

Building the Foundations of Community

The Basis for a Community Development Process

Introduction

Society has clearly come to a crossroads, especially so in developed countries. It is rapidly becoming evident that all growth has its limits. The very foundations of developed society and the world's ecology have been shaken in order to expand production, consumption and fiscal wealth. The imperative for new theories, models and processes of development is indisputable.

The starting point for a new approach can be found in the original concepts of Community Development. This concept with its focus on people and community provided many of the elements and institutional components of the foundations for much of the developed world's more advanced socio/economic concepts; latterly most have been diminished or destroyed. The basis of this essay is to explore the challenges and outline the necessity of getting back to the fundamentals of true community development to provide a framework for development that is more equitable and sustainable.

The Challenge – From the global to the local

In our haste to “create wealth” most have ignored or dismissed the fundamentals of development that is focused on people and rooted in community. The model of development based on expansion and growth with consumerism as the engine and only fiscal wealth as the measure of success, has not only failed, but resulted in perhaps irreparable damage to many societies. The results show that excessive consumerism is often damaging to health and overproduction is ruinous to the natural world.

This same thesis applies to knowledge as well. There is a limit to the real information that can be produced and consumed by any human mind much less used to create wisdom – the basis of knowledge. The concepts of consumption and production as economic engines and knowledge as a source of wisdom have become corrupted by the very flawed processes developed through the expediency felt necessary to provide “growth”.

The same can be said for communities as we change and force migration patterns under the guise of progress. The ability of cities to absorb more people is hindered by the capacity of community to be built. The development of new infrastructure to house new arrivals in ever expanding cities is only eclipsed by their alienation. Physical infrastructure and institutional capacity are miniscule components of community, compared to the education and acclimatization required for humans to co-exist. Co-existence is the real challenge of community and co-existence has never been the strong suite of human nature. History is full of stories of the struggles and wars of the inadequacies of humans to co-exist in harmony for extended periods.

Economy is another story in itself, in our endeavours to create ever greater and cheaper production we build and collapse economies with haste. No consideration is given to the human waste left behind or the harm to people as we create and collapse these production zones. The ecological mess that is left is another story all together. The reality is that

consumption and production is centered on the few while the destruction is among the many.

The wasteland of vacant factories, polluted environments and destroyed communities, left in the wake of those in a haste to accumulate more is one of humanities greatest travesties. The level of misinformation and flawed knowledge creating panic and fear among the masses at each new revelation is beyond precedent. The damaged minds and souls are beyond comprehension; much less human compassion. Perhaps history will record this era one of humanity's greatest catastrophes, which has resulted in the diminishment if not the loss of human compassion and conscience.

The financial crisis impacting most of the developed world and subsequently the developing world, is supposed to have its roots in flawed mortgages (sub-prime) and how they were shared among investors. Yet, one has only to be older and not necessarily wiser to suggest that perhaps it's more the result of the decline in values, the gradual collapse of democratic processes and the emergence, especially in the west, of government systems more into control than democratic governance. Someone wiser would point out, that mostly, the resultant transition emanates from the very human element of greed.

A Transformation

The transformation being experienced in the world today is not just another economic slowdown or market correction, but a shift so profound in the makeup of the world that it will emerge totally different. One could suggest that change brings chaos, while transformations provide shift. The economic and social balance of the world has shifted whether we wish to believe it or not. The social and economic structures within the world have seen gradual shifts, much like those caused by minor earthquakes, every decade since the 1940's. With earthquakes, the minor ones are the precursors to the larger one that will transform the landscape. There are many examples of these small seismic shifts over the past 60 years. In nature it is the imbalance that creates the fissures that produce the earthquakes that cause the shifts. The fault line for this current transformational quake is very evident.

Economically the shift of wealth from the many to the few is profound. The shift was enabled by the belief that money was wealth and currency had value, in and by itself, and would sustain its own proliferation. Conceivably, no one recognized that currency, without a basis in something of real wealth, is only paper without worth. This shift was exacerbated by the neutering of the social structures created to provide balance and future security in the early stages of our last transformation. Perhaps no one really understood that the basis of these social institutions and programs were tied to the ability to generate and distribute wealth more uniformly.

So, in our current economic transformation, we refer to past recessions, previous economic shifts and even major economic depressions, as if this time, our knowledge and learning from all of these will provide the ultimate answer. There are suggestions in current rhetoric that, this time, our solutions will ensure it never happens again. This

implies that, in fact, learning and history will stop with this crisis; such is our arrogance. This aspect of human nature coupled with greed is at the basis of the crisis which we face.

We appear to live in a world out of tune with life. Similar economic and social imbalances pervade every country. Any real sense of spiritual well-being appears elusive, perhaps even daunting. The push for more, and right now, has produced a concentration of wealth, perhaps unparalleled in history. During other eras, at least people had some value, if only for manual labour in order to produce food; today it is machinery, technology and hype that count.

It appears that people are expendable, not only at work but in life, a commodity to be bartered, bought and sold at will, and disposed of, when any sense of usefulness is waning. Slavery is alive and well in most of the modern world despite our boast of superior knowledge and a continuing cry against the abuse of human rights.

The basis of most socio-economic development activities today, which are money driven and results oriented to demonstrate fiscal value, exacerbates these issues. There is more focus on accounting and results and little on accountability and transformational change (which is the basis of any development activity). Perhaps this relates to our scientific and technical approach to life and living which influences not only agriculture and production but, as well, relationships, education and spiritual well being.

Basic human and societal necessities are now usually offered as just in time services, to fit within people's busy work schedules which are compulsory to life and living. The work is the means to generate the income required to keep up with the push on people for consumerism; the world's current economic engine. The destructive results of this mechanized approach to life is evident not only in our failing food security but in our imploding economies and dysfunctional societies.

Local, community and development organizations, and their employees and volunteers, now the main providers of these "services" have been under duress because of the economic and social transitions affecting the world. This appears not about to abate. Added to this phenomenon they are facing more and more restrictive funding regimes and almost infinite financial accountability challenges. The time required to identify funding, generate the detailed proposals required and then achieve the stringent and detailed reporting is draining both in vitality and enthusiasm. This restricts the ability of such organizations to provide the energy and time to provide for the growing people and community support needs and activities. Measuring the value and work of community organizations has long been a challenge, perhaps, more so, with the gradual increases of government support to this sector over the past decades.

Latterly most development organizations bought into the "business model" that recently failed. They have been pressured to adopt accounting concepts developed in production, and finance, as if human development and life relates to such processes. Now of course is the push for social accounting and auditing as a means to evaluate the work of local

development organizations and NGOs. There has been a significant shift over the past few decades in governmental support to these organizations and a push lately to results based management, and as such, more emphasis is being placed on outcomes relative to the expenditure. NGOs and developmental organizations are having to contend with more systematic scrutiny of their organizational activities are being pushed to evaluate and articulate the value of the work that they are doing, unfortunately based on a more industrial mode of evaluation.

Social accounting and auditing is no guarantee that the work of local organizations will be improved, accountability will be achieved or that communities will be transformed. At best these processes will allow credible organizations to demonstrate better their credibility but will cost in time and effectiveness. In both businesses and governments throughout the world we are seeing the practices of accounting and auditing lacking in its ability to identify indiscretions and out right corruption, as a result of human ingenuity (and greed), often collapsing both the corporations and the governments involved.

There is no substitute for openness, inclusivity, and transparency (key elements of any democratic and community process) in business, government or community, the measurement of this has much more to do with honesty and trust than any organized system of accounting or auditing.

Community Development – a flawed model

Interestingly, it is during these particular times that it appears that the concept of Community Development in one form or another (whatever its current flavor or name) becomes co-opted by governments as the “answer” and why it has become in vogue over the last few years. Local initiative and involvement are again being espoused as the route forward. Similarly, as in other times, I would suggest, it provides those that would advocate authority a release from their responsibility, as they promote more local control, devolution and individual responsibility. By doing so governments can deflect accountability yet, retain their position of power. But, with all this posturing is real community building happening or are organizations being forced to follow some path developed by bureaucrats, consultants and academics at a distance. As in previous eras when the crisis is past will it be relegated back to the margins. Is there really any understanding of community development as a continuum, not just a perceived medium of retrenchment during periods of dramatic or rapid change to be utilised by those in power when their own solutions are found wanting?

Community responses to the widespread changes being experienced are being delineated, defined and explained in different ways, in many languages and with different terminologies and are designed with many societal biases. As a result, community processes are being defined using various terms (for example, Community Development, Community Economic Development, Local Development, Community Regeneration, Social Economy, Social Solidarity Economy, etc.). These variations in definition and use of different terminology more than anything are creating a crisis of complexity which deflects people from the true nature of the activity required, that of creating a process to facilitate the transformational change required for people to cope and progress.

Yet, often people are engaged in a myriad of activities unrelated to the real requirements of their communities and its transformation. This usually results from priorities set by distant funders including governments and resultant inadequate programs. It might be argued that community is becoming lost in the quagmire of complexity created around the language, terminologies and quest by some for dominance of one bureaucratic or academic theory over another. In fact, it is evident that community has now been relegated to just economy which, in turn, means money; therefore community development has taken on the mantra of business and finance including its terminology.

In most development processes advocated, economy has become the central focus without the full realization that economy in and by itself is not an end, but only a component part of the means to achieve societal well being. In fact, because the economy is now defined as only fiscal wealth and fails to encompass the human aspects of what genuinely creates an economy, it usually usurps society.

The processes of “community development” have been compromised in their current incarnations, as we ignore the realities of human existence, in attempts to fast track the creation of ever larger urban living spaces and abandon rural environs with haste. In this current era many of the community fundamentals have been lost or stripped from Community Development processes, with the rush to embrace each “new” and “alternate” business concept. Many think that it is possible to fast track the process and do not understand that Community Development is a genuine process of human education and improvement and has always been a long term endeavour.

The Result

Let me begin by explaining what I believe we have perhaps forgotten or maybe just muddled:

- We seem to have forgotten many aspects of our history, instead framing everything that we do in the present, thinking that this is how it has always been, when in fact many current aspects of modern living extend back very few years.
- We have clouded our cultures, which embodies our very roots, our values and the inherent philosophical basis for our way of life, with a popular culture foisted on us by mass marketing and media.
- We have diminished the basis for our society rooted in family and developed in community; one could argue that we have difficulty even remembering or understanding what is “community”.
- We have forgotten that real human and community development emerges from the hearts, minds and dreams of people; not from grants, programs or projects.

Perhaps these lapses are only indicators of the fact that, the ways and means that we used to organise and manage will not fit in a world where many aspects of our society have changed. The dilemma is that we tend to want to dismiss the very values of our society, yet retain the very structures and practices that we developed to organise and manage ourselves in the past, exactly as is happening in banking and business. This is further complicated by the trend for quick fixes and the adaption of the myriad of experimental

concepts that have neither been fully explored nor truly tested in society. In fact, many are hare-brained schemes, often scams, developed to create rapid wealth for its perpetrators and to take advantage of the weaknesses and insecurities of people.

It is amazing how the words of values, of culture, of community and of democracy seem to permeate every spectrum of our society whether it be private or public, politically left or right – it even surrounds technology (even when we reference the internet). Yet, the challenge of human development and true human growth is left wanting in our rush to placate those in charge of our ever-expanding dysfunctional society - a society which has reached the apex of its ability to consume and the level of endurance of those who are disadvantaged. The wasteland of human despair and fear that is evident even eclipses the environmental wasteland that our grandchildren and great grandchildren will have to endure.

Unraveling these flawed and corrupted processes, rebuilding local institutions and recreating community economies will not happen quickly, nor will it be easy and will require involvement by many. It will require a new awakening, a rebuilding of consciousness and much nurturing and overcoming a resistance to change, even when this change is beneficial. This perhaps is our greatest hurdle, while convincing those in charge of our institutions and thus societal processes to address these issues is perhaps as great a challenge. These are the two main reasons development is most often deflected from true community processes, relegated to public and private programs and projects and to each new fad that happens to appear.

A Belief

Personally, I believe that the essence of community is about feelings. Feelings emanate from knowing and knowing comes from awareness. The more that we become aware of our environment, our circumstances and those who share the world with us, the more our knowledge grows. Expanded knowledge creates stronger feelings, deeper relationships, and an enhanced sense of our inter-connectivity, resulting in stronger communities.

It is my contention that community begins when two people share. The sharing is what creates economy, social well-being, spiritual comfort and subsequently lifestyle. Community Development is neither the beginning nor the end; it is the process and the measure of our ability to share. It relates to people, their aspirations, their dreams and fundamentally, their own efforts to bring these to reality. Community truly requires the connecting of individual spirits to share. Thus each sharing is a new beginning, a new development and a new reality.

Each sharing involves a process of introspection, reflection and perspective. It requires understanding, patience and trust, all arduous activities that are stressful and often encompass pain: ultimately the real human avoidance issue.

Community – some insights

Community is more than the sum parts of physical infrastructure, much more than the social environment in which people live and fundamentally more than the services which people have come to expect. Community is the primarily intangible environment where people co-exist, raise families and build memories. The challenge of building community capacity and subsequently using this capacity to create and maintain a community economy is fraught with perils, some internal and many more which are external. The process, through which this is accomplished, because of its nebulous nature and long term necessities, evolves consistently, encountering many obstacles which often create vulnerability. This vulnerability is a reflection and a microcosm of the community and the people who live there and their own vulnerable nature.

Sudden shocks are very unsettling, the fragility is in the moment, in the short shocks that rattle people, shake their confidence and open the avenues to potential despair. Some moments last a long time and some are so disruptive that they totally unsettle the foundations of community resulting in long lasting effects with the possibility of eventual dissolution of community and all that it means. Once the environment of community is shattered, the sense of community is lost and has to be rebuilt in a whole new context; which is what many communities are now addressing. In many places community will be lost forever leaving its populace adrift.

In true communities, people rally, come together and find resolutions to whatever the problems that must be faced. But, in these types of communities, people have commitment to each other and to the intangible environment that is community. In times of radical change people have to dig deep within themselves and ask - what next.

Community Development – its challenges

The development of community transformational processes has always faced many challenges, not the least being the unwillingness of people to fully see the root causes of the changes happening or to accept the circumstances that result. But this aspect of human nature is compounded in today's world by the complexities that are being created around the very processes that might assist. These complexities, as indicated, relate to language and terminology, organizational and institutional creation and a belief by some that there is one uniform ideology that can be created to solve the problems of everyone. There are even some who believe that there must be just one ideology. Community Development implies togetherness, understanding and cooperation based on simple values, not a single ideology.

What might be more beneficial for most people is to take a step back and take an in-depth look at these transformations, their causes and how a community might respond in a meaningful way to whatever forces (and there are usually many) causing the imbalances and changes. Perhaps what might be realized is that what is first required is a movement (of people), not just the creation of organizations or institutions. What might be understood is that first people need development skills and tools, not necessarily physical or other constructs. What might be appreciated is that values (what it is people really value) have more relevance than any uniform ideology. And what might be of most

value to a local community is realistic (and targeted) investment rather than charity and grants.

First of all what must be understood and agreed is that there is not some mystical end that is to be reached but that all are engaged in a continuous process of human transformation. This process relates to thinking and doing but most necessary there has to be a belief in being and a necessity of belonging – thus valuing ourselves and feeling a part of a whole. These key beliefs evolve fundamentally from values and culture, which require preservation (and evolution) so that new generations not only have foundational beliefs but a true sense of their belonging. Uncovering these beliefs and values are the elemental and fundamental components of the foundational work required for meaningful community transformations to occur.

The Process – its foundations

There are many definitions, approaches and concepts which fall under what used to be simply referred to as Community Development. Currently there are many who primarily focus on the economic or social aspect within this concept. Thus efforts and resources are targeted towards a multitude of programs and projects (and their evaluation) and the community aspect gets lost.

The reality of Community Development is somewhat different, as it is founded on the basis of “people at the heart” and development as a process. It is not just the linear approach to projects and funding programs that is currently articulated and espoused. Community needs people with belief in themselves and where they live, pride in what the community stands for and a spirit to do what is required for the betterment of all. The human element is imperative: without it there is no community, no economy and no future.

The process of development and evolution, marches slowly forward as people wend their way along the road to community enlightenment, thoughtfulness and activity. This process will influence the communities social and economic environment, if it is given time. It will even influence government policy programs and services and how they are delivered to communities, but this usually takes even more time. For this to happen this community process must be given understanding, appreciation and the support to first help people in communities, especially those experiencing radical change, deal with their anguish and then their required learning. The focus of this learning has to be about themselves, their communities and the opportunities that might be available to them. It is through this learning process that vulnerabilities are shared, reality exposed, common support given and true community experienced.

In order for renewal and development to occur, any transformational process has to ensure that certain basic elements are considered:

- Human development is a pre-requisite for any transformational process and for real development.
- Social and economic organizations, institutions and instruments have to be rethought, restructured and even renewed.

- Legal frameworks need to be evaluated and revised.
- Values and principles require reflection, appreciation and understanding as do concepts of equity and equality.
- The foundational elements above, of course, relate to transformational processes that have people as a focus, a somewhat balanced society as an aim, and social and economic equality as an ideal.

True community transformational processes, relate to a concept most often referred to latterly as People- Centred Development - where people are considered the core and raison d'être of any development process. People-Centred Development most often includes many (or all) of the following elements:

- Based on values
- Relates to a process – which is continuous, evaluated and adjusted
- Founded in education (capacity), not ideology or indoctrination
- Relates to freedom as responsibility
- Built on knowledge, not control
- Sustained through inter-generational sharing and learning
- Founded on people's involvement, support and influence
- Resistance to complexity (of language, terminology, institutions, etc.)
- Implicit in togetherness, cooperation and tolerance

People-Centred Development requires positive and adequate foundations from which to work. It requires a fundamental belief in people and their abilities and capabilities to do what they need for themselves. But it requires the understanding that encouragement and support are a part of the adequate foundations that have to be built. Foundational building, often neglected to achieve some artificial goal, is perhaps the most critical element of all and often requires the most time and effort.

The steps of a truly enlightened community transformational process include the following components:

- Building connectivity (not constructs)
 - to share ideas
 - to share information
 - to share learning
 - to create common policies and development instruments
 - to create legal concepts which have genuine merit and which are transferable
- Building strong grassroots groupings (of people) which reflect shared values and common interests
- Recognizing the many aspects of community of which social and economic aspects are only two
- Recognizing that the true value of self-determination requires not a single or unitary structure but a mosaic of local community groups (some more formal than others) providing the basis of transformational thinking, actions and deeds.

A Conclusion

True development which encompasses community, social, economic and the spiritual begin with basics and focus on our human resources. Self examination and genuine contemplation of our history and our environment is crucial. Understanding the full extent of this self-knowledge, its relationship to where we live, and why we live here is fundamental. True development is a long term prospect: it is one that has been long postponed in favour of short term escape routes - routes that end up being complicated traps.

As we continue to encourage migration as a means to solve economic change and transformation, we erode the basis of community. The result is a loss of respect for the very basis of human need; that of relationships. It also negates the contribution, struggle and commitment by those who have built the many communities that now find themselves under duress.

Building community is fundamental to any healthy economy. A true community development process has not only people at its heart but respect as its guide. This includes true respect for oneself, for others, for traditions and culture and, most of all, for difference. That's why there is need for varying approaches to Community Development, but one which begins with from a basic and fundamental foundation related to human values and evolves from a process that ensures respect for the different jurisdictions and conditions in which people find themselves.

That is why there is need for a community process founded in human compassion built on human kindness and sustained through human sharing. The basis of a true Community Development process is rich in all three and encompasses the social, economic and spiritual wrapped in the sanctity of our environment. Without these fundamentals there can be no community, no development and, most of all, little by way of sustainability. But the basis of a locally created community development process will require dedicated leadership, willing people and a belief that people themselves have all the answers they need to solve the seemingly insoluble problems they now encounter.

*Written by William Pardy
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