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An Inclusive Society? Practicalities and Possibilities

Creating inclusive rural communities:

Grass roots perspectives on the opportunities and challenges

Stream:

Social Exclusion and economic inequalities

Organisation and delivery of human services

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Abstract

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Rural communities in developed countries such as Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom and Ireland have experienced profound challenges over the past three decades. The social fabric of rural communities in these countries has been and will continue to be affected by global and local processes that compound poverty and exclusion. The paper then asks, given this social exclusion and poverty how can social inclusion be achieved for these rural communities? Drawing on the experiences in North Eastern United States, the Scottish Highlands, Ireland and Northern England the paper examines how communities, particularly through the third sector, are responding to this crisis. What are the opportunities and challenges to creating social inclusive, vibrant and sustainable rural communities in developed countries?

Introduction

This paper aims to do a number of things. Firstly, it seeks to show that poverty has a geographical dimension, even within developed first world economies. Secondly, it seeks to describe community practice in a range of settings that responds to rural poverty. And finally, the paper critically considers the challenges facing community development workers and community activists in responding to rural poverty and creating inclusive, vibrant, sustainable rural communities.

The paper is preliminary and exploratory in nature. It draws on a range of sources, including unstructured interviews or ‘conversations’ with paid and unpaid workers in communities in North Eastern United States, the Scottish Highlands and Northern England. I use the term ‘conversations’ as it more truly captures the interactive and mutual dialogue that occurred. Participants in the United States were attending the annual conference of the Community Development Society, the national body for community development practitioners. Participants in the United Kingdom and Ireland were identified by the International Community Development Association and CDX (Community Development Exchange). As such the participants were leading scholars and practitioners in the field and thoughtful contributors to current debates about community development practice. These ‘conversations’ occurred in different settings – both formal and informal – sometimes over a period of days. Some were opportunistic, others were more formally planned. The more formal ‘conversations’ were taped whilst for others detailed notes were written up as taping was not possible or appropriate. Accordingly, they are not the ‘outcomes’ of a rigorous research process. It is difficult to quantify the exact number of conversations however the

experiences of some 30 people inform this paper. I travelled to rural and remote North Eastern United States, the Scottish Highlands and Northern England with a view to talking with people responding to social exclusion and creating sustainable social change in rural communities.

These conversations were motivated by a growing personal concern about Australian responses, particularly those of the third sector, to issues affecting rural people. I was hopeful of learning from the experiences and knowledge of those in other settings that might be useful in the Australian context. A recent study of the geographic distribution of social disadvantage in Australia (Vinson, 2007) highlighted the concentration of disadvantage in non-urban settings. On the heavily populated east coast urban settings were outnumbered 4:1 by rural settings among the most disadvantaged communities (Band 1) (Vinson, 2007: 66-85). Social disadvantage in these rural settings are marked by: early school leaving; low work skills; limited access to computers or the internet; and few post-school qualifications. It would seem there is a crisis in both policy and practice in rural communities in Australia (Pawar & McClinton 1999). Margaret Alston suggests policy direction can be taken from the US and the European Union where rural policy

is framed around an acknowledgement of the multi-functionality of rural areas.

Value is given to rural culture and heritage, the importance of maintaining a healthy environment and the need for food security. As a result the population at large supports cross-subsidisation and resourcing of rural communities. ...

Clearly there is a need to return power to communities, reversing the movement of power from local to national and international levels. (2002: 223)

Poverty in rural settings

Rural communities in developed countries such as Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom and Ireland have experienced profound challenges over the past three decades. Developed countries, whilst having distinct welfare state and community responses (Esping-Andersen, 1990), share the factors shaping rural communities. The social fabric of rural communities have been and will continue to be affected by agricultural and trade policy reforms; demographic change and migration patterns; house prices; labour and skills shortages and access to information technologies; depletion of fossil fuels; and climate change (Carnegie Commission 2007: 14). The CEO of Heart of Wisconsin Business and Economic Alliance, a community economic development organization, graphically described the reality of these changes in the following way:

Our area had been very strongly dependent on the paper industry and had large paper mills that were started around the turn of the century, family owned/operated ... by the year 2000 [they] had all sold to multi nationals ... We lost about almost 40 per cent of our job offerings in that downsizing when the ownership changed and with that you also lost a lot of the philanthropy that the locally owned paper companies had ... a lot of the leadership was wrapped up in the corporate management prior to the sale and when the sale took place a lot of that management was wiped out, so you lost a lot of the community leadership as well. (CEO Heart of Wisconsin Business and Economic Alliance)

The Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development ‘identified significant inequalities and associated poverty across rural UK and Ireland. The evidence ... confirms that where there are problems, these are however predominantly a product of the failure of public and private sector delivery systems and of the socio economic structure of society and not the individuals in rural communities themselves.’ (2007: 28). In 2005 Combat Poverty estimated that 23% of the Irish population experience relative poverty and 9% of the population experience consistent poverty (Motherway, 2006).

Research in the United States indicates the entrenched nature of rural poverty and disadvantage. Weber *et al* note that 95% of counties with ‘persistent-poverty’ defined as experiencing poverty rates of 20 percent or more in each decennial census between 1960 and 2000 were non-metropolitan (2005: 1)

Ameliorating poverty and social disadvantage through community development

Across the UK, US, Ireland and Australia one important strategy for alleviating poverty is community development. Recent work by Professor Tony Vinson (2007) in Australia has provided statistical evidence of the ameliorating effect of social cohesion on social disadvantage and poverty. Vinson’s study sought to test whether the strength of local social bonds lessens the impact of damaging social, health and economic conditions on community wellbeing. It defined social cohesion as being ‘connections between people and between them and their community’. Social cohesion was defined as having a number of characteristics, including: volunteerism; membership of local groups; group action to improve the community; neighbours help

in difficult times; feeling safe walking in neighbourhood; agreeing people can be trusted; attendance at local community events; and feeling valued by society. Social cohesion scores for 495 Victorian Postcodes were calculated. 155 showed high social cohesion, 176 showed medium social cohesion and 164 showed low social cohesion. 24 pairs of harmful communal conditions and associated unwanted outcomes were studied across the 495 postcodes with social cohesion scores. In every instance the degree of association (correlation) between the adverse conditions and unwanted outcomes was lower in the high cohesion localities than in the low cohesion ones. This study provides statistical evidence of what community development workers *know*: that connecting people together, increasing their sense of control over their lives, has positive social impacts which facilitate inclusion.

International responses to social exclusion and the creation of inclusive, vibrant, sustainable rural communities

In general those community development practitioners involved in rural communities espoused a commitment to community development through participation, local decision making, linking individuals through networks and social action. In the United Kingdom there is currently a stronger (at least rhetorically) commitment to local participation and shifting power. In the United States local economic development is seen as very important in addressing rural poverty.

Self reliance in the community and culture change... We actually have a bit of a phrase for what our goal and vision for the community and our work in the community is: to create a self reliant, innovative, business friendly culture in a

vibrant community, with a prosperous local economy. (Manager, State Rural Development Council, North Eastern US)

The past decade has seen some notable examples of communities ‘shifting power’ in rural UK and Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland community development ‘is a major component of Irish social inclusion policy and is at the centre of several national programmes addressing local development and social inclusion’ (Motherway, 2006). The community of Eigg, for example, in the Scottish Highlands successfully completed a ‘community buy-back’ of the Island in 1997, after at least half a decade of activism. The community has improved infrastructure with the up-grade of the wharf ensuring more consistent contact with the mainland during winter months, created community craft co-operatives, improved access to food through a locally owned shop, enhanced island transport through a community bus and recently completed a wind farm that will meet the islands energy needs.

Most conversations in the United Kingdom and Ireland though were quick to point to a gap between the rhetoric of ‘social inclusion’ and the reality for most rural communities. Ireland, with its much heralded social inclusion policies, has seen the gap between rich and poor grow during the past decade, not reduce. Whilst the focus on community led responses in the United Kingdom and Ireland was welcomed putting this into practice was not without its challenges. A community activist on the Island of Eigg in the Scottish Highlands commented:

Our biggest challenge was to create a culture of debate, to enable people to participate. They had no experience of this – the remote landowner created no

forums for debate or dialogue. For many people this was completely new and we had to build this culture from scratch. And sometimes putting your head up over the parapet is dangerous – you know ‘who are you to talk?’ (Community activist, Eigg)

A history of being silenced and ignored created major challenges for community development practitioners in rural and remote Scotland. This led some community workers not to view their work in such grand terms of ‘creating social inclusion’ but simply providing people with a voice, creating a space for those who had historically been excluded from public utterances. Ironically, at the same time there was a very strong sense of ‘engagement fatigue’ emerging in the United Kingdom with so many government/community engagement processes in place little time was left for independent community development. This coupled with neo-liberal processes that hinder independence of the voluntary sector had seen the ‘death’ of radical community development practice in Scotland. It is interesting to note that the Eigg experience was driven by community activists not paid workers and although they had the assistance of paid workers on four occasions (short term funding) mostly this created difficulties. These paid workers had to be convinced that the community had the capacity to achieve their visions, rather than be limited by the paid workers own agendas.

In the United States community development has usually occurred in the guise of community *economic* development, with a strong focus on wealth generation. As the quote below illustrates, this is seen as a ‘foot in the door’ without which engaging rural communities in the process of change would be very difficult.

Yeah, economy is a big - it's kind of the foot in the door, for the community development. There are a lot of community developers who would love to be doing other things, but their foot in the door for the community is the economic prize sort of thing ... I mean one of the ways that we approach, when people ask what the difference is, community development is development *of* a community. Economic development is development *in* a community. (Manager, State Rural Development Council)

This focus on economic development demanded a different range of skills than traditionally associated with community service workers. These workers were experienced in 'leveraging' funds for community projects, identifying and exploiting profit making opportunities. The practice of these workers was informed by community development principles such as local decision making and participation.

I believe in locally determined development, almost universally across the board. I don't think that - I think, for instance, at a statewide level you can build capacity and you can build strategies that make sense for the local area, but there's no way that any development is sustainable, unless people come up with it and they implement it themselves and they have a stake in it. (Manager, State Rural Development Council)

One key strategy was that of networking with other successful communities, in this way creating bridges between people. Whilst there were often practical and pragmatic

outcomes from these networking opportunities (such as a good product idea) there was also the indirect benefit of connecting people together with similar experiences.

We have this need for a sense of community, not only in terms of interacting with other people, but really you come to a realisation you can't do it all yourself ... we mesh together ... and then there's the realisation that you're part of a much, much, much bigger whole ... [O]ne of the things we take a very intentional approach on is getting our people outside of the community so they also recognise that issues that lay beyond our borders also have an effect on what's in our borders and that people have commonalities across all communities (CEO Heart of Wisconsin Business and Economic Alliance)

Leadership development was also an important element of the work undertaken by these community development workers in Wisconsin, although this was more truly leadership identification. This was about acknowledging the leaders present in any community and also being open to abandon 'expert' status when it comes to working in that community.

I've learnt from the communities that I worked with, I admire the people that I work with as volunteer leaders often. Rural communities it is often one person who wears the hat of a recorder, a city administrator, a planner, a budget officer, legal, interpreter. (Rural Development Specialist-Environment, Rural Community Assistance Corporation)

Supporting rural communities: Lessons

There is little doubt that civil society has a strong role in creating a healthier, more equitable society (Alston 2002: 223-224).

There are examples of communities and community activists using community development processes to create inclusive, vibrant and sustainable rural communities. The principles of participation, increasing local power and ownership, building strong social networks inform the work of many practitioners in Ireland and the United Kingdom (Carnegie Commission, 2007). The question these examples raise however, is why is this approach to community development not more widespread in rural communities in Australia? Ife & Tesoriero (2006) in the Australian context argue that community development is 'in general a much easier task' in rural settings from which 'new alternative community structures will more readily emerge' (2006: 100). If this is the case, what support is needed to assist the development of sustainable, vibrant, rural communities?

There are clear lessons for Australia from the experiences of the United Kingdom, Ireland and the United States in creating sustainable rural communities. One of the key lessons is the absolute importance of harnessing local talents and energies. Unpaid activists have a vital role and it is important paid community workers do not impede them. In rural settings community services need to work closely with the broader civil society. For some community services this will mean addressing the tensions arising from unpaid labour or volunteering. The paid community worker here has an important role in identifying and facilitating linkages between people, often times beyond their local community.

Certainly the experience of these workers suggests that the association of community development with 'the left' creates particular difficulties. Many rural communities are conservative and traditional leading to a questioning of 'newcomers'. Community development will not be effective or productive in every rural community. Some communities will simply not see the need or have the desire to undertake a long term change process using community development principles. A great deal of skill and time is required to work with a rural community, particularly if that community is facing a crisis. Short term outcome specific project funding is of little use in forming the relationships required and may be, as Clinton & Pawar argue, actually 'destructive of future potential' (nd p. 42). One person in the US commented

I've learned working for a nonprofit in a rural area, focusing on affordable housing, that often-time the outside expert approach was not as welcome as I might have assumed, coming out of graduate school. (Rural Development Specialist-Environment, Rural Community Assistance Corporation)

Experiences in Ireland and the UK had shown the benefits of multiple state funding sources (eg. Local authority, central government, EU as well as philanthropic sources). This lessened the organisations vulnerability to pressures from specific funding sources. The existence of specific developmental funding for the Scottish Islands and Highlands managed via a Qango was very important to rural communities such as Eigg. This agency is able to invest in rural cultural heritage as valuable in and of itself.

Across the US, UK and Australia there are similar debates occurring within the field of community development. These included concern about the lack of clarity about meaning and practice of community development, concern about the community sector relationship with the State, particularly when funding arrangements may lead to a co-option of community activism and an erosion of radicalism. Whilst there are common experiences across the English speaking first world of rural disadvantage the responses have been markedly different. Of particular interest is how the State is positioned in the different contexts. In the Australian context the dependence on the State is striking compared particularly to the United States. There government's role is to stay out of the way of communities, to make it easier for communities to succeed. This included importantly access to loans and less restrictive legal arrangements. The risk however was that global capitalism and the State were not held accountable for their actions (such as the loss of 40% of a communities jobs in order to maximise profits). In the United Kingdom the relationship with the State appears more fluid with many community workers advocating for 'creating the space for effective work with communities'. The State was not seen as monolithic or omnipotent – a creative community development worker finds and exploits the spaces in the relationship to bring about change in the lives of communities.

Another important learning from these conversations was to remember 'community development is just a bit player' when it comes to change on a large scale. There is a risk in fact that the third sector may be held accountable for circumstances or situations well beyond their control. Community development strategies must always be complemented by structural supports, such as income support, research and development funds or other strategies aimed at supporting the rural community.

Conclusion

Social exclusion underpinned by poverty has a geographic dimension in first world economies which is often overlooked. In the US, UK and Australia there are examples of successful community responses to rural social exclusion and poverty. These are often underpinned by community development principles, such as valuing local skills, increasing local power, enabling participation and involving commitment overtime. The paid community services sector has an important role to pay in facilitating sustainable social change in rural communities but this must be in collaboration with broader civil society institutions. Australia has much to learn from the experiences of community development practitioners internationally.

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