

What is Development?

The Community Worker's Dilemma

Johannesburg Child Welfare Society

People working in the welfare field are starting to acknowledge that a purely curative approach is not enough to break the cycle of welfare related problems in communities, and that more emphasis needs to be placed on preventive work. Community development has become the new catch phrase to describe work which attempts to address underlying problems such as unemployment, lack of or inadequate housing, criminal and political violence and widespread substance abuse.

What is development? Is it something done by experts with the technical know-how on behalf of the less privileged, or is it a process whereby we equip communities to develop themselves? Our interpretation of development has important implications for our role as community workers, the methods we adopt, the impact we have on communities, the type of projects set up, decision making processes, and the ownership of projects. A top down approach tends to result in community members remaining passive, whereas a grassroots approach is more likely to involve participants actively in the process of transforming themselves, their families, their communities and broader society.

Maintaining Control, Feeling Good

Turton identified three different approaches to development, namely 'growth centred', 'spend and service' and 'people centred'. The 'growth centred' approach is characterised by: a focus on production; measuring development in terms of quantitative growth; co-option of local leaders to implement the plans and goals, resulting in manipulation of the community; and lack of focus on basic power relations.

The characteristics of 'spend and service' are as follows: programmes are based on material indicators such as poverty, homelessness, unemployment, malnutrition and poor health; programmes are designed and implemented by the developer; there is community participation, but not in the decision making and planning processes; certain material needs are redressed, but insufficient resources go into building the capacity of local communities; and projects depend on funding and are unable to continue once the funding stops.

The 'people centred' or 'community centred' approach has the following characteristics: a focus on process rather than on projects; empowering people and communities with skills, knowledge and the capacity to act and engage effectively at the community level; community participation to gain greater control over resources; and meeting basic needs and continuously improving the lives of as many people as possible.

State structures and welfare organisations generally adopt a 'growth centred' or 'spend-and-service' approach. These approaches maintain the status quo and can be seen as a form of social control. They are used to fit people into the system even though the problems people experience may arise out of that very system. They are top down in nature and people are not equipped with the bargaining and negotiating skills to address power imbalances themselves. Communities are discouraged to take ownership of projects by being excluded from aspects such as planning and control. There is a lack of training in organisational and financial skills. Consequently they remain dependent on the welfare organisations, and eternally grateful for what these organisations are doing for them. This, in turn, allows the predominantly middle and upper class welfare committees to feel very good about the projects they are maintaining, while ensuring control over the poor at the same time.

By People, Not To People

According to Hope and Timmel, "development and education are first of all about liberating people from all that holds them back from a full human life. Ultimately, development and education are about transforming society." Clark adds that development is "a process of change that enables people to take charge of their own destiny and realise their full potential. It requires building up in people the confidence, skills, assets and freedom necessary to achieve this goal. True development is done by people, not to people".

The 'people centred' approach ensures that people participate in planning, making decisions and implementing projects, according to their needs. The ownership of the projects by the community is encouraged from the very start. The skills for managing the project are developed in the process, and consequently empowerment is more likely to become a reality. This process enables people to shape their own destiny.

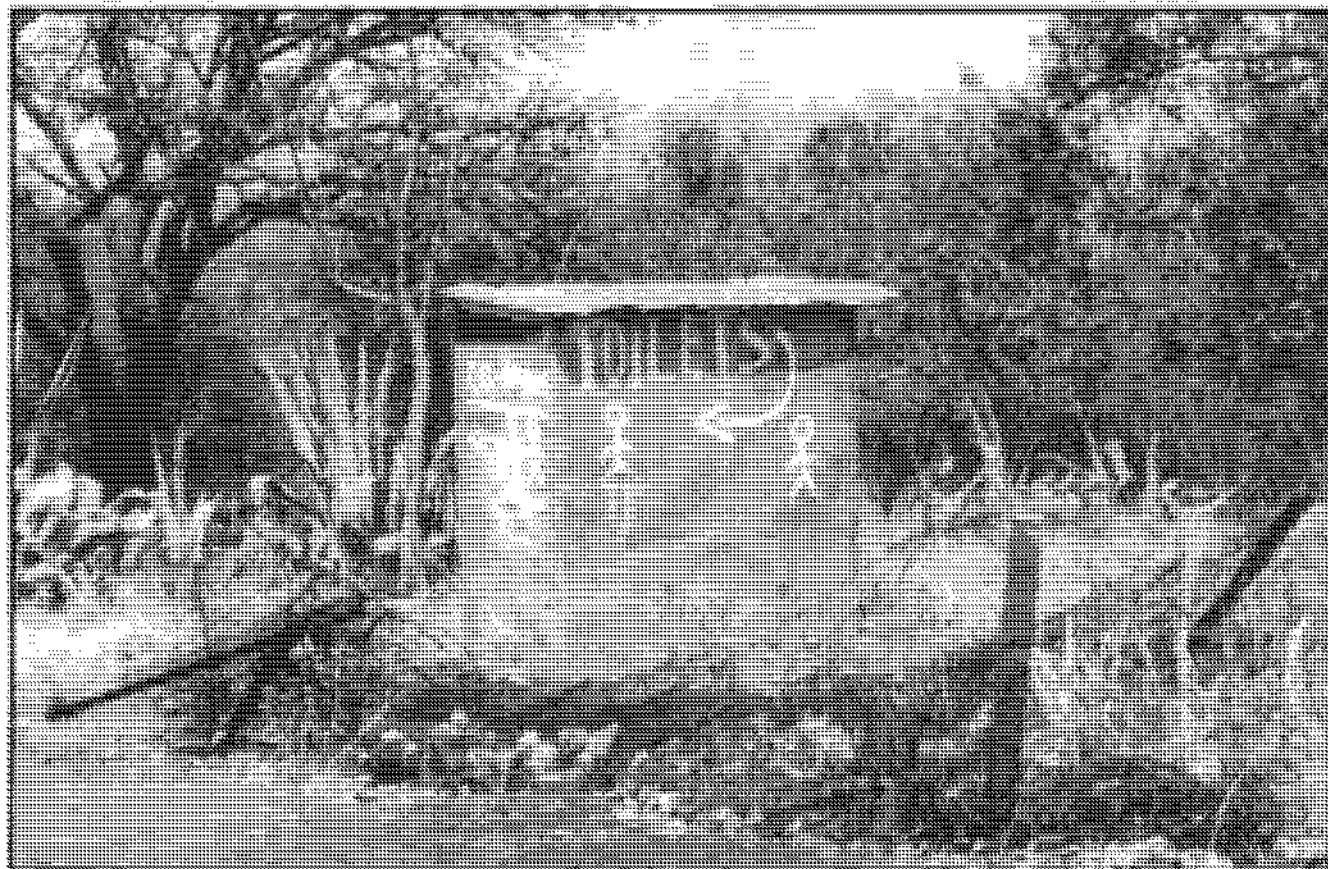
It is important for us to question whether the approaches we use maintain the present situation and the problems inherent in it, or whether they lead to positive transformation.

Conflicts and Dilemmas

A lot of the work done in the name of development is top down, in spite of many community workers seeing the need for a grassroots or bottom up approach. This contradiction draws attention to the conflicts and dilemmas experienced by community workers. Often workers are employed within a top-down bureaucratic system. They are inevitably left with the question of how to implement real grassroots work within the parameters and policies of the existing structure.

A community worker is accountable to the community as well as to the agency. When there is a clash of interests between the community and the agency, she is faced with a dilemma. For example, agencies often hold on to projects when it is in the interests of communities to work independently. Agencies hold on because they need to show funders what they are doing, while funders want to see the results of their financial input according to their own indicators of success.

Welfare organisations tend to favour consensus models of community work. Is this appropriate when many problems arise from conflicts of interests, discrepancies in the distribution of resources, and power imbalances? The way in which this dilemma is resolved has important implications for the community worker.



Development should revolve around a process, not an end product.

Photo: Ismail Vawda

The Facilitator Must Empower

The community worker's role is defined to some extent by the development approach that is adopted. Roles such as advocacy, organising and consciousness-raising are consistent with grassroots approaches, where unequal power relations and economic, social and political injustices are seen as impacting negatively on communities. Top down approaches are inclined to view the role of the community worker as that of expert and long term co-ordinator of projects.

Roles such as facilitator are generally included in all approaches. However, the way in which these roles are interpreted depends largely on the approach. The top down interpretation of these roles is linked to the view of community worker as expert. Facilitation is geared towards assisting people to adapt to existing social structures, or to new structures that are decided on by the developers. Community members are regarded as 'empty vessels' needing to be filled with the expert's knowledge. However, this stops short of the transfer of the skills needed for communities to take over the management of projects.

A grassroots approach interprets the facilitative and educative roles as empowering people to take control over the decisions that affect their lives and to define the nature of the changes they want. Active participation, critical thinking and creative problem solving are regarded as essential.

Contradictions and Challenges

It is important for community workers to be aware of the contradictions inherent in engaging in development work within the parameters of the welfare system, in order to identify the limitations and constraints that impede effective development work. We as community workers also need to look at ourselves, to question our assumptions about the communities we work in, to examine our own feelings about change, and to assess the extent to which we hide behind the policies of welfare organisations.

We assume that communities need education and training, but have we considered the possibility that colleagues, welfare organisations and funders need to be educated about development?

We often claim that we are using a grassroots approach, yet our approach to needs assessment presupposes the specific projects we have in mind, and the projects we implement reflect our assumptions of what the community needs. When the projects we implement are not well utilised, we blame the community for being apathetic. When participants remain dependent, even though the project may be well attended, we try to justify our belief that communities are

incapable of managing their own affairs.

We sometimes hand over the running of projects to communities when funding dries up, without adequately preparing them with the necessary skills, and we despair when the projects collapse. Alternatively we maintain control over resources such as equipment and finance, thereby ensuring the continued dependence of the community. If we are really serious about adopting a grassroots approach to development, it is necessary to address these issues. Grassroots development requires that we involve the community in planning and decision making from the start, and that we develop the capacity of the community by equipping members with the necessary organisational and administrative skills.

Build Capacity to Take Control

If community work is to fulfil its preventive role, it is necessary to address broader social problems such as unemployment, lack of housing, violence, unequal power relations and economic, political and social injustices. We must also aim to break the cycle of dependence that results from top down welfarist approaches, otherwise we are making a mockery of development and we are merely paying lip service to it. Community development is a farce unless it aims at empowering communities by building the capacity of community members to take control of their lives.

This article was written by the Community Organising and Development Department of the Johannesburg Child Welfare Society