its vision of society and the values and principles underpinning that society in a competent and professional manner. It must constantly evaluate its ways of working and organising. It needs to limit the distractions. It needs, above all else, to ensure that it is enabling the voice of those who are living in poverty to be heard.

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NOTES

At the centre of all definitions of community development is the idea that it has the capacity to develop a 'voice' for the voiceless. With further support this 'voice' can respond by informing and developing policies that will address the real needs of people in poverty. Involvement and participation in this process can lead to empowerment which is central to the process of community development and the business of social change.

This discussion paper examines the potential for such a dynamic in the current context of community development in Ireland. It asserts the importance of having both the 'authentic voice' of people living in poverty and the 'representative voice' that is effective in the development of policy.

It discusses the challenge of making participation meaningful rather than being an end in itself, the necessity of balancing the growth in managerialism with the recognition that community development practice is a labour-intensive and a 'doing' work which must be encouraged, protected and valued. Finally, it recognises that a genuine sharing of power is necessary if policy is to be balanced in favour of those who have least access to it.



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