

Understanding Community Development

Going back to communities – a global trend

DDRC's effort at community inclusion echoes a silent but growing global trend to turn to communities for innovations in social development, entrepreneurship and human services. What has brought this trend about? One immediate factor is that governments and other institutions traditionally charged with organizing collective human life are now less able to do so as a result of funding cuts to social programs. Even more important, the prevalence of social problems despite generations of government programs questions the affectivity of present institutional models.

On the other hand, many communities who have stood up to face economic and social challenges are rediscovering and reclaiming their capacities to manage themselves, to rebuild the relationships that define community, and to track their own future. In a number of countries in the South where government programs are almost absent, communities of small producers have established their own local credit, health and education programs. Here in Calgary, many community groups are involved in similar community development efforts.

Communities face up to challenges

In our modern society, economic insecurity, isolation and other social problems put tremendous pressures on people, threatening their communal relationships with families, neighbours and co-workers. The weakening of a sense of community and shared purpose has made people susceptible to isolation and to intolerance and discrimination especially against those who they perceive as “different.”

On the positive side, many try to overcome these challenges by reviving and strengthening the collective capacities of their communities. There are many stories of such efforts in our own city. In response to growing concerns for families and youth at risk in their area, neighbourhoods in northeast McKnight have come together to put up their own community resource centre. What is innovative in the effort is that the residents themselves, not the service providers or the government, are deciding how the centre will be developed. In the greater Forest Lawn area community groups help enable families to survive tremendous economic and social difficulties and create strong networks of support. Others in the same are breaking through isolation and cultural division. Some communities like Hillhurst-Sunnyside and Thorncliffe have over the years built strong community spirit around common collective experiences and a sense of common cause.

As people seek a sense of belonging and meaning in an increasingly impersonal urban culture, new communities are springing up, defined more by common interest or purpose rather than by place. Some are transient and temporary like hobby clubs.

Others are moved by a shared long-term vision to pursue social change and establish alternatives. Calgary's growing Bow Chinook Barter Community for instances bring together individuals and local businesses seeking economic alternatives that are more people-friendly and ecologically sustainable. In the same light, DDRC can be seen as a community of purpose.

Building Social Trust – the aim of community development

The aim of community development is to help communities develop common purpose and to build social trust, the web of relationships and attitudes that enables them to work collectively. Social trust is not constant, it increases or diminishes depending on how people are brought together by common experience and purpose or divided by the lack of it. One could immediately see signs if a community has an ample stock of social trust - an active community association, a lot of informal activities happening, an abundance of self-help networks, youth groups, busy sidewalks where people stop to talk to each other, a general feeling of safety.

In such a community, individuals take on different roles in a web of relationships – as neighbour, friend, participant in an activity, member of an organization, a voice in a townhall discussion, a regular customer in a neighbourhood watering hole, etc.

Even in communities where social trust is weak or weakened by overwhelming economic and social pressures, there will still be individuals and groups playing the role of community builders. In some instances, outside agencies and allies take on this role.

What community development means to DDRC

Understanding all these, what does it mean for us to seek community inclusion? At the individual level, it is to build meaningful relationships, to seek personal choices in an atmosphere of acceptance and belonging, to claim one's rightful place in a community. It means becoming part of the social trust – to contribute to it and to benefit from it. In the end it means to pursue a more meaningful life and to live an number of valued roles – as a neighbour, friend, volunteer, co-worker in a complex network of relationships rather than just being a client of service agencies.

For communities we link up with, it is an opportunity to recognize, understand and overcome barriers to inclusion. Even communities with strong social trust are in constant struggle to be inclusive, to be owned by those traditionally marginalized. Communities are like chains, their strength lies on their weakest links. As the adage goes, if one is denied, all are denied – because the one that is denied has gifts from which the others can benefit.

For our part, it entails a shift in thinking, a paradigm shift. To see ourselves less as providers of service and more as facilitators of relationships, enablers of dreams and advocates of rights.

It also means doing our share of community building so that over the long run, communities do become more inclusive and nurturing and acquire deep capacities for care. Hopefully, in the long run, we will rely less on people's charity and curiosity for the links that we make, but on their sense of solidarity and respect, their sense of community.

This article was written by Cesar Cala, former DDRC employee, 1997. Bonny Johansson, DDRC Community Development, provided the updated Initiatives in community development.

Initiatives in community development

So while we do individual connection, some of our efforts need to be geared toward community development and building social trust. In some ways we are starting to do this. As active members of Vibrant Communities Calgary, we are involved in advocating for a living wage policy for the City of Calgary and sharing information on other strategies for the creation of vibrant workplaces.

We have a long history with Sustainable Calgary and recently indicated our intention to participate in the establishment of the Sustainable Equitable Transportation Charter. The Charter will identify key issues and actions that if taken will make a difference. We will be involved in community education and information through our work with the Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative – Human Rights Domain.

We continue to link up with Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, the Centre for Newcomers and other immigrant serving agencies for the purposes of greater cross-cultural understanding and better service provision. In partnership with other community groups, we are looking at ways to engage youth.

All these initiatives entail the meaningful participation of the people we serve and their support circles. The participation of DDRC staff is likewise crucial. Hopefully, we pursue these as efforts of our own community of purpose.

If you are interested to know more or be active in any of the initiatives mentioned above, please call **Bonny Johansson at 403-240-3111** or email to: bonnyj@ddrcc.com.