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Caught in the vortex: Can Local Government Community Development Workers in South Africa succeed?¹

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Abstract

In 2003, following an announcement to Parliament by President Thabo Mbeki, a new cadre of public servants—community development workers—was introduced in South Africa to serve as agents of change within local government municipalities charged with the responsibility for social and economic development. This paper examines the context of this initiative in South Africa, the role of community development workers, the progress of the Community Development Workers Program, and the challenges faced by this emerging occupational group. It begins with a discussion of community development theory and highlights the difficulties for community development workers as state employees whose goal is to foster support for and participation in government-initiated community development programs. It shows that the work of community development workers is a far cry from the hortatory theory of community development. Given the institutional confusion within which they operate and harsh practice realities in South Africa, success seems most unlikely.

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Community development is an elusive concept which is widely used by academics, policy makers and practitioners (Davids, Theron, & Maphunye, 2005). Each defines it in their own idiosyncratic way as suits their purposes. Thus, for De Beer and Swanepoel (1998: 1), community development exists “in an Alice in Wonderland world where words still mean what you want them to mean”. For the most part, however, community development is used to describe the collective actions of local grassroots people to improve their lives. But, as Craig (2007: 335) notes, governments have continually failed “properly to engage in ‘bottom-up’ development” despite the fact that “‘community empowerment’ is virtually government policy” (Shaw, 2007: 24). Community development thus, more often than not, refers to top-down government enabled, orchestrated or engineered participation (Hodgson, 2004) in which the government retains its command and control mandate (Newman, 2001). This is true of South Africa, which remains a deeply divided, unequal society despite numerous social development initiatives over the past fifteen years since the transition to a new democracy (Bollens, 2000; Dixon, 2006; Gray, 2006; Gray & Mitchell, 2007; Gray & Lombard, 2008; Hölscher, 2008; Engelbrecht, 2008; Mubangizi, 2008; Ruiters, 2007). Enormous challenges remain in South Africa where:

- 61% of the African population is poor compared with only 1% of the white population numbering five million.
- Unemployment remains high with an official unemployment rate of 30% and unofficial rates of 50%
- Urban disintegration characterises poor people’s lives ravaged by AIDS and HIV, declining health, and crime and insecurity (Dixon, 2006). For example, in 2006, life expectancy for black males fell from 59.5 to 35 years (Ruiters, 2007).

Community development theory

The theory of community development emphasises the importance of local responsibility through community participation, ownership, self-determination, empowerment, and capacity building where the community development worker plays a facilitative role. In theory, community development involves working with local people—grassroots communities—to give them a voice, i.e., to have a say in what various—public sector planners and decision makers—have in mind for them, to give them control over what happens in their community, to make them believe that even though they are poor and feel disempowered, they have rights, and so on. It is ostensibly about social justice though some question whether it is rather a form of government devolution of responsibility onto poor communities (Hodgson, 2004), especially since there has been little research on the effectiveness of community development which is largely theory and value rather than empirically driven. Why then do governments continue to pursue policies of community development in the face of a lack of concrete evidence that it works?

Of central importance is what constitutes ‘community’ for critics note that this hothouse of social capital (Putnam, 2000)—the social glue that holds the community together—is used strategically as a spray-on solution (Bryson & Mowbray, 1981) to devolve social responsibility from neoliberal governments onto local people—poor individuals and families and, more often than not, women—who bear the brunt of the burden of participation. Thus community places poor people—women—at the centre of development embroiling them in a process which ostensibly enables them to reach their full potential or empower themselves through participating in activities that are said to be responsive to problems and issues within their communities—usually not of their

own making. The value of community ties in well with the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, i.e., the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. In the social sphere, this might be seen as a normative device for “inculcating morals and values that facilitate social cohesion” (Etzioni, in Hodgson, 2004: 141), i.e., social capital. In the political sphere, however, *ubuntu* is used to emphasise the need for unity or social solidarity *with the state* among the citizenry or civil society, as it is more often referred to in South Africa.

Bryson and Mowbray (1981) were highly critical of the way in which the conservative political—welfare reform—agenda blurred the structural causes of social problems through additive use of the amorphous term community and later social capital (Mowbray, 2004). Rather than achieving any fundamental change, community development preserves the status quo through its apolitical conception of social problems, its consensual approach, and its legitimization of existing social relations by emphasising unity and solidarity rather than diversity and conflict. It promotes an idealistic notion of community control as a cure-all when, as Mendes (2006: 3) rightly points out, “local community control can just as easily lead to the social exclusion ... of marginal and disadvantaged groups”. Likewise social capital, or the building of trust and social cohesion among community groups, is always seen as positive when in reality cohesive community groups can and do perpetrate harsh and unjust behaviour on groups that differ from them. As Cox (2007: 510) notes, “certain forms of solidarity can be very toxic”.

The ploy of social capital and community control ignores government’s use of community participation and capacity building as a means of devolving its responsibilities onto poor communities and of ignoring the structural causes of social

problems. In effect, there is no real devolution of power onto local communities. Instead community capacity-building initiatives are often accompanied by reduced state expenditure on social programs which effectively devolves responsibilities for care onto local community organisations and usually onto women. Within this environment there is little hope for radical community action. Instead community development becomes a program of action (Luloff & Bridger, 2003) purposively directed toward altering local conditions for the *government's* ends. One needs to be mindful that Putnam (2000) promoted his stratagem of creating social capital by insisting it would not be expensive for government and it has become part of public policy in the face of harsh criticism (Mowbray, 2004; Portes, 1998). Furthermore, Putnam (2000) did not coin the term and other social theorists, like Bourdieu (1980, 1986) and Coleman (1988), have emphasised the way in which it perpetuates class differences and the distribution of power, privilege and economic inequality. It enables government to turn a blind eye to public policy which entrenches inequality and social division. Though he was a professor of public policy, Mowbray (2004: 10) believes that Putnam “displays virtually no interest in power and politics ... or any fundamental political or economic reforms”. Thus social capital is used as-if civil society alone can solve public issues when Putnam himself rejected this idea (Mowbray, 2004).

This has certainly been the case in South Africa with its notion of “developmental local government” (Marais & Botes, 2006: 379) where local community—economic—development initiatives focusing mainly on job creation have been an overwhelming failure. The limitations of *local* community development are brought home by Bhattacharyya (2004:24) who emphasises the need for the countless

social organisations practising community development to come together so as to collectively exercise political clout:

Local action, centred in neighbourhoods and villages, is not adequate to the task of finding enduring solutions to social problems. The local problems are local manifestations of problems whose sources lie further upstream. Community development thus calls for simultaneous action at both micro [local community] and macro [public policy] levels (Bhattacharyya, 2004:24, original emphasis).

For example, to improve health we need local education campaigns as well as national strategies that alter the environment that generates ill-health, such as poverty, overcrowding, pollution, and so on. To deal with crime and violence, we need local neighbourhood watches as well as national crime prevention strategies (Dixon, 2006). We “must address macro factors while working in microenvironments” (Bhattacharyya, 2004: 28) but to be effective we must be strategic and carefully select our target mounting sufficient evidence and political muscle for decisive action. We need to force the government to assess the impacts of public policy on social capital, not just social policy but also economic policy that directly affects the distribution of income and wealth bearing in mind Bourdieu’s (1980, 1986) notion of social capital as reproducing the structure of privilege and relationships of power. Social capital keeps the poor poor. It focuses attention on localised community capacity-building programs and fails to recognise the administrative and policy domains that have the greatest influence on social capital, especially those that affect income distribution; access to health, education, and employment; race, ethnic, and gender relations; and corporate behaviour (Mowbray, 2004).

In the case of South Africa, local community development initiatives are prone to failure as most municipalities do not have the capacity, skills or leadership to implement developmental local government policy. It is a terrain marked by “institutional confusion” (Marais & Botes, 2006: 384) not least in relation to the Community Developments Workers Program. As Marais and Botes (2006) noted, in South Africa the Constitution (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 1996) makes local government responsible for the social and economic development of communities. This, and other policies, such as the White Paper on Social Welfare (RSA, 1997), White Paper on Local Government (RSA, 1998) and the Municipal Systems Act 32 (RSA, 2000), sets the scene for the government’s positive disposition towards social and community development. However, as Dixon (2006: 183) notes, translating policy into practice is no easy task. Marais and Botes (2006) have described the local economic development program through the Department of Provincial and Local Government and its failure to create sustainable community enterprises beyond the grant-driven phase of projects. In this paper, we take a closer look at the progress of a fairly recent program, the Community Development Workers Program (CDWP), also intended to enhance community development at the local government level.

The Community Development Workers Program

In South Africa community development has always been a broad, multidisciplinary activity practised by a wide array of occupations, i.e., professionals (e.g., social workers) and non-professionals (e.g., health workers and agricultural extension officers), as well as volunteers and unpaid workers. In 2003, however, a new occupational category—community development worker (CDW)—was introduced by

President Thabo Mbeki⁴ when he announced a national Community Development Workers Program (CDWP) to be coordinated by the Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) with the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) taking responsibility for its initial implementation. The CDWs would be employed by the DPLG and would be based in local government offices to “act as the link between the municipality and outlying townships, small towns and rural areas”. (Foundation for Contemporary Research’s, 2006: 42).

This was a complex and unwieldy program from the start being based in one department (DPLG), overseen by another (the DPSA), with yet another—municipalities—being the locus of their day-to-day activities where the municipal manager—through the office of the executive head of local government—would monitor their work and report to the DPLG on the program’s progress. In addition, the South African Management Development Institute (SAMDI, 2005) was commissioned to develop the 12-month training program for community development workers⁵. By June 2007, 3,614 cadets had completed the requisite CDWP training. What then has been the progress of the Community Development Workers’ program since its launch in 2003?

⁴ See <http://www.info.gov.za/issues/cdw.htm> and http://www.southafrica.info/ess_info/sa_glance/social_delivery/update/communityworkers.htm Accessed on 22/01/08

⁵ The training comprised a combination of theoretical or classroom learning and on-site training which could vary from proportionally from a 50-50 to a 30-70% split. The training was provided by several universities in Pretoria, Cape Town, and Bloemfontein. It led to a level 4—one-year post-school—qualification (National Qualification Framework, South Africa Qualification Authority, www.saqa.org.za). By way of comparison level 5 requires a two-year post-school diploma; level 6, a three-year university degree; and level 7, a four-year professional degree, e.g., social work.

The progress of the CDWP

Given the limited ability of municipalities to supervise these workers, as noted by Marais and Botes (2006) above, not to mention the severe hardship experienced by poor communities in South Africa, even the most enthusiastic community development worker would be hardpressed to persevere amid the institutional confusion in the implementation of the CDWP. The challenge was compounded not only by the apathy of communities mistrustful of government but also their suspicion of these new government spies, as they saw them. Nurturing a culture of participation is a huge challenge even in the most promising situations but is especially difficult for those involved in top-down, state-led community development programs. A recent study by the Foundation for Contemporary Research, which is monitoring the implementation of the CDWP in the Western Cape province found, following focus groups involving 53 CDWs, that their relationship with key stakeholders—councilors and ward committee members, most of whom were voluntary workers—was tenuous at best (Mackay & Davids, 2006). There was an overwhelming lack of understanding about the CDWs' roles and responsibilities with mounting tension as the CDWP progressed. The CDWs' brief was broad and the work environment was politically charged. Power issues were exacerbated by confusion as to who was in charge of these workers and to whom they were accountable. This led to dysfunctional relationships and a lack of cooperation. Local government officials and councillors felt threatened by the CDWs' direct line of reporting to the DPLG, regarded them with suspicion and were afraid lest they usurp their role. The CDWs felt undervalued, unappreciated and underestimated. They expressed concern that local government officials and councillors used them as a buffer between themselves and disgruntled communities thus putting their lives at risk.

Councillors, on the other hand, felt undermined by these ‘loose cannons’, as they referred to them, who refused to take instructions from them and who completely lacked accountability (Mackay & Davids, 2006). Tensions arose between CDWs and ward committee members as most committee members were voluntary while CDWs were paid employees. The absence of a change management system to usher in the CDWP had effectively placed the burden of infrastructural and logistical arrangements on councillors and ward committees who had not been consulted on the implementation of the CDW training program, or on discussions on the CDWs’ roles and functions and who, most importantly, were ill-equipped for this role. While CDWs reported back to the provincial government, there was very little guidance or support as had been promised to CDWs from DPLG officials.

CDWs too were not a homogenous group and there was a great deal of infighting between the various training cohorts with many remaining unemployed. Those who were employed performed diverse tasks and responsibilities with limited resources. But it was unclear who was responsible for them. Most were under the impression that it was the municipality’s responsibility while municipalities believed that it was the DPLG’s responsibility. Hence there has been a great deal of uncertainty, confusion and negativity about the CDWP leaving all involved deeply frustrated and disillusioned with many predicting yet another failed program. Clearly, there are major issues facing community development workers in South Africa, not least the clash of community and government interests in a context where the neoliberal economic agenda is at odds with the goals of social development.

First, poverty reduction programs, conceptualised in the prime of the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) (ANC, 1994; RSA, 1994) and its

people-centred development mantra, proved difficult to implement as grassroots development programs were forced to operate in a market-oriented environment of efficiency, cost-cutting and cost recovery brought in by the more conventional neoliberal economic program of Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR, 1996). This orthodox neoliberal economic agenda, which effectively “derailed social reform” (Ruiters, 2007: 489), has become further entrenched by South Africa’s desire to be a global player, to foster economic growth, attract foreign investment, tighten monetary policy, liberalise trade, reduce budget deficits, and so on. In such an environment, it is almost impossible for community development workers to balance the lengthy, time-consuming work of community engagement, participation and consultation with market-oriented discipline. Hence they tend to concentrate on concrete tasks, many of which have nothing to do with community development, such as assisting people to apply for identity documents which are needed to secure welfare payments and informing them about and helping them apply for social grants⁶.

Secondly, the poorly developed infrastructure and ongoing poverty makes the strengthening of civil society and empowerment and capacity-building of local communities an arduous task. It is especially challenging in rural areas—where community development is most needed—despite the Integrated Rural Development Strategy (Office of the President, 2000). What infrastructure there is remains uncoordinated with diverse agencies—government, non-government, and community-based organisations and private companies—involved in the implementation of community development programs. Many of these have to compete for scarce

⁶ This is an aberration in the government’s so-called developmental welfare system where the number of people on social security grants is growing exponentially while the pool of taxpayers remains constant. Concerns have been raised about the sustainability of this social security system (see Gray & Mitchell, 2007).

resources. Consequently, they operate in silos and work at cross-purposes with one another. As noted by Bhattacharyya (2004), community organisations need to form powerful collaborative networks for community development to be effective. Isolated local community development projects are not equal to the task. However, the will of local communities—and theory of self-determination—seems to run counter to effective coordinated strategies. This is partly the result of resistance to externally imposed community development programs without negotiation with beneficiaries, “or careful thinking through the(ir) potential effects on the poor” (Ruiters, 2007: 491). Local community drives for autonomy militate against a broader coordinated change strategy.

Thirdly, despite the conducive policy environment and the supportive legislation, the government’s inability to deliver efficient municipal services and the ongoing refusal of consumers to pay for them—mostly because they cannot afford them—have led to severe difficulties in South Africa’s 284 municipalities and 2000 wards which constitute the locus of the CDWP (Municipal Systems Act 32, 2000; Ruiters, 2007). Since 2001, the municipal councils have had ‘indigent lists’—as the state labels poor people—which segregate those in the market who can pay for municipal services, like rates, water and electricity, from those who cannot and are thus at the mercy of the state (Ruiters, 2007) resulting in the perpetuation of a two-tier system. The ‘indigent’ are those who need community development.

Fourthly, most policy initiatives require a high degree of intergovernmental and intersectoral collaboration which is almost impossible to achieve. While this might be sound thinking in social development blueprints, like the RDP, it is extremely difficult to achieve in practice. Instead, when programs span sectors and levels of government, confusion reigns supreme. This is especially evident in the case of CDWs based in local

municipalities with direct access to provincial and national government who are ostensibly accountable to their local communities represented by municipal councillors and ward committees. Given the latter's distrust of the CDWP, cooperative work in local municipalities is almost impossible. One of the challenges, therefore, relates to how the CDW relates to structures which have diverse (and often conflicting) interests. The uneasy relationship between local communities and government is a recurrent theme in the literature on public participation where community development workers are placed in the invidious position of being "in and against the state" (Craig, Taylor, & Shaw, in Banks & Orton, 2005: 1). This is made especially difficult when the community development literature and the CDW's value base emphasises the role of promoting community interests. There is no escaping the fact that CDWs are employed by the state to support and promote the state's development agenda. How then do they simultaneously support groups and communities to challenge aspects of the state's policies and practices? Perhaps this is a role mainly for community practitioners in NGOs.

Finally, possibly the biggest challenge facing CDWs is their lack of 'professional' organisation and their uneasy relationship with the social work profession, which has laid claim to community development as part of its *modus operandi*. Clearly, community developers need to 'professionalise', i.e., to organise themselves as a unified body, to give themselves a voice, to establish standards for community development practice, to lobby government, to draw attention to their contribution to social development, and so on.

Conclusion

This paper has raised several issues about definitions of community and ideas about social capital. In particular, it has examined the relationship between micro community development programs and macro economic policy in South Africa. It also highlights issues relating to professional education and qualifications and the role of community development work, which might have wider relevance in contexts where the roles of human service professionals are being reconfigured (Gray, 2000). For example, new occupational categories, like 'social service professionals' in South Africa and 'social care workers' in the UK, have blurred the boundaries between established professionals, like social workers, and newly emerging occupations, like community development workers (Gray & Wint, 1998). Against these professional concerns, a huge gap between the hortatory theory of community development and its practice remains. This has been demonstrated through a critical examination of the work of community development workers in South Africa. The paper argues that the institutional confusion within which these government-employed workers community development workers operate and harsh practice realities characterised by widespread poverty, crime and AIDS severely hampers their capacity to implement effective community development programs. The most they can do is paper over the cracks, respond humanely where their services are requested and work diligently to build positive relationships with local communities. They should treat the confusion surrounding their role as an opportunity to negotiate their way into local municipalities in a way that is responsive to the unique circumstances in which they find themselves. And they need to network with one another to develop a strong occupational association en route to professional recognition. Rather than wait for government to sort things out, they need to be

proactive and advocate strongly, not only for themselves, but also for the communities they serve.

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