Community work

Kjell Henriksbø, HiB and Klas-Göran Olsson, HHJ

Hello students.

We, Kjell Henriksbø and I, Klas-Göran Olsson have the pleasure to introduce some approaches in Community Work.

We are both working as assistant professors in Social Work. I am working at Jönköping University in Sweden, in the faculty of Social Work. I also have been working as a social worker myself even if it is quite a long time ago now.

How about you Kjell

K: I have been working at Bergen University College in Norway since 1993. Teaching community work at the bachelor and master level. Before starting as a teacher, I worked in different fields as a social worker.

K: Why are you interested in CW Klas-Cøran?

KG: I like the community work approach because it is respectful towards people and their inherent capacities. Community work is about mobilizing different communities to strengthen their own capabilities in different ways. I prefer Community Work as a method in Social Work, and I think that there is need for social workers to improve their skills in CW methods. I like a definition by M.L Weyers (2001).

He says:

“social worker’s act of bringing people together to utilize their potential or position to improve their own or other peoples circumstances”.

He mentions some purposes of effecting change by Community Work:

a) development of the human potential.

To me this means to see people as resourceful creatures that have potential to make a difference. This is an important value.

A second point:

b) to improve the provision of resources and services that are needed to prevent and eliminate social dysfunctioning.

This is an important challenge for social workers, not only to relieve distress or placate unsatisfied people, but encourage the participation of the people in making a real change.

The third principle:
c) *promoting social justice.*

Which means to take a stand in meeting peoples needs and aspirations, and promoting human rights so as to create equal living conditions. See Ife & Fiske, in the article Human rights and community work, complementary theories and practices.

And the last principle

d) *the enhancement of peoples problem solving,*

This is a part of what we can call co-construction of peoples capacity building, a part of the learning process coming out of Community Work projects. People always have the capacity to strengthen their capabilities.

**KG: What do you understand with CW Kjell**

**K:** There are different definitions and approaches to CW. When I am talking about CW I like to start with a def. from Twelvetrees

"*the process of assisting people to improve their own communities by undertaking collective action*” (Twelvetrees 2008, p 1).

As community workers we are assisting, not directing or leading people, the community (the collective) is the central actor, working for positive changes – improvements.

Let me give you an illustration from my own practice where we started with the individual social work approach, offered some of the clients social group work, and later took a more community work approach.

Almost 20 years ago, I worked in a social service office in a group together with two other social workers. Our tasks were helping young people without income/work, trying to help/motivate them to take part in different qualification programmes. In the group meetings we still had an individual focus, with the group as a working/training and supportive forum. This kind of group work was not an ordinary way of meeting the clients at that time, perhaps not to day either. And the clients found this a good way of meeting with the social workers.

In this process, something interesting happened. One of the youth contacted a central politician in the municipality, and told about our group and asked if we (the group) could meet the municipal board for Social Affairs. They got an appointment, and after a lot of discussions in the group, they decided to meet with the politicians.

As social workers we now entered a period of some weeks assisting the group to present its issues in the meeting. They used their own experiences, but now the focus was not themselves, but the situation for young people receiving income from social welfare. One of their messages was related to the amount of welfare money they received each month and how difficult their living conditions were.
As we see, they tried to speak on behalf of people in the same situation as themselves. As a group, they acted as a collective, trying to improve the living conditions for a wider community of clients.

KG. Was this a common way of doing social work?

KJ: As a social worker at that time I think I had not taken the step towards this more action based approach. I had no problem with supporting the group, I thought it was great, but it was not in my professional repertoire. This was a real bottom-up idea.

K: You are often talking about the importance of being pro-active as a social worker KG, how does this fit in with community work?

KG: I see social work as a very important profession in the society as a whole. Social workers get to know about people’s living conditions. They meet and identify groups of people in disadvantaged situations. From my perspective I believe that social workers can be oppressive and make people dependent on support from social workers. This is not good. Therefore, I would prefer social workers to be more pro-active in fighting for the improvement of particular groups’ conditions. This can also be a kind of preventive work.

What I mean is, if a social worker meets with people in negative social conditions, and gives fair assistance, this is of course good, but I want the social worker to go further in improving clients situation in a broader perspective. The social worker should question himself and colleagues about how to improve living-conditions a structural level. This is one way of being pro-active, to get in contact with politicians and other decision-makers to make changes in laws and policies. Sarah Banks (1999) defines this as active-proactive. From my point of view I find this to be responsible as a professional social worker. I mean that community work also can be part of a so called pro-active even active-proactive method.

KG: In community work there are different models or approaches. Do you find it important to be precise about this Kjell?

K: From the US, we have a classical typology from Rothman (1979 in Bracht 1999:85)

- Locality development
- Social planning
- Social action

These different models are not understood quite the same all over the world, and perhaps the meaning also has changed during the last years. Rothman is referring to the three models as
different way of Community Organization. While Community organization in textbooks from Great Britain or The Nordic countries is understood as a model close to social planning.

Twelvetrees (2008:3) calls community development (Locality development) the most unique to community work. “Community development workers operate as facilitators with people in relation to what those people decide to become involved with, helping them realize their collective goals.”

K-G: According to Twelvetrees (2008:3), the community worker in social planning mostly deals with initiating projects, liaising and working directly with service providers to sensitize them to the need of specific communities. This may be more or less in cooperation with community members.

K: I think we are seeing more of a mix of approaches, or during a project period we may focus on different models. I am inspired by the locality (community) development ideas, focusing on community building.

However, I think in what we call a mixed economy of welfare, with public as well as market based and voluntary actors, there will be even more difficult for disadvantaged communities to improve their living conditions. The assistance from community workers being good at social planning/organization will be important.

K-G: In the Budapest declaration concerning community development from 2004, community development is seen as a way of strengthening civil society. (http://www.fcdl.org.uk/policy/documents/BudapestDeclaration.doc)

K: The Budapest declaration underlines the importance of strengthening the inhabitants as potential members of interest groups representing the community.

As we are discussing different models, perhaps we should reflect more on a “top-down” or a “bottom-up” approach. I find the approaches we may call “change from below” to be interesting.

How do you understand this KG?

KG: Well, it is very important to let the ideas come from the people, the citizens in the community. Even if you, as a professional outsider, understand that there are great needs in a community that can be improved, you must wait till the members of the community define their problems and needs. Otherwise there is a risk that you may take over and create disempowerment instead of empowerment in the community. Swanepoel and De Beer (2007) stress the importance of empowerment as a bottom-up process. Ife and Tesoreiro (2006) say that it is easy to state the rhetoric of grassroot power, but it is not so easy to fulfill in practice, especially in the Western world where we are used to Top-down approaches according to policy making and programme management. This makes the idea of bottom-up very radical and challenging which means it requires a major change of mind-set for many social workers.
K: Bottom-up or change from below is about valuing local
- knowledge
- skills
- culture
- resources and processes

Due to traditions there is always a risk of going for a top-down approach even if it has started as a bottom –up process. The community worker has to be deeply rooted in community work theories and values to resist the temptation to act as an expert instead of being supportive and act more as an adviser in the process.

K-G: Furthermore the bottom-up approach is important in relation to the sustainability of the community work intervention. Bottom-up means that the community members take the ownership of the project. This ensure long lasting benefits for the community. A prerequisite for bottom-up approaches is participation from the community members. Do you have any thoughts about this Kjell?

KJ: Participation is a key word in CW, and the concept of citizenship is important, with an emphasis on political processes and a renewal of democracy. “Participation is an important part of empowerment and consciousness rising” (Ife and Tesoriero 2006). This might not result in immediate structural changes, but the power balance can slightly be altered. Experiences from social movements like women liberation, black movement illustrate this.

CW should pay attention to more direct or participatory forms of democracy, assisting people to achieve voices in different ways through media, public meetings, lobbying and so forth. Bringing issues on behalf of the community to the public and political agenda, taking part in processes before decisions are examples of participatory approaches. Once more, we are talking about a process of creating agency.

K-G: In connection with participation and strengthening peoples capacity I have an example from my own municipality, Vårgårda in Sweden. In the beginning of 2003 a project with the purpose to encourage children and youth participate in societal decisionmaking was started. The intentions was to get the children
- to take more responsibility for their own interests
- to understand how democracy works
- to be get the feeling of belonging and the feeling of being respected as citizens
- to contribute in improving their situation in schools
- etc
The politicians in the municipality invited children from grade 5, grade 8 in the secondary school and grade 2 at the high school to decide how a certain amount of money should be allocated. Before the children decided, they presented their proposals and negotiated among each other. This process is repeated every year.

The children also are, once a year invited to a meeting, a hearing, with the top civil servants and top politicians in the municipality. During this meeting children raise issues that are of importance for them. The politicians and civil servants have to respond, in a respectful way, to the childrens experiences and sometimes critical remarks. Some decisions taken by the city council have to be discussed by the elected pupils councils, prior to a final decision.

This is a way of mobilizing children to be more aware of the advantages and challenges of participation in democracy.
We will end this lecture by looking at some sentences from a textbook in Community work by Margaret Ledwith (2005:1)

- "Community development begins **in the everyday lives of local people**. This is the **initial context for sustainable change**. It is founded on a process of empowerment and participation.

- Empowerment (involves a form of critical education that) is to encourages people **to question their reality**: this is **the basis of collective action** and is built on **principles of participatory democracy**.

- In a process of **action and reflection**, community development grows through a diversity of local projects that address issues faced by people in community”.
To discuss and reflect:
What are your experiences in relation to the content of the lecture? Can you relate this to social work in your country.

References:


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