

# Critical Social Policy

<http://csp.sagepub.com>

---

## **Community capacity-building: Something old, something new . . . ?**

Gary Craig

*Critical Social Policy* 2007; 27; 335

DOI: 10.1177/0261018307078846

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://csp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/27/3/335>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Critical Social Policy* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://csp.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://csp.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** <http://csp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/27/3/335>

## Community capacity-building: Something old, something new . . . ?<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

Fifteen years ago, the term ‘community capacity-building’ was not to be found anywhere within the policy literature. Now it is used worldwide, particularly in the context of urban policy, regeneration and social development. The paper argues that the term has been introduced as part of a political fashion but that in practice it is difficult to distinguish it from the practice of *community development*. A critique, drawing on experience worldwide, suggests that its widespread use represents a continuing failure of governments properly to engage in ‘bottom-up’ development, is built on a ‘deficit’ model of communities which fails to engage properly with their own skills, knowledge and interests, and helps to obscure structural reasons for poverty and inequality.

**Key words:** bottom-up, community development, poverty, regeneration, top-down

### Introduction

Fifteen years ago, the term ‘community capacity-building’ (CCB) was not to be found anywhere within the policy literature. Now it is ubiquitous, particularly in the context of urban policy, regeneration and social development. Indeed, by 2000, a UK report described CCB as ‘the New Holy Grail’ (Duncan and Thomas, 2000: 15), noting that the government’s major national regeneration programme contained more than 3000 separate CCB initiatives. Increasing use of the term seemed, however, to raise more questions than it answered despite the fact that, as Soares (2005) recently observed, ‘any mention of civil society seems to include the term “capacity building”’. Why is this, what does the term mean and is there anything truly distinctive about the practice of community capacity-building? This article

reviews the origins of the concept, the way in which it is currently used, in the UK and more widely, and offers a critique of this usage within the particular context of Third Way governments.

### The nature of 'community'

In understanding the meaning of CCB, we have to address, albeit briefly, the contextual language associated with it. We need first to be clear about the term 'community' itself. This is also to be found everywhere in the language of policy and politics, particularly, it seems, where politicians wish to engender a sense of well-being and consensus. Yet it remains a term also loaded with contradictions and ambiguities. The American sociologist Hillery (1964) examined the literature fifty years ago, identifying several hundred meanings, arguing that the only distinctive common characteristic was that of social interaction. Stacey's influential paper, 'The Myth of Community Studies' (1969), indeed challenged the notion that there might be an entity that sociologists could recognize as 'community'.

In the early 1980s, one commentator viewed the then enthusiasm within many national governments for the word 'community' as a cynical and superficial gloss on policy programmes, describing community as a 'spray-on additive' (Bryson and Mowbray, 1981 cited in Craig, 1989: 9). Certainly, its usage within very many recent UK public policy programmes – in community safety, community policing, community health, community education, and so on – suggests that governments hope that it will convey a sense – if not the reality – of 'community' ownership of such programmes.

The idea of 'community' – along with other key concepts such as opportunity, accountability and responsibility – has been central to the development of what New Labour governments from 1997 have regarded as the Third Way approach to social and economic policy, steering a line between the policies of the Old Left (characterized by excessive state control and collectivism) and those of the New Right (marked by excessive individualism) (Powell, 2000). Although New Labour has constantly 'paid homage to the idea of community since 1997' (Nash and Christie, 2003: 22), the idea has been elusive and 'Blairism has had a long and largely abstract romance' (Benn, 2000 cited in Nash and Christie, 2003: 22) with the concept. As Nash

and Christie note, community appears to have greatest resonance when New Labour talks about poverty.

The UK government has made extensive use of the term 'community' within its flagship New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme which has been investing significant funding in 39 deprived 'communities', claiming to be putting these communities 'at the heart of renewal' (Taylor, 2003: 124). However, as Taylor notes, local communities (in this case, geographical areas defined in terms of a range of indicators of deprivation) were given little say 'in the criteria by which they [the programmes] will be judged' (p. 124), and felt excluded from effective control of the programmes because of the structures and top-down systems of decision making established by government. In many instances, local plans for regeneration were rejected by government (Nash and Christie, 2003). As Benington and Donnison (1999 cited in Lister, 2001: 432) and others have argued, the continuing focus on small 'deprived' areas, labelled in New Labour-speak as communities, 'can run the risk of diverting attention away from the wider political economic forces which cause and maintain the concentrations of poverty and unemployment in these areas'. Similarly, Taylor notes that 'community' can be invested with a variety of meanings that 'cover the faultlines of economic decline and community fragmentation' (Taylor, 2003: 2) and as a recent commentary noted (Mendes, 2006: 247), "'Spraying-on" community as a solution to social problems provides no guarantee of progressive outcomes.'

In a parallel way, those writing about – and practising – community development, have struggled over the past fifty years to define what 'community' means for their practice. In the current global discourse about community development, 'community' has three basic meanings: first, it refers to a *geographical community*, a collection of people living within a fairly well-defined physical space – a discrete housing development, a neighbourhood, a rural village or a refugee camp. This has historically been the most common usage of the term and one that has shaped the job descriptions of many community development workers.

Community development workers from both North and South, however, came to recognize from the 1960s that seeing 'community' simply as a geographical entity did not adequately deal with the realities of conflict or tensions between different interests within spatially

defined communities (Craig, 1989). These tensions might take the form of religious or ethnic conflict (as in Northern Ireland or Bosnia for example), disagreements based on class or age, or the desire of some groups to assert specific needs based perhaps on sexuality, gender, ethnicity or disability. Community thus properly incorporates axes of diversity which may generate conflicts. Much of the language of government fails to acknowledge this fact, implicitly denying that communities may be the site of contestation as much as of consensus (except, ironically, when the discourse becomes racialized). One example of this social fragmentation within a geographical community is apparent in the experience of the New Deal for Communities programme in Tower Hamlets which has been the context for conflict and competition for resources both between White and Bangladeshi populations but also between elements within the Bangladeshi population (Dinham, 2005).

The second cross-cutting type of community identified by community development workers was thus a *community of identity*. Within and between geographical communities there might be a wide range of communities of identity which may have differing needs and interests. Seeing community as a site of conflict between competing interests presents a challenge to the political approach of communitarianism, a political philosophy strongly promoted by New Labour. As Dwyer notes (2000: 28 citing Avineri and de Shalit, 1995), a 'strong sense of community, defined as "a body with some common values, norms and goals in which each member regards the common goal as her own" is, for communitarians, a basic need.' However, whilst 'community' is of central importance to communitarians, New Labour's communitarian-inspired view of community is one which, as Driver and Martell (1998) argue, is characterized by conformity, conditionality and moral prescription driven by top-down policy solutions rather than those developed through democratic dialogue from within communities themselves. Government does not therefore respond to agendas set from below but shapes policy programmes from above, for communities, and in terms of its own political agendas.

Thirdly, community workers have often found themselves engaged in relatively short-term work, focused on particular issues such as improving housing conditions, improving road safety at school crossings, or protecting aspects of the environment through campaigns around river pollution. These groups constitute *issue-based communities*.

## The practice of community development

This concept has also been used to cover a range of differing understandings of practice and outcome. The history of community development can be traced back to the 1950s at least (Craig, 1989) but in the late 1980s/early 1990s, many governments and international organizations 're-discovered' community development, although not always labelling it consistently as such. Thus the World Bank viewed community participation as a means for ensuring that Third World Development projects 'reached the poorest in the most efficient and cost-effective way, sharing costs as well as benefits, through the promotion of self-help' (Craig and Mayo, 1995: 2). Their programmes, better known for fiscal conservatism than for political and social risk-taking, frequently led, however, to the undermining of local community social and economic structures whilst appearing to advocate the importance of 'community', one example of the confusion that surrounds this and related terms such as community empowerment. The United Nations Development Programme commented (UNDP, 1993) that it had 'people's participation as its special focus . . . [It] . . . is becoming the central issue of our time' (Craig and Mayo, 1995: 2). In reality, however, these international and national agencies have given scant attention to issues of social justice, with respecting the dignity and humanity of the poorest, with their right to participate in decisions that affect them or with mutuality and equality, all principles that underpin the philosophy and practice of community development as it is understood by practice-based organizations.<sup>2</sup>

A wide-ranging definition of community development was agreed at a recent conference convened in 2004 by international community development organizations. This Budapest Declaration is significant because it was drawn together by delegates from more than thirty countries, mostly from across Europe but also from Asia, Africa and North America.<sup>3</sup> It is worth rehearsing the definition at some length because of debates about CCB which follow.

Community development is a way of strengthening civil society by prioritising the actions of communities, and their perspectives in the development of social, economic and environmental policy. It seeks the empowerment of local communities, taken to mean both geographical communities, communities of interest or identity and communities

organising around specific themes or policy initiatives. It strengthens the capacity of people as active citizens through their community groups, organisations and networks; and the capacity of institutions and agencies . . . to work in dialogue with citizens to shape and determine change in their communities. It plays a crucial role in supporting active democratic life by promoting the autonomous voice of disadvantaged and vulnerable communities.

To serve the interests of local communities, community development promotes local 'voice', encouraging the ability to be critical of established policy and political contexts. National and international 'community development programmes' often have not allowed this political space, as programmes from the ill-starred UK Home Office Community Development Project (CDP) onwards have learnt to their cost (CDP, 1977). Such programmes are not really, in the sense outlined by the Budapest Declaration, *community* development programmes because they allow little control by the community itself with, again, 'top-down' policy prescriptions taking precedence over 'bottom-up' community analyses. They also fail to understand potential divisions within communities with which community development workers have to work. As Oxfam noted (2004: 12), criticizing the badging of top-down policy programmes as community development and again pointing to the importance of understanding community as a site of conflict, although 'bottom-up' community development came from the 'realisation that development decisions made by professionals and those in power have not really worked, often misunderstanding or oversimplifying issues . . . and so devising inappropriate solutions' the use of community-led development can also be flawed by assumptions that 'communities are homogeneous and work automatically towards the common good' (p. 12). Oxfam went on to argue that much community-led development still 'ignores diversity issues within a community and many community management structures over-represent the dominant elite' (p. 12).

Community development is not only a practice, involving skills, a knowledge base, and a strong value base. It is also a goal, self-evidently the development of communities or, as it now appears fashionable to describe it, building the capacity of communities. This leads to the issue of CCB itself.

## Community capacity-building: Scope and definitions

Since the late 1990s, the term community capacity-building began to be used widely within both 'developed' and 'developing' countries to describe activities involving work with local deprived communities, to promote fuller engagement with social, economic and political life. As with the term community however, there was little clarity in its use; nor was it clear why it should have emerged so strongly into policy discourse.

The earliest sustained references to *capacity-building* in the literature date from the early 1990s, in the work of UNCED (1992), Agenda 21 and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (UNDP, 1991). Some commentators claim its origins lie (albeit later) within Europe (Kirklees MC, 2004). The UNDP definition focused on the role of the UN itself in supporting capacity-building. McGinty (2003: 5) suggested this was seen as to do with 'building capacity for the formulation of plans and strategies in support of sustainable development . . .'. This definition emerged in the context of water sector capacity-building which Srinivas (2005) suggests was about 'building the capacity of cities and urban areas to handle their environments [covering] human resource development, organisational . . . institutional and legal framework development.' UNCED (1992: 232) suggested that capacity-building 'encompasses the country's human, scientific, technological, organizational, institutional and resource capabilities' (see also UN, 1996). As McGinty later argued (2003: 5), however, 'the acknowledgment that the UN needed better capacity in its interface with communities was the point at which the discussion and models of *community* capacity-building for provider organizations and government shifted to a more participative mode' (original emphasis) and links with community development acknowledged. Capacity-building then elided in policy discourse into *community* capacity-building.

Within Europe, the first major allusion to CCB came with a report to the European Commission (EC, 1996: 68) regarding strategies for community economic development in areas of 'low economic activity whose members have lost the ability to compete in the labour market', i.e. disadvantaged communities. Banks and Shenton (2001) argue that the approach in the North initially relied heavily on US experience, following the Community Investment Act, which facilitated access by community-based organizations to advice and training

in 'the market', focusing, it appears, more on the provision of business and management skills to individuals. Some Northern thinking was also, however, increasingly influenced by the development literature where what had frequently been 'top-down' project work was increasingly replaced by a recognition of the need to 'strengthen people's capacity to determine their own values and priorities and organise themselves to act on this' (Eade and Williams, 1996: 64; see also Oxfam, 2004).

From these contradictory origins, the concept has been adopted in a wide variety of national and policy contexts, some more concerned with building the strengths and capacities of *organizations* (often, but not always, those that worked with 'communities') and others more specifically to do with CCB, that is building the capacity of *communities* themselves. Although CCB is the focus of this discussion, boundaries remain blurred: thus, building the capacity of organizations *within* deprived communities is seen to be a part of CCB. For example, Ahmed et al. (2004: 20), reflecting on capacity-building for faith communities, argue that it is to 'strengthen groups' organisational capabilities to enable them to sustain themselves in order to play a fuller part in civil society and community cohesion and engage more fully with public authorities.' The use of the narrower term 'capacity-building' remains common in the development literature from both North and South (e.g. Hailey et al., 2005; Hursey, 2005; James and CABUNGO, 2005).

By 2001, use of the term CCB had become widespread within many Northern countries, so much so that it was becoming the target of sceptical humour. At one UK conference of activists, it was caricatured as 'developing local skills in a way that ensures people are able to know what is missing' (cited in Beazley et al., 2004: 5). Another writer likened it to public participation, referring to an earlier definition by Arnstein as 'like eating spinach, because ultimately it is good for you' (cited in Beazley et al., 2004: 1). Indeed, the term had come to convey such a range of meanings that it was often seen to increase confusion rather than provide clarity, leading some activists to suggest it should be dropped altogether. There remained, however, a strong view that 'the broad ideas and activities described as "capacity building" . . . are essential in eliminating poverty' ([www.developments.org.uk/data/14/ms\\_capacity.htm](http://www.developments.org.uk/data/14/ms_capacity.htm)) making it difficult to dismiss entirely. In the context of its own need to be seen to be combating poverty, the first New Labour government had claimed to regard CCB as a 'key idea'

(SEU, 2000). However, as Stoker and Bottom (2004: 6) noted, 'with every new policy area, there is a new jargon to be invented and learnt . . . this perspective applies with particular force in the area of community capacity-building'. Their analysis of the way in which New Labour characterized the 'problem' leading to the need for CCB included 'a lack of formal engagement in politics, lack of capacity to engage in institutions of democracy, reflecting social exclusion, lack of basic infrastructure to support community life, and the need to support individuals so that they can become full members of society' (2004: 6).

The sense of confusion in the UK has led to several attempts to interrogate its meaning. For example, a study (Humm, 2005) covering six neighbourhoods addressed the question of whether CCB and community development were the same thing but although, as with other analyses (Chapman and Kirk, 2001), it concluded that community development might be seen as a slightly wider term, the 'capacity-builders' responsible for CCB were, in most important senses, identified as generic community development workers. In a study of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Northern England (Banks and Shenton, 2001), respondents failed to see any difference between the terms 'community development' and 'CCB', although the authors suggested also that it might be possible to see CCB as a narrower aspect of a broader community development process.

The UK Charity Commission, which regulates the activity of charities, decided recently – reflecting increased interest in the concept – to include 'community capacity-building' in its limited list of charitable aims (education and the relief of poverty being the other two). The Commission defined communities in terms of both geography or interest, but limited to those that were socially and economically disadvantaged. The Commission defined CCB (Charity Commission, 2000: 3) as:

Developing the capacity and skills of the members of a community in such a way that they are better able to identify and help meet their needs and to participate more fully in society.

This is remarkably close to – if shorter than – the definition of community development emerging from Budapest. It is significant that the Commission debated at length as to whether to use the term community development instead of CCB, perhaps deciding on the latter

because of its contemporary popularity with government. What this might then mean for local community members was described generally as 'empowerment' but specifically this might involve (Charity Commission, 2000: 3), in a familiar litany regarding skills and responsibilities:

Equipping people with skills and competencies which they would not otherwise have;

Realising existing skills and developing potential;

Promoting people's ability to take responsibility for identifying and meeting their own and other people's needs.

Shortly after, one UK government department reported (DEFRA, 2003: 2) on 'community capacity-building and voluntary sector infrastructure in rural England'. This saw the outcome of CCB as leading to strengthened communities, increased levels of volunteering, targeting social exclusion and greater community involvement in local service delivery: here organizational and community capacity-building appear interlinked. Improving service delivery should be seen within the context of more widespread debate about government's strategic motives – in the UK and elsewhere – for using the voluntary and community sectors (VCS) to deliver public services, which, many critics argue, is about providing such services 'on the cheap' (Craig et al., 2005). The requirement for the VCS to build their *organizational* capacity in order 'to expand their role in the provision of public services' (Cairns et al., 2005: 872) resonates with the experience of the US, where capacity-building is largely perceived as a technique of organizational management. This debate highlights the latent conflict between the goals of community organizations for themselves and the goals of government for such organizations.

The former UK Home Secretary, David Blunkett (2002: 5), whose department has been a key UK government player promoting CCB, had no time for the niceties of definition: 'building capacity – when I was a lad we used to call it community development!' His department described 'building the capacity of both individuals and groups within communities as central to the process of civil renewal' (Blunkett, 2002: 5) and, in its review of 'civil renewal' (a review, it

stated, of government support for community capacity-building and proposals for change) defined CCB as:

Activities, resources and support that strengthen the skills and abilities of people and community groups to take effective action and leading roles in the development of their communities. (Home Office, 2003: 15)

This accords well with the Charity Commission's definition, in that it stresses the importance of participation, community development and the strengthening of skills, abilities and responsibility. This review claimed that CCB should be based on a value base close to that underpinning community development practice. An analysis of community involvement in urban policy (Chanan, 2003), conducted for the UK's Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, however, equated 'participation' with 'involvement' (in public decision-making, in general community activity, and, again, in the provision of services by the VCS), noting the key role played by community development in creating and sustaining involvement. However, and oddly, this lengthy discussion contains no mention of the concept of CCB. Clearly, in the UK at least, CCB had come to mean different things to different government departments, another example of widespread linguistic and ideological confusion.

## Experience outside Europe

Experience from elsewhere has not been more helpful in distinguishing CCB from community development, or in resolving its meaning. In Canada, where the process of strengthening communities is often described as establishing 'resilient' communities (CCCE, 2000), community capacity is defined as 'the combined influence of a community's commitment, resources and skills that can be deployed to build on community strengths and address problems and opportunities' (Bruce, 2003: 25). CCB is thus:

Any activities which the community undertakes (on its own or with the help of others) to improve or build its own collective commitment, resources and skills. (Bruce, 2003: 25)

In Australia, the term CCB has been adopted equally enthusiastically by both statutory and voluntary interests. Victoria State's Department of Community Activities covers a wide range of policy initiatives under the umbrella of CCB ([www.dvc.vic.gov.au](http://www.dvc.vic.gov.au)). The Stronger Families Learning Exchange notes that 'community capacity-building has become a central objective in a wide range of public policies and programmes . . . Most analysts and practitioners in the human services field would count this as a positive development despite the fact that the concept of "community capacity" is seldom precisely defined . . . [and] measures to indicate whether or not it has been "built" are only in the developmental stage' (Hounslow, 2002: 22). In the field of health promotion, CCB is, however, associated officially with building infrastructure, partnerships and organizational environments and problem-solving capability in communities and systems (Hawe et al., 2000). Mission Australia, a faith-based agency, suggests in a wide-ranging review of the term (2004: 3ff.), that it covers, at the federal level, community economic development, community business partnerships, social entrepreneurs (formerly 'community leaders'), and fostering micro-businesses but stresses the need to identify 'genuine community ownership of organisations' rather than seeing CCB as a means of 'growing the organisation'.

In New Zealand, a national CCB initiative focuses on the mechanism of partnership working (see below) between communities and local and central government which is characterized as 'strengthening communities' ([www.waitakere.govt.nz/ourpar/strengthcomm.asp](http://www.waitakere.govt.nz/ourpar/strengthcomm.asp)). This linguistic confusion is again similar to that in the use of the term community development, in that CCB, as noted above, does not always seem to be concerned, in other contexts, with working directly with deprived populations themselves but is focused on organizational management and development, characteristic of CCB work in the USA. One typical US example is in Virginia whose Office of Community Capacity Building ([www.dhcd.virginia.gov/cd/occb](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/cd/occb)) describes its role as providing 'capacity building assistance to Virginia's community development and housing partners'. This again reflects ideological confusion about the term community: here these organizations are identified closely, in the official view, with their 'communities' i.e. the communities to which they offer services. Seen from the vantage point of local residents of deprived communities, these formal organizations may not, however, be seen as closely identified with their needs nor do local residents appear to exercise control over

their programmes. In short, this appears to be another instance of 'top-down' CCB posing as a 'bottom-up' form.

There are examples worldwide of CCB initiatives with minorities and especially First Nations people, generally communities of identity with highest levels of deprivation. The government of Western Australia 'has a specialist role in working with indigenous communities [i.e. the Aboriginal Koori] on capacity-building initiatives and on strengthening relationships between local governments and indigenous people' ([www.dlgrd.wa.gov.au/regionDev](http://www.dlgrd.wa.gov.au/regionDev)). A top-down CCB approach is taken in New Zealand by the Alcohol and Public Health Research Unit in its work with the indigenous Maori population in order to reduce some of the effects of the greater exposure of Maori people to alcohol-related crime (Casswell, 2001). Within New South Wales, in Australia, the Department of Criminal Justice's Aboriginal Unit, addressing the over-representation of Koori young people in detention, argues that better direction of existing resources to help build capacity amongst Aboriginal communities is important as a preventative approach. Although the Department argues ([www.aic.gov.au/conferences/2003-juvenile/Anderson.html](http://www.aic.gov.au/conferences/2003-juvenile/Anderson.html)) that there is no one single strategy, it asserts that 'in any capacity-building strategy, the Aboriginal community must be leading the responses to issues they have identified' (p. 6). However, many Black and minority groups worldwide would respond that, although CCB may be a key issue for their organizations, structural racism and discrimination often means that they have limited access in reality to funding and sources of expertise on their own terms (Chouhan and Lusane, 2005).

## Capacity and partnership

The possibilities of CCB in the context of partnership working, a key form of local governance promoted by New Labour and emerging more or less simultaneously alongside the enthusiasm for CCB, have also become a salient issue. Recent analysis of partnership working, evidenced in Glendinning et al. (2002), argues that one major difficulty with partnership building as a form of local governance is the uneven capacity of the partners. In particular, NGOs – and community groups in particular – often are represented on a volunteer unpaid basis: one of the key roles of larger, more powerful and better resourced partners might therefore be to help build the capacity of

the weakest partners. However, there remains disagreement in the literature as to whether it is appropriate for stronger partners – who often tacitly or explicitly set policy agendas for the partnerships in question – to support weaker ones (see Balloch and Taylor, 2002; Craig and Taylor, 2002). As Banks et al. (2003: 293) argue in the context of UK partnership working, there is a significant ‘mismatch between their [NGOs’ and particularly community groups’] structures and processes and those of more formal institutions such as local authorities or large voluntary organisations. Partnership working, especially when this involves people from different sectors, requires skills and strategies for building working relationships and understanding that enable communication and cooperation across these [partnership] boundaries’ (see also Pearson and Craig, 2001).

The NGO partners in many of these strategic partnership instances often tend – in the context of NGOs more generally – to be amongst the better-resourced, more organized elements of the voluntary sector and not the smaller, representative, community groups with which community development workers typically operate. Thus, CCB, in the context of partnership working, may often result in a form of organizational strengthening at a level of governance beyond the reach of communities themselves, confirming the difficulties that smaller community groups have in the UK in becoming fully involved – on their own terms – in community regeneration programmes (JRF, 1999, 2000). The latter Joseph Rowntree Foundation review suggested, strikingly, that although a range of agencies were now resourcing CCB, provision was neither comprehensive nor well-coordinated and, in many programmes, not only was community development not a priority but that CCB was displacing ‘real’ community development. Partnership working has in fact increasingly been criticized for building the capacity of the powerful (and their organizations) and not the weak, or for building the capacity of the weak only insofar as it accords with the interests of the powerful (Banks and Shenton, 2001).

### A critique of community capacity-building

There clearly remains substantial linguistic and ideological confusion surrounding the term CCB just as with the terms community and community development. This confusion is not helped by the fact

that, despite warm governmental rhetoric, there is little evidence as to whether CCB actually works. The community development literature has recently begun to grapple with questions of its effectiveness (Barr et al., 1995, 1996; Craig, 2002; Skinner and Wilson, 2002) but none of this debate appears to have spilled over into analysing the effectiveness of CCB.

Community capacity-building as a concept and practice can be criticized from at least four different perspectives. First, given the marginal differences between the proclaimed goals and methods of community development and CCB, it may seem superfluous to introduce a new concept into the policy lexicon. Given the origins of the term, it seems quite likely that the elision between the two concepts, from capacity-building's initial focus on developing the strengths of organizations into a catch-all term covering a range of activities at 'community' level, was accelerated by political fashion: new governments wishing to introduce apparently new policy programmes often adopt new terminology to distance themselves from their predecessors' programmes. This ignores frequent references in the CCB literature to the fact that it '. . . has its roots in a much older movement called community development' (McGinty, 2003: 8), and that 'the ideas behind community capacity-building are not new . . . from the 1970s there has been a strong community development school in the not-for-profit sector . . .' (Hounslow, 2002: 20).

The second, related, critique is that, as with the term 'community', the concept of CCB is applied uncritically – as the 'spray-on additive' – to a very wide range of activities, many of which have however little to do with the development – with community control of the skills, knowledge, assets and understanding of local deprived communities – which is at the heart of the definition of community development. Thus CCB is used in a contemporary context by organizations such as the World Bank (2001), and by national governments (including New Labour) to describe what are effectively 'top-down' interventions where local communities are required to engage in programmes with predetermined goals – such as the privatization of public services within a context of tight fiscal control – as a condition for receiving funding, approaches far removed from 'bottom-up' community development interventions.

Thirdly, those working with local communities question the motives of those promoting CCB 'from the top'. For example, Beresford and Hoban (2005: 45) argue that 'capacity-building to develop people's

confidence, self-esteem and understanding supports their empowerment and participation. It is not the same as skill development to equip people to work in the way that agencies traditionally work': i.e. that CCB is pursued by powerful partners to incorporate local communities into established structures and mechanisms rather than having to face the challenges to those existing structures which effective working with deprived communities presents. These challenges could go to the heart of the reasons for deprivation and inequality. Diamond (2004: 198), in the context of UK regeneration, notes that 'whilst these [CCB] initiatives use a new language, they are steeped in old practices. Changing structures does not of itself alter the power differences inherent in local neighbourhoods where community groups are cast as "dependent" by regeneration managers seeking to meet performance targets'. Diamond notes that capacity-building approaches of local authorities studied marginalized alternative views to those in the mainstream, sought to co-opt local activists and, through existing practice, individualized rather than collectivized local communities' experience, very much in line with the Third Way approach of New Labour.

In a similar vein, Mowbray (2005: 263) analyses the CCB programme of the (conservative) Government of Victoria in Australia. He is less critical of the way in which activities within this initiative are developed than of how government 'restrains their scope and rhetorically reconstructs their character and impact'. In particular, government effectively made funding available only to communities with pre-existing well-established structures, ensured that any activities that might be regarded as political (such as advocacy by community members) were excluded from the framework of the initiative, and claimed credit for the action plans of participating communities. Essentially, the ability of the community to act on its own behalf, to work on issues that it identified, and at a pace and in a manner that it determined itself, was compromised by the government's need to promote its own social and political agendas.

This story is a familiar one to many community development workers and those in the communities – in North and South – with which they have worked. Responding to the UK government's review of its support for CCB, the body representing community development training argued (FCDL, 2004: 3) that:

. . . the experience of many communities is that ‘community capacity-building’ programmes (with a myriad of titles), have been imposed on them; with perceived needs, desired outcomes and preferred methods part of the package which they have not had the opportunity to identify, develop or agree . . . the ‘community’ (often not self-defined) is exhorted to play its part in an environment where inequalities of resources, power, information and status are not even acknowledged, never mind addressed.

The Federation for Community Development Learning (FCDL) argued further, echoing Mowbray, and Banks and Shenton, that the impact of CCB has been to increase inequalities between established ‘communities’ and those struggling for resources. Ironically, shortly after writing this submission, the FCDL, an organization that undertook a great deal of bottom-up work with local activists, lost its core funding from government.

From a study of CCB projects working with Aboriginal Koori people in Australia, Tedmanson (2003: 15) noted that:

This new capacity-building jargon signifies an entrenchment of notions of what constitutes capacity, who defines capacity and what constitutes the relationship between the dominant culture *capacity-builders* and those identified as *capacity deficient*. . . . The term community capacity-building will have little . . . meaning to . . . the Anungu peoples of Central Australia where concepts such as Yerra . . . are cited as encompassing reciprocity and community obligation. Supporting, helping, sharing, giving of time and resources, cultural affirmation and taking care of country are responsibilities not viewed as special individualised effort but as cultural competencies . . . discussions of community capacity-building in indigenous contexts must avoid the paternalistic construction of a ‘deficit’ in the Aboriginal domain (original emphases).

The author cites an Aboriginal respondent (Tedmanson, 2003: 15):

To restore capacity in our people is to be responsible for our own future. Notice that I talk of restoring rather than building capacity in our people . . . we had 40 to 60,000 years of survival and capacity. The problem is that our capacity has been eroded and diminished [by White colonialists] – our people do have skills, knowledge and experience . . .

we are quite capable of looking after our own children and fighting for their future.

The fundamental argument here – appropriate to other groups representing the powerless – is that ‘cultural difference is viewed as a weakness and not a strength, a capacity deficit to be rebuilt or a problem to be “solved”’ (Tedmanson, 2003: 15).

This is the most fundamental critique of CCB, that it is based on the notion of communities being ‘deficient’ – in skills, knowledge and experience. Beazley et al. (2004: 6) analyse the weakness of the ‘deficit model’. First, ‘it pays no attention to the capacity of institutions to overcome inherent barriers to engagement’ i.e. the problem lies not with communities but with the institutions, structures and processes which affect them; and secondly, definitions of CCB built on the deficit model again ‘give no indication of an endpoint. What is capacity being built towards or is it an end in itself?’ (p. 6). This is a question that has plagued the theory and practice of community development and is reflected in New Labour’s continuing emphasis on measuring programmatic outputs in terms of its own narrow quantitatively defined goals rather than on community process and outcomes. Essentially, although it is possible to identify the characteristics of ‘strengthened’ or ‘resilient’ communities (skills, knowledge, organization etc.), the fundamental aim of community development is – consonant with its value base – to ensure that greater political power lies with local communities. The endpoint might thus be ‘less comfortable, more empowered and awkward but self-determined communities’ (Beazley et al., 2004: 6) and a process that maintains that situation.

Partridge (2005), analysing a local NDC programme, argues that CCB is a ‘term invented by social managers. It explains the lack of “buy-in” to their regeneration schemes by implying a lack of skill on the part of members of deprived communities . . . neighbourhoods are deprived and regeneration schemes don’t work because of an analogous lack of “capacity” in the inhabitants. A nice form of blaming the victim’. He suggests the term might be seen as useful only where it applies equally to the lack of capacity both in neighbourhoods and of powerful partner agencies to listen to, engage with and share power with communities effectively. Do such powerful agencies have the capacity to ‘lose face, cope with residents’ decisions going against them?’ (Partridge, 2005) and so on.

This 'deficit' approach to CCB, it is argued by Beazley et al. (2004: 3), assumes a social pathology approach to communities that lack skills and abilities: these qualities would allow local community residents to be 'good citizens' in terms identified by government and 'for those in power, this model of capacity-building is useful. It poses no threat. It is top-down, paternalistic, and deflects attention away from the need to change the existing institutional and economic structures. It is a view that serves and supports the status quo' (Beazley et al., 2004: 3).

Such an analysis of CCB from the perspective of the values of community development, would suggest that a view of communities as somehow deficient in certain skills and capacities to enable them to engage effectively with other actors in local governance misses the point. Communities have skills, ideas, capacities: but these are often latent or unacknowledged (Taylor, 1995). Local and central governments often come with their own agendas which they attempt to impose, however subtly, through partnership working, or more crudely, directly on local communities, often using funding requests as levers for compliance. The task for powerful partners in this kind of CCB partnership working should be to listen to communities' demands and respond appropriately, most of all when what local communities are demanding may be in conflict with external agendas; and thus for the former not to continue with predetermined goals and programmes. This may not just be difficult for powerful partners, it may be precisely what – despite the rhetoric of CCB – they are not interested in. For example, there can be little doubt that the UK government's understanding of CCB is linked to its desire to have more stable, organized communities with which it can more easily engage to pursue its own ideas of community cohesion (particularly given the increasingly racialized impacts of the so-called 'war on terror'), community safety, child and family policy and criminal justice (Rodger, 2005). The 'carrot' of funding is key here in getting community groups to 'buy in' to government agendas and much CCB at a local level can be seen as a way of creating local structures fitting with government funding requirements (Macdonald, 2005). These structures may not, then, be ones that most effectively facilitate the expression of local community interests nor may they enable local communities to build on their own capacities.

## Conclusion

It seems clear that CCB can be seen as none other than our old friend community development. Under this new umbrella term, however, not only has a similarly wide range of activities found shelter, many of which have little to do with the goals and values of community development, but many of the old tensions and difficulties of community development – of manipulation of communities, misappropriation of terminology, co-option of activists, conditional funding and state-controlled power games such as divide and rule – have emerged. Local, regional and national governments and international bodies – particularly those of a centre-right disposition (in which New Labour is increasingly situating much of its social policy) – thus buy themselves continuing political space enabling them to not respond appropriately to the demands of the dispossessed or to obscure the structural reasons for continuing poverty and inequality. To respond effectively to local communities' demands would mean giving up much of the power that these bodies enjoy. We may well ask: who defines the capacities that communities need and why? What control do local communities exercise over the capacity-building process? And who defines what a strong community would look like? As Banks and Shenton (2001: 296) put it, 'we need to question whose purpose capacity-building is serving and ensure that local residents are not mere puppets in the regeneration game played out by large national, regional and local agencies. "Community development" may be a more acceptable term and a more useful approach to promoting social and economic change in neighbourhoods.' But community development, like CCB, can be manipulated to serve government's interests.

Community capacity-building is essentially not a neutral technical process: it is about power and ideology and how these are mediated through structures and processes. As with the terms community and community development, the term CCB is used to hide a false consensus about goals and interests. In reality they are all arenas for political contestation. And, as with these earlier terms, CCB has been manipulated by governments to give a false sense of community ownership and control.

## Notes

1. The full (English) epigram is 'something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue'. Given the association of blue with right-wing political parties, community capacity-building might be said to incorporate all these dimensions.
2. See for example the definition from the Community Development Exchange at [www.cdx.org.uk](http://www.cdx.org.uk).
3. This Declaration and the parallel Yaounde Declaration covering community development in Africa can be accessed at [www.iacdglobal.org](http://www.iacdglobal.org).

## References

- Ahmed, R., Finneron, D. and Singh, H. (2004) *Tools for Regeneration: A Holistic Approach for Faith Communities*. London: FBRN (Faith-Based Regeneration Network).
- Avineri, S. and de Shalit, A. (eds) (1995) *Communitarianism and Individualism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Balloch, S. and Taylor, M. (2002) *Partnership Working*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Banks, S. and Shenton, F. (2001) 'Regenerating Neighbourhoods: A Critical Look at the Role of Community Capacity Building', *Local Economy* 16(4): 286–98.
- Banks, S., Butcher, H., Henderson, P. and Robertson, J. (eds) (2003) *Managing Community Practice*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Barr, A., Drysdale, J., Purcell, R. and Ross, C. (1995) *Strong Communities: Effective Government. The Role of Community Work*, Vol. 1. Glasgow: Scottish Community Development Centre.
- Barr, A., Hashagen, S. and Purcell, R. (1996) *Measuring Community Development in Northern Ireland: A Handbook for Practitioners*. Glasgow: Scottish Community Development Centre.
- Beazley, M., Griggs, S. and Smith, M. (2004) *Rethinking Approaches to Community Capacity Building*. Mimeo. Birmingham: University of Birmingham.
- Benington, J. and Donnison, D. (1999) 'New Labour and Social Exclusion: The Search for a Third Way or Just Gilding the Ghetto Again?', pp. 45–70 in H. Dean and R. Woods (eds) *Social Policy Review* 11. Luton: Social Policy Association.
- Benn, M. (2000) 'A Short March through the Institutions', in A. Coote (ed.) *New Gender Agenda*. London: IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research).
- Beresford, P. and Hoban, M. (2005) *Participation in Anti-poverty and Regeneration Work and Research: Overcoming Barriers and Creating Opportunities*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

- Blunkett, D. (2002) Speech at the relaunch of the Active Community Unit, Home Office, 29 May.
- Bruce, D. (2003) 'Insights on Community Capacity Building', available from [dwbruce@mta.ca](mailto:dwbruce@mta.ca)
- Bryson, L. and Mowbray, M. (1981) 'Community: The "Spray-on" Solution', *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 16(4): 255–67.
- Cairns, B., Harris, M. and Young, P. (2005) 'Building the Capacity of the Voluntary Non-profit Sector: Challenges of Theory and Practice', *International Journal of Public Administration* 28: 869–85.
- Casswell, S. (2001) 'Community Capacity Building and Social Policy – What Can be Achieved?', *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand* Issue 17: 22–35.
- CCCE (2000) *The Community Reliance Manual*. Vancouver: Canadian Centre for Community Enterprise.
- CDP (1977) *Gilding the Ghetto*. London: Community Development Project Information and Intelligence Unit.
- Chanan, G. (2003) *Searching for Solid Foundations: Community Involvement and Urban Policy*. London: Community Development Foundation.
- Chapman, M. and Kirk, K. (2001) *Lessons for Community Capacity-building: A Summary of Research Evidence*. Edinburgh: Scottish Homes.
- Charity Commission (2000) *The Promotion of Community Capacity-building*. Taunton: Charity Commission. [[www.charity-commission.gov.uk/publications/rr5.asp](http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/publications/rr5.asp)]
- Chouhan, K. and Lusane, C. (2005) *Black Voluntary and Community Sector Funding: Its Impact on Civic Engagement and Capacity Building*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. [[www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)]
- Craig, G. (1989) 'Community Work and the State', *Community Development Journal* 24(1): 3–18.
- Craig, G. (2002) 'Towards the Measurement of Empowerment: The Evaluation of Community Development', *Journal of the Community Development Society* 33(1): 124–46.
- Craig, G. and Mayo, M. (eds) (1995) *Community Empowerment*. London: Zed Books.
- Craig, G. and Taylor, M. (2002) 'Dangerous Liaisons: Partnership Working and the Voluntary Sector', pp. 131–48 in C. Glendinning, M. Powell and K. Rummery (eds) *Partnerships, New Labour and the Governance of Welfare*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Craig, G., McNamee, S., Peake, R. and Wilkinson, M. (2005) *A21CVCS4Y+H – A 21st Century Voluntary and Community Sector for the Yorkshire and Humber Region*. Leeds: Yorkshire Futures.
- DEFRA (2003) *Community Capacity-building and Voluntary Sector Infrastructure in Rural England*. London: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

- Diamond, J. (2004) 'Local Regeneration Initiatives and Capacity Building: Whose "Capacity" and "Building" for What?', *Community Development Journal* 39(2): 177–205.
- Dinham, A. (2005) 'Another Deal for What Community?', Unpublished PhD, Goldsmiths College, University of London.
- Driver, S. and Martell, L. (1998) *New Labour: Politics after Thatcherism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Duncan, P. and Thomas, S. (2000) *Neighbourhood Regeneration: Resourcing Community Involvement*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Dwyer, P. (2000) *Welfare Rights and Responsibilities*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Eade, D. and Williams, S. (1996) *The Oxfam Handbook of Development and Relief*. Oxford: Oxfam.
- EC (1996) *Social and Economic Inclusion through Regional Development: The Community Economic Development Priority in European Structural Funds Programmes in Great Britain*. Luxembourg: European Commission.
- FCDL (2004) *Building Civil Renewal: A Review of Government Support for Community Capacity Building and Proposals for Change*. Submission from Federation for Community Development Learning. Sheffield: FCDL.
- Glendinning, C., Powell, M. and Rummery, K. (eds) (2002) *Partnerships, New Labour and the Governance of Welfare*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Hailey, J., James, R. and Wrigley, R. (2005) *Assessing the Impacts of Organizational Capacity Building*. Oxford: INTRAC.
- Hawe, P., King, L., Noort, M., Jordens, C. and Lloyd, B. (2000) *Indicators to Help with Capacity-building in Health Promotion*. Sydney: NSW Health Department.
- Hillery, G. A. (1964) 'Villages, Cities and Total Institutions', *American Sociological Review* 28: 32–42.
- Home Office (2003) *Building Civil Renewal*. London: Home Office.
- Hounslow, B. (2002) 'Community Capacity Building Explained', *Stronger Families Learning Exchange*, Bulletin No. 1 (Autumn): 20–2 [www.aifs.gov.au/sf/pubs/bull1]
- Humm, J. (2005) *Who are the Capacity Builders?* London: Community Development Foundation.
- Hursey, C. (2005) *Capacity Building: Perspectives from the NGO Sector in Spain*. Oxford: INTRAC.
- James, R. and CABUNGO (2005) *Building Capacity to Mainstream HIV/AIDS Internally: Experience in Malawi*. Oxford: INTRAC.
- JRF (1999) *Developing Effective Community Involvement Strategies*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- JRF (2000) *Resourcing Community Involvement in Neighbourhood Regeneration*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Kirklees MC (2004) *Dewsbury Community Capacity Building Projects*. Huddersfield: Kirklees Metropolitan Council.

- Lister, R. (2001) 'New Labour: A Study in Ambiguity from a Position of Ambivalence', *Critical Social Policy* 21(4): 425–48.
- Macdonald, D. (2005) Personal communication, 7 November.
- McGinty, S. (2003) 'Community Capacity-building', Paper presented at Australian Association for Research in Education conference, Brisbane, Australia. [www.aare.edu.au]
- Mendes, P. (2006) 'Classic Texts No. 5', *Community Development Journal* 41(2): 246–8.
- Mission Australia (2004) *There's Something Different about this Place*. Sydney: Mission Australia.
- Mowbray, M. (2005) 'Community Capacity Building or State Opportunism?', *Community Development Journal* 40(3): 255–64.
- Nash, V. and Christie, I. (2003) *Making Sense of Community*. London: IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research).
- Oxfam (2004) *Social Inclusion Directory*. Oxford: Oxfam.
- Partridge, G. (2005) Personal communication, 4 November.
- Pearson, S. and Craig, G. (2001) 'Community Participation in Strategic Partnerships in the UK', pp. 118–38, in J. Pierson and J. Smith (eds) *Rebuilding Community*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Powell, M. (2000) 'New Labour and the Third Way', *Critical Social Policy* 20(1): 39–60.
- Rodger, J. (2005) 'Subsidiarity as a Ruling Principle in the Welfare Society', Paper given at Osservatorio Nazionale Sulla Famiglia, Bologna, 8 October.
- SEU (2000) *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal*. London: Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Unit.
- Skinner, S. and Wilson, M. (2002) *Willing Partners?* Leeds: Yorkshire Forward.
- Soares, C. (2005) Personal communication, 4 November.
- Srinivas, H. (2005) Personal communication, 10 November at hsrinivas@gdrc.org
- Stacey, M. (1969) 'The Myth of Community Studies', *British Journal of Sociology* 20(2): 134–47.
- Stoker, G. and Bottom, K. (2004) 'Community Capacity-building', Lecture given at Lorne, Northern Ireland, 25 July.
- Taylor, M. (1995) *Unleashing the Potential: Bringing Residents to the Centre of Estate Regeneration*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Taylor, M. (2003) *Public Policy in the Community*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Tedmanson, D. (2003) 'Whose Capacity Needs Building? Open Hearts and Empty Hands: Reflections on Capacity Building in Remote Communities', Paper given at the 4th International Critical Management Studies Conference, University of South Australia.

- UN (1996) *Community Capacity-building*. New York: UN Commission on Sustainable Development.
- UNCED (1992) *Capacity Building: Agenda 21's Definition*, Chapter 37. New York: UNCED (UN Conference on Environment and Development).
- UNDP (1991) *Symposium for Water Sector Capacity Building*. Amsterdam: UNDP (UN Development Programme)/International Institute for Hydraulic and Environmental Engineering.
- UNDP (1993) *Human Development Report*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- World Bank (2001) *New Pathways to Social Development*. Washington DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

□ Gary Craig is professor of social justice at the University of Hull, head of the Centre for Social Inclusion and Social Justice, and associate director of the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation. His research interests include poverty, local governance, 'race' and ethnicity and community development. He is president of the International Association for Community Development, Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and Academician of the Academy of the Learned Societies in the Social Sciences. He is a member of the social policy and social work sub-panel for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. *Address*: Social Policy, University of Hull, Hull HU6 7RX, UK. email: g.craig@hull.ac.uk □