Defining Community Development

From CRWRC Core Learning Modules: Community Development and Transformation,
Module 1: Basic Principles and Practices, Lesson 1

Community development—governments and development agencies have been actively involved in it since World War II. The development road has been paved with good intentions; billions of dollars have been spent in the interest of sustained community change.

We have all heard about discontinued “development projects”: wells with no water, tractors rusting in the fields, empty cereal banks. It is hard to find successful replicable community development initiatives. We wish we could hear more people saying, “Look what we did to make our community better!”

And the good news? Small local organizations supporting community initiatives, linked with larger organizations working at policy change at national and international levels, are learning together how to create the conditions in which communities can transform themselves.

Definitions of community development

Dictionary:
Community (n): a number of people having common ties or interests and living in the same locality.
Development (n): becoming bigger, better, fuller, or more useful.

Roland Bunch (Two Ears of Corn):
“a process whereby people learn to take charge of their own lives and solve their own problems”.

CRWRC (2004 BRIEFCASE):
“a long-term, indigenous, people-centered process developed from participant involvement and enthusiasm that results in transforming, measurable, individual and community change based on Christian values”.

From these definitions we discover that community development:
1. is a process (not a thing),
2. involves people learning and taking responsibility for their own lives, and
3. involves people working toward their own transformation.

Role of the outside agency

It is clear from the above that the role of the helping agency or partner is not to initiate or implement change on behalf of a community, but to accompany the community on its journey of self-initiated change.

We can too easily skip statements such as the one in the last paragraph, nodding in agreement, without acknowledging how counter-intuitive it is to how we from outside the community usually react. When confronted with a poor community, we almost invariably switch into “problem-solving mode”. We do so at our peril. When people from outside the community take control of the community change process, the result is dependency. Change happens, but not the kind of change we were hoping for!

- Believe that you are there for the community and the community is there for you.
- Allow the community to make their own decisions.
- Be able to say no to a community when a proposal could increase dependency.

This is not to say that governments and development organizations do not have a role to play. However, they must continually remind themselves that real development happens only when community members make decisions and take action to achieve their own vision for community transformation.

But beware: going into a community and asking, “What do you need?” will most likely result in a wish list. A more positive approach is to ask communities what activities they plan to undertake during the coming months to improve their individual and community lives. Then look with the partner at what it can do to support the community’s initiative.
**Wholistic Development**

Development involves not only changes in knowledge and skills but also in attitudes and feelings. Truly transformational development involves a change of worldview. A feeling of helplessness and victimization is transformed into a sense of control of one’s own destiny.

These attitude changes do not come easily for people who live in extreme poverty. The more desperate the physical, emotional, and spiritual poverty in which people live, the more difficult the transformation. For example, the rural poor often feel more in charge of their lives than the urban poor, who may feel helpless even though both groups have about the same material wealth. The rural poor may have more access to land and resources to provide for themselves and may function more as a community than the urban poor, whose access to electricity and city water does not add to their sense of control of their lives and their living situation.

Success with a real activity is probably the biggest single factor leading towards attitude change. Therefore, it is important to begin with the community activities most likely to be successful. The community itself is the best judge of what these are.

We should keep in mind as well that poverty is complex. Activities grouped in a single sector, such as health or agriculture, are not likely to make much of a difference. An integrated approach is required. The more communities diversify their development initiatives in order to address the different facets of poverty, the more likely attitudes will change and the community be transformed. Note that this does not necessarily mean that the development organization has to go into the community with several separate programs. It means that they need to encourage and support diverse community initiatives in multiple sectors, for example, health and agriculture and literacy.

**Community development as a process**

Community development is a process. There are two things to keep in mind about processes:

First of all, they take time. It might seem easier and quicker for a development agency to decide on its own what the community should do. But when people are involved from the beginning and grow in the process, the opportunities for success increase tremendously.

Secondly, processes are on-going. They are means, not ends. We are all on a journey of becoming more developed. Each of us wishes to develop in the way that we ourselves choose. None of us has arrived. When we talk about **sustainable** development, we make reference to the fact that genuine development has within it the seeds for continuous regeneration.

**Tracking development**

If the process of development is so important, it is also important to find a way to help the community track it. A community can look back at its history to determine how far they have come, where they are now, and where they want to go. As much as possible, the community should define the indicators of their own development. At the same time, especially in the beginning, local partners can use research-based indicators to evaluate at which stage of development a community is. This helps determine which types of intervention would be most helpful at this particular stage of the community’s growth.

**The role of the community developer**

The work of accompanying local commun-ity initiatives demands sensitive and well-trained development workers. They need to be down-to-earth and knowledgeable in technical areas with which the people identify. At the same time, they must understand development processes and principles and be able to work respectfully with the community, keeping themselves out of the limelight.
Summary

Community development…
1. … is for and by people;
2. …is owned and managed by the people of the local community;
3. …is an integrated, wholistic process which deals with the whole person: physical, spiritual, and mental;
4. …is a continuous, self-generating process;
5. …is enhanced with accompaniment by respectful and knowledgeable community development practitioners.

