

Basic Guide:

Introducing Community Development

This sheet introduces community development as a way of creating change in your local community. It briefly answers the following questions:

- What is community development?
- Why is it important?
- How is it different to other approaches?
- What issues does it raise for Christian congregations or projects?

From the start, it is important to acknowledge that community means different things in different contexts. Whilst much of the information in this tool is based on Shaftesbury's work in local communities, for the purpose of this guide community can mean:

- People living on a street or on an estate or in a neighbourhood
- A people group sharing similar characteristics e.g. older people, youth, people from a similar ethnic or religious background
- A group of people with similar interests e.g. creative arts, media, business, sports etc

What is community development?

Community development is not just about getting involved in the community. It is about the way you go about it. It describes a specific process of change. Through community development local people themselves take responsibility for and respond to local needs or issues.

Community development is a long-term activity. It confronts disadvantage, poverty and exclusion. It does this by members of the community working equally alongside each other to get involved in the issues, learn, take decisions, seek solutions to problems together and identify the resources available to address them. The goal is to create change and achieve a better quality of community life.

For a group of Christians or congregation to do this effectively, they must set aside their own ideas about need and how to respond. Instead, they take part as equal players alongside others living in the community. Through working in this way, the church becomes more interwoven with the social fabric of a local community.

Why is it important?

Community development is important because it brings people together to transform communities. It encourages congregations to think about valuing and working with others and how to do that with integrity, not just tokenism.

Community development challenges injustice. It challenges the systems and structures that exist within the community which keep people poor, oppressed and excluded. It is life-giving and empowering. It also disturbs the status quo by changing power relationships, for to empower others you have to give power away. It encourages local people to get into the boat and embark on a rich journey of discovery and hope.

What are the core characteristics of community development?

Community development has these key elements: -

- Personal empowerment
- Positive action
- Community organisation
- Participation and influence ¹

Personal empowerment is the process through which individuals and groups of people gain the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to be able to take action on matters that concern them.

Positive action is change which builds on an acceptance and understanding of others where no one group of people gains at the cost of others. This term is an umbrella for equal opportunity, social justice and anti-discrimination.

Community organisation describes a range of ways people come together to work together towards a particular goal. It can be informal or formal. Informal types of community organisation include keeping an eye on your neighbours' homes while they are away or helping older people with shopping. Formal types are groups that exist to find out and represent community needs and issues. Examples include tenants associations and neighbourhood forums.

Participation and influence is the process through which individuals and groups interact with the outside world to achieve change. It is about getting involved in

¹ From "ABCD Handbook, a framework for evaluating community development" by Alan Barr and Stuart Hashagen, Community Development Foundation 2000.

decision-making within the political, administrative and service-providing bodies in an area.

How is community development different to other approaches?

Community development is different to other types of community involvement. Two important ones are service provision and community action:

Service provision is activities run for people in the local community, for example a carer's and toddlers group, lunch club for older people, debt advice. This approach is a popular method of community work for many local congregations. It directly meets community needs and is good with helping people to cope with their circumstances. However, it focuses on effects rather than the causes of problems, and maintains a cycle of 'doing things for' people, rather than directly involving local people in shaping or delivering the services.

Service provision contrasts with community development in that often local people are not directly involved in shaping or delivering the services. It maintains a cycle of 'doing things for' people; people using the services can become dependent on the helper. It can be easy for those who set up a project to retain control over what happens; often it is they who are empowered rather than the recipients. There is also a danger that the service becomes the end in itself, rather than bringing about lasting change in the community.

Community action describes local people and/organisations working together through some sort of campaigning. For example this could include a 'litter clean up' activity on an estate or lobbying the council for more recycling services. It tackles issues that directly affect people's lives, coordinating people to address the issues together.

Some ways in which community action can be different to community development are: it can be focused on the end task, rather than the process of getting local people involved; it can focus on a single issue, instead of exploring wider community needs; it can be short-term and lack adequate follow up.

Local congregations might shy away from community action as they see it as getting involved in local politics, which they do not see as their role. This approach involves letting go of control and allowing the local community to determine outcomes. As a result, some congregations might fear it will dilute their Christian ethos or values.

What are the challenges of community development for Christian congregations or projects?

Christian congregations and Christian project workers who want to embark on community development have to be prepared to overcome some barriers. These can be very much part of everyday church structures and culture.

Power is a big issue. Many 'top-down' leadership structures, where a few people at the top decide on a vision and roll it out retains power and control among the

few. This would need to be challenged. Community development involves the wider congregation and even more so, the wider community. It allows room for people to respond to the vision God has put in their own hearts. It also demands a willingness to lay down power to enable others to create change, which may take far longer.

Overcoming this mindset requires perseverance and a commitment to valuing the way things are done as much as what is achieved. A push for easy wins and a tick box mentality in our consumer culture is barrier to the long-term view of community development, as is a charity model of 'doing things for people'. Community development hinges on listening to local voices and allowing them to take the lead. It is a long-term continuous process in which people are changed as they change their situation. It is about collective thinking and doing where the good of the community as a whole is put first and foremost above other church agendas.

People can have legitimate concerns about maintaining a Christian ethos. At times this can be justified, but it is also important to see how community development is a process which is completely consistent with Jesus' way of doing things. Through community development, communities and lives can be transformed by bringing the kingdom of God closer to hand: seeing people's material, physical, emotional and spiritual needs met, justice for all, relationships formed and restored; these are all part of the wholeness of God's kingdom.

Community development can strongly challenge a congregation's goal of getting involved in the community. What is the aim? To get more people in the pews? To improve the use of the church building? To see community relationships restored? To enable people's needs to be met? With community development, how a congregation sees success has to shift: from numbers attending church-based activities to an improved community life for all.