The Major Issues and Future Direction of Community Development

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As I look back over my years of research, study and fieldwork, my overall feeling is one of sadness that so much community development effort has, on the whole, resulted in relatively so little actual betterment and more especially for the poor and underprivileged people who need betterment most. I know, of course, that powerful minorities in every country often succeed in influencing development policies in their own interests at the expense of the mass of ordinary people, and I accept that as a fact of life we have to live with. What concerns me much more is that the well-intentioned efforts of so many planners, administrators and field workers who really want to promote betterment have, on the whole, so often fallen so far short of realising their full potential. To give but two examples: in India great dissatisfaction was expressed at the 1969 National Seminar on Panchayati Raj 'that the social and economic benefits (of rural development) have flown to the more affluent sections of the rural communities... The benefits it was expected to confer on the weaker and underprivileged sections of the rural population have not materialised in many cases'.

Again, although the Basic Democracies Works Programme in East Pakistan has resulted in great physical improvements in drainage, flood control and transportation, it has also been heavily criticized as having mainly benefited the larger landowners, widened the pre-existing gap between rich and poor, enlarged the number of landless labourers and worsened their condition.

Overall Development Objectives are Necessary

Such examples could be multiplied indefinitely, which suggests that something is seriously wrong here. Basically, I believe, it is because each social and economic development agency, and there are many, pursues its own objectives with its own selected clientele and too readily assumes that by achieving such objectives it contributes its share to overall betterment. What is much needed, but in practice lacking, is any common agreed and overall purpose for development to which every agency aims to contribute and by which it continually assesses the results of its work. It seems to me that the current situation is well summed up by one student of development who writes: 'At the moment we are in an impasse. Recent theories of development... have certainly defined the problem areas, and very well too. But they have left the problem or problems largely unsolved, especially the problem of what constitutes development and how it is to be attained'.

Betterment, especially of the Poor

Here, I think, I need to make my own standpoint clear. The basic position from which I start is that every development objective, or target, or activity should desirably contribute to betterment of people. If this is accepted, it follows that no development objective, or target, or activity should be regarded as an end in itself but only as a means which needs to be rigorously and continuously assessed, and if necessary modified, in order to ensure that it really does contribute to people's betterment, and more especially, perhaps, to the betterment of the poor and underprivileged people who need it most. To promote betterment in this sense is, or rather I feel should be, the overall purpose of every development agency and every development worker.
The Promotion of Environmental Change

Next, I feel I should try to define this overall betterment purpose rather more precisely. I find this an extremely difficult thing to do in only a few sentences, but as I must try, I would say that achievement of this purpose involves promoting changes of two quite different kinds: the one, changes for the better in people's local, regional or national environments; and the other, changes for the better in people themselves. Changes of the first type are usually detailed as development objectives or targets on every development agency's programme. They include the provision of services and amenities that people are seen to need, for example, schools, clinics, community centres and reading rooms, and the servicing of groups such as co-operatives, women's groups and youth groups. The problem here is to ensure that the people for whom such amenities or services are provided really do value them, use them and benefit from them in the way that was intended.

The Promotion of Change in People

Changes of the second type occur, for example, as people become more open-minded to change; more self-reliant; more willing to act responsibly in implementing their own decisions for themselves; more skilled in organising and planning how best to achieve what they have decided on; more concerned to promote the welfare of people other than themselves; and more willing to work together for the common good. The problem here is to find the agencies which really are purposefully working to promote changes in people of the kind I have described. True, there are social groupwork agencies and casework agencies, but these are almost entirely concerned with individuals in special need, such as delinquents, problem-families and the like. Most other agencies are much more concerned with providing people with specific amenities, facilities and services than with just how, in fact, what they provide and how they provide it will promote the development of people in the sense in which I have defined it.

The Community Development Approach to Development

However, community development agencies do claim to work purposefully for both kinds of betterment. The relevant concept, of course, is to be found in the felt-wants theory. According to this theory, it is during the process of people thinking, discussing, and deciding on what they really want, and then planning, organising and acting together to implement the decisions they have reached that, at one and the same time, they both develop more fully their potentialities as people and promote changes for the better in the environment in which they live. And, indeed, it has been proved many times that by stimulating people to discuss, decide and work to meet their own felt-wants, a skilled development worker can promote both aspects of the overall development purpose at the same time.

In the late 1940's when this community development way of working was first introduced by some government officers in the rural areas of Asia and Africa, its immediate results were impressive: and many politicians and high-ranking government officers regarded it as a breakthrough. Indeed, one I know was so impressed that he talked of 'the mystique' of community development almost as if he regarded it as magic. But, as we all know, it has not lived up to its early promise, and for two main reasons. One of these reasons is that people cannot want possibilities that they do not know exist, and the more backward they are the less able they are to formulate ideas for their own betterment. Yet it is the things they do not know about, and therefore do not want, that are usually the key objectives in the extension agencies' programmes. The second reason is that many of the things that people do want, often do not fit in at all well with the requirements of national and regional development programmes.
These two limitations are both so fundamental that even the keenest protagonists of community development have acknowledged them. Thus Albert Mayer when writing on "felt-needs" comments: 'After the early introductory stage, the question of Felt Need becomes more complex. The people on the plane of formulation tend to run out of them temporarily . . . the second stage is the "induced felt need", i.e., the felt need resulting from the interaction of the people and the agency. The dogma is of course that we democratically keep following the people's wishes, but I think this is naive'.

Again, to quote Julia Henderson: "If there is to be any general impact of community development on economic development—for example, if there is to be a real connection with the national plans—then there does have to be an educated and persuaded need".

The Development of More Directive, Imposed Approaches

These comments draw attention very pertinently to the very real limitations of the existing felt-wants concept, but if we take at their face value Albert Mayer's comment that it is 'naive' to keep following the people's wishes, and Julia Henderson's that there has to be 'an educated and persuaded need' where do they lead us? I suggest that they lead us—and in fact have led us—to a very blurred image of ourselves in which we say we believe in encouraging people to think and decide for themselves, but in practice spend a great deal of time in trying to get them to accept and act on what we other people have already decided on for them. What then becomes of our goal of developing people by involving them in thinking and deciding for themselves? To my mind, this is the basic issue which faces would-be community developers today. Indeed, until it is resolved, if it can be resolved, the term 'community development' has lost all real meaning.

The Need for a Non-Directive Approach

But is the felt-wants theory really quite as restricted in its applications as the comments I have quoted suggest? As this theory is currently stated, I think the answer must be "yes". But I also believe that the theory can be expanded in a way that frees it from its existing limitations and which opens up a very wide field of potential application. For this to happen, the key requirement is that the expanded concept must demonstrably be able to produce better results than the traditional extension method of persuasion—not only in promoting growth in people, but also—and from the technical extension agencies' point of view more particularly—in enabling them to achieve their specific technical development objectives.

Because space is limited, I can only present you with the barest outline of my elaboration of this theory. I will start by making two general statements, the full implications of which are too often ignored in extension work practice. They are:

1. that whenever a development 'authority' or agency has no effective means of forcing people to accept an innovation, the power to decide whether to adopt it or not (i.e., the effective authority) rests with the people; and

2. that no suggested innovation is effectively 'good' however important it may seem to the agency which sponsors it, unless ways can be found of getting people to implement it and go on implementing it.

Final Decisions must rest with the People

Therefore in all this area, and it is a wide one, the final decisions are made by the people, however backward and ignorant they may sometimes appear to be. This leads us
on to the really basic issue, which is how best to ensure, as far as humanly possible, that the people will accept and make beneficial use of each and every suggested innovation that really will contribute to betterment for them. Is it to try to persuade people into accepting the innovations that the agency thinks will turn out well for them? or is it to encourage and help them realistically to assess both the advantages and disadvantages of any such innovation before deciding whether it really has a favourable balance of advantage for themselves?

Proposed Innovations Must Satisfy Criteria

Let us note first that lasting success in getting people to adopt any particular innovation depends on whether it satisfies certain basic criteria. These are:

1. it must be technically sound: that is, it must produce the advantage aimed at when people apply it in their own locality;
2. this advantage must be functionally related either to some existing want or to something the people learn to want;
3. it must be locally practicable in terms of the materials and skills available;
4. the people must feel that the advantage they have gained by adopting the innovation outweighs for them any disadvantages it may also involve for them.

How well does the commonly adopted persuasive approach fit in with these requirements? I see this as essentially a directive kind of approach since the aim of the workers who use it is to ‘sell’ their pre-determined programme objectives to people rather than to get them thoroughly to consider each proposed innovation—both its merits and demerits—for themselves. Thus the key technique of persuasion is to present an idea as attractively as possible by highlighting, demonstrating and emphasising only its advantages. It can be summed up as ‘Trust us. Do this. This is why it will be good for you’.

Outcome Will Follow Accordingly

Whether persuasion succeeds or fails depends on whether the innovation, as decided on and presented to the people in any particular place, fully satisfies each of the criteria I have just mentioned. If it does, then very often persuasion can produce excellent results. If it doesn’t, then it will fail, and the most common cause of failure is that the advantage of the innovation, however real, is more than outweighed, in the people’s minds, by disadvantages which the agency has not foreseen. In all such cases one of three results will follow: either,

1. if the people are aware of any such disadvantages and feel secure enough to say so, they will reject the idea outright; or
2. if they are too polite or feel too insecure to say so, they will appear to accept the innovation at the time, but then do nothing about it; or
3. if they are not initially aware of any disadvantages, they will accept the innovation and try to implement it, but reject it later when the disadvantages become apparent. (A rejection of this kind can be particularly damaging since it tends to make people generally mistrustful of the agency’s desire and competence to help them).

Why is the Directive Approach so Widely Used?

Such adverse reactions are quite common when extension work is based on the advantage concept rather than the balance of advantage concept, so why then is the persuasive approach still so widely used? One reason, I think, is that most development
agencies do not continually and rigorously evaluate their work, and more especially the causes of their failures. Thus they do not learn the lessons these could teach. Another reason is that they are not aware of any really viable alternative: especially as, with some justification, they tend to mistrust the capacity of ordinary people to reach sound conclusions on the basis of their own unaided thinking. Hence, most agencies continue to rely on persuasion and, if and when they fail, they attribute their failures to the ignorance, incompetence or apathy of the people with whom they work.

The Directive Approach is often Unrealistic

This is a negative and unprofitable reaction. It is true that very many people, and more especially those under-educated and under-privileged people who are the main concern of most development agencies, are not all that well practised in systematic and objective thinking. It is true that they lack many of the ideas, and much of the knowledge, that they need in order to reach soundly-based decisions about what they ought to do for their own good. It is also true that often they have not even thought out their own purposes at all clearly.

But this does not mean that extension agencies are being realistic when they therefore resort to persuasion, for to do so is to ignore three basic facts. The first of these facts is that the people will decide anyway; that what they decide will in the end be the product of their own thinking; and that all the agency can do is to try to ensure that they think as soundly as possible in the light of all the facts. The second is that by trying to persuade, i.e., by using the advantage concept instead of the balance of advantage concept, the agency is trying to restrict the scope of people's thinking at the risk of promoting unrealistic thinking. And the third is that a development worker who has been trained to help people think can contribute a great deal to raise the level of their thinking. Such thinking can turn vague dissatisfaction into a clear awareness of certain needs; awareness of a need into wanting some specific kind of change; and wanting some specific kind of change into readiness to take some clearly defined action in order to bring it about.

Key Characteristics of the Non-Directive Approach

What then are the key characteristics of the alternative approach? It is for the worker to get people to look critically at any idea he is suggesting: both in order to get them to assess the full extent of all its potential advantages for them; and equally, on the other hand, to identify any disadvantages they think might also be involved. Then, if they do foresee any disadvantages, to promote realistic discussion in the light of all the available facts in order to get the people to think out whether, and if so just how, any such disadvantages can be avoided or reduced.

The worker's purpose throughout is to help people come to an informed and therefore realistic decision. Thus, he does not want them to accept an idea, however well-intentioned, unless and until they are sure it has a favourable balance of advantage for them. It is this approach which I call non-directive in order to distinguish it clearly from the other. I regret very much having to use such a negative sounding word to describe such a positive role. It is, perhaps, significant that although the English language contains many words, such as lead, guide, persuade, sell, direct, manipulate, enforce and threaten, which one can use to indicate directive action, it does not contain any one positive word solely indicative of the non-directive role of helping people to think clearly and systematically in the light of all the available facts in order to reach a really sound decision on matters which can vitally affect them.

It is by stimulating and encouraging people to test his agency's ideas for innovation in the light of their own local knowledge of what is really practicable and acceptable
for them that the extension worker can best ensure that his agency's ideas for innovation really get tailored to fit. And as they do get tailored to fit, so in effect, the worker has created in people new felt-wants. And if, in the end, no way can be found of getting some ideas to fit, then surely, it is better that they should be rejected, for what, after all, is the development purpose if it is not to promote betterment? And here it is worth noting that when an extension worker, by working in this way, really involves people in a process of thinking and deciding for themselves, so also he is actively helping them to develop more fully their own potentialities as people: and thus, like the community development felt-wants worker, he promotes both aspects of the overall development purpose at one and the same time.

So far, I have dealt only with the applicability of this non-directive approach to the work development agencies do in order to promote their own specific programme objectives. But can we assume either that it is not needed, or that it is already effectively applied in our own traditional field of working in relation to people's existing felt-wants? Indeed, we cannot, for in fact the rural areas of Africa and Asia, to mention only these two continents, are bespattered with the relics of such projects as, for example, feeder roads, community centres, reading rooms, and even wells which people said were their felt-wants but which either they started but did not complete; or, if they did complete them, have since found it too much trouble to use and maintain. Such results are largely avoidable and should be avoided. They do not add up to betterment of any kind. They leave people dissatisfied and disillusioned, both with themselves and with the agencies which encouraged them. They breed apathy.

The fact is that it is temptingly easy for a community development worker to take what people say is their felt-want at its face value—and all the more tempting if what they say they want is what the development planners want them to want. He then has every incentive to get them started on a project to add to his list when he reports: unless, that is, he aims to promote real betterment and has been trained in the skill of helping people to think.

The Functions of a Community Worker

Here I can indicate only in bare outline the worker's functions when he adopts this non-directive role.\(^6\) In brief, he aims to do two things:

1. to help people think in a more orderly, systematic and logical manner than they would otherwise do. He achieves this mainly by asking unloaded questions which are designed, \textit{inter alia}

a. to ensure that the people he is working with really are agreed about just what need, or want, or problem they are aiming to discuss;

b. to ensure that the people base their thinking on facts rather than assumptions about facts;

c. to ensure that they consider both the pros and cons of each and every alternative open to them rather than restricting themselves to considering only one; and

d. to help them avoid getting involved in unproductive argument. (He does this by suggesting that they all concentrate on listing and assessing both the merits \textit{and} demerits of each of their conflicting viewpoints rather than on some arguing for one viewpoint and some for another. What he does \textit{not} do is to show himself in favour of one viewpoint rather than another, for he would then get involved in the argument himself. It is only by remaining impartial that he can hope to promote objectivity in the discussion.)
2. to ensure as far as humanly possible that the people are in possession of all the relevant facts. He achieves this:

a. by asking questions which draw people's attention to their need to get at all the relevant facts; and then

b. encouraging people to contribute the relevant local facts for themselves; and

c. by contributing relevant non-local facts, but not opinions, himself.

This non-directive approach to working with people derives from basic community development theory, but elaborates and expands it. It elaborates it in the sense that it clarifies and defines the positive role and functions of a worker who aims to help people to think, decide, plan, organise and act to promote their own betterment for themselves; and in the process to help them develop more fully their potentialities as people. It expands it by providing the field workers of the specialist extension departments with a viable alternative to their traditional persuasive role—an alternative which not only provides them with a more effective way of realistically achieving their target goals, but which also, at one and the same time, contributes to the wider development goal of promoting growth in people.

The issues I have so far discussed—the first, whether underlying all development activities there is, or should be, one overall development purpose, and if so whether it should include both development of people's environment and development of the people themselves; and the second, whether adoption of the non-directive approach as I have defined it would enable each and every agency and each and every one of its field workers to contribute to both aspects of it—these are both key issues in the sense that whether they are decided, and if so how they are decided, will determine the future direction, not only of community development, but of the whole field of development activity of which community development is a part.

The Barrier of Specialized, Professionalized, Departmentalized Community Development

The major barrier, as I see it, to the resolution of these two issues in a way that could potentially maximise the contribution to overall betterment of every worker of every agency is the present trend towards the specialization, professionalization, and departmentalization of community development. Community development's core concept of working with people rather than for them—of helping them to think and decide realistically for themselves rather than, often unrealistically, attempting to think and decide for them, is I feel, much bigger than any one specialization, profession or department. It is potentially applicable to the work that every specialist agency does with people, and as such is, or rather should be, part of each specialised agency's professionalism. This has profound implications for the organisation, content and method of training which we, as would-be professional community development educators and trainers have, as yet, barely perceived. As we perceive them, if we do, so perhaps we shall see more clearly the full scope and nature of the professionalism to which we aspire.

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6. See Batten, T. R., Communities and Their Development, Oxford University Press, 1957, pp. 10-12 for examples of this. See also Chapter Five, "Directing Change" in the same book for a much fuller assessment of the directive approach in general.