Building on Practitioners Strengths: reflecting on community development practice

# Mandy Wilson and Pete Wilde

Summarised and revised by Mandy Wilson 2014

# Overview

Building Practitioner Strengths was first published by CDF in 2001 and reprinted 2005. It is now no longer available in hard copy.

#### It was the product of a CDF action research project (1999) and based on the experience of community development practitioners. The project involved;

#### the formation of a steering group through which varying perspectives on community development were shared and the project planned

#### the recruitment of seven practitioners to provide case study material

#### synthesis and analysis of recorded ‘stories’

#### development of a draft framework for reflecting on community development practice

#### consultation and testing of materials and their application within the community development field (primarily through a national conference)

#### development of accessible tools for reflection

There have been many changes since the publication of the original. These changes cover enormous economic, political and social changes in the UK. There have been substantial changes in the funding, practice and management of community development and in the way that it is regarded and used by central and local government and the public sector as a whole.

Community development, whether it is formally named as such, or even formally resourced, remains a set of principles and practice methods that can help people achieve this. Right up until the closure of CDF in March 2016 CDF was more concerned than ever to support the community sector in testing times and so were keen to ensure that these resources were still available to as wide an audience as possible. Mandy shared this view and so they worked together to make this revised shorter electronic version available.

In 2001, the contents were:

Chapter 1 Introduction

Chapter 2 Project Methodology

Chapter 3 Starting Points

Chapter 4 A Framework for Reflection

Chapter 5 Practitioner’s Reflections

Working in a Black Women’s Centre

Community Development in a Neighbourhood Setting

Community Development in a Partnership

Community Development in a Community Forum

Community Development in a Local Authority

Community Development in a Rural Area

Community Development in a Homelessness Project

Chapter 6 Emerging Themes

Chapter 7 Over to You

# About this revised version

In this shorter version, Mandy has reproduced the content with very slight amendments. As such, the original chapters 2 and 5 have been removed. Also please note that the book was written in 2001 and this revision should now be read with that in mind. This publication is for:

* experienced community development workers who feel they need to evaluate their strategy within the context in which they are practising
* those people who have come more recently to community work and who are looking for some guidance to develop more sensitive and considered practice
* those supervising/managing community development workers and who are trying to ensure they provide meaningful support and direction for these colleagues

# Introduction

Building Practitioners Strengths aimed to develop a reflective framework through which practitioners can identify and share approaches to community development.

Context

Community development has achieved legitimacy on policy and programme levels as a form of intervention for working with people to bring about changes in their lives. The challenge for those of us working with communities is to develop a practice base that can genuinely and consistently support people to build relationships with others and improve the quality of their life.

Successive policy developments have highlighted the need for people to be placed at the centre of change and there is evidence of some additional resources being made available to enable the rhetoric to become reality. A consequence of these burgeoning aspirations for community investment has led the term, and the label, ‘community development’ to be used so frequently that it is in danger of losing any real meaning. There is a whole range of practitioners working in a community setting wearing the badge of community development who are struggling to fulfil these aspirations. There are many varied reasons as to why this might be the case and might undermine the very best of intentions held by the community practitioner. Even the most experienced community development workers are finding their practice threatened by the roller coaster programmes which demand ‘hard’ outputs. Less experienced community development workers may lack the appropriate training necessary to build relevant underpinning knowledge and skills, and as community development becomes a ‘catch-all’, there is often inadequate managerial understanding and commitment.

Community development theory promotes the cycle of action and reflection and espouses the right to formative learning. The aim of “Building Practitioners Strengths” was to develop a flexible framework through which community development practitioners can examine, reflect on and name their practice in the current environment.

The aims of the book

This publication aims to help practitioners reflect on their practice – to evaluate what they bring to their practice, the context in which they work and the resulting strategy they adopt and apply. It therefore makes the case for strategic action and considered practice, for conscious community development work that is informed by a theoretical understanding and knowledge, and experience of application. That said, the aim was never to give readers a ‘how to do it’ guide to community development but rather to provide an accessible tool to help practitioners think through their practice.

We hope that practitioners will find this publication useful within the spirit of a developing process of action, reflection and analysis, which is flexible enough to be individually relevant. The significance of this project is in enabling practitioners to move beyond a description of their work to a better understanding of why they work in the way they do and on to new ways of approaching and engaging in community development work.

The intention is to provide a flexible learning tool – a framework. We acknowledge that community development is a contested concept, and as commented above, this is not a blueprint for community development practice but a prompt to enable debate, progress and evolution of practice. It is recognised that workers in the field of community development span a variety of motivations, contexts, and experiences. It would be unhelpful if this project developed a model, which rules some people in, and some people out, of practising community development. It is expected that people will use and adapt and develop the framework in the way that best suits them.

Developing the framework

All frameworks have to begin somewhere and a broad agenda on which the participants could base their reflections was devised. It was based on the identification of community development as concerning values, process and outcomes.

* Values can be described as the beliefs and principles that underpin your work.
* Process relates to the approach that we take in our work.
* Outcomes refer to the achievements of our practice.

These three tenets of community development provided a backbone for the process of developing a more detailed and rigorously tried and tested framework. The first stage in this process was collecting case study material. Seven practitioners undertook a detailed reflection on their own and provided a wealth of information about why people are involved in community development work, why they approach their work in particular ways, how they critically examine their practice and identify new approaches and strategies, how they evaluate and re-evaluate their achievements and aims. This recorded information informed the development of the resulting framework.

# Starting Points

**Key Purpose of Community Development**

The Community Development National Occupational Standards, revised 2015, defines the purpose and values of community development as below:

Community development enables people to work collectively to bring about positive social change.

This long term process starts from people’s own experience and enables communities[[1]](#footnote-2) to work together to:

* Identify their own needs and actions
* Take collective action using their strengths and resources
* Develop their confidence, skills and knowledge
* Challenge unequal power relationships
* Promote social justice, equality and inclusion

in order to improve the quality of their own lives, the communities in which they live and societies of which they are a part.

**Community development values:**

The community development process is underpinned by a set of values on which all practice is based. Community development practitioners need to relate these values to their roles and actions. There are five key values that underpin all community development practice:

* Social Justice and Equality
* Anti-discrimination
* Community Empowerment
* Collective Action
* Working and Learning Together
* What is reflection?

In Community Development practice the HOW and WHY, the PRACTICE and PROCESS are key to the work. Central to this is the reflective practitioner. The reflective practitioner regularly reviews how the values underpin, inform and are present within their community development practice. (CDNOS 2015)

For many practitioners, reflection is an acquired skill, one they learnt through participation in a community or youth work training programme. For other people, being reflective may be something that does not come easily to them. They may be ‘doers’, who just like to get on with the task and not spend time thinking about or looking back on what’s happened. Some people may feel insecure about themselves or themselves in their work role, and so not want to look too deeply for fear of exposing weaknesses or behaviour that they find too difficult to address. Or they may have simply experienced or come across the value of reflection, and not have the tools to know how to do it in any kind of structured way.

Reflection is about taking stock of some event or experience that has happened, stating what our intended role and outcomes were in that setting, identifying what actually happened and why, coming up with learning from that experience and thinking about how that can inform our behaviour or the way we work in the future. Many models of the Learning Cycle have been developed, with all essentially saying that learning comes about through a conscious process of examining an experience and planning future action from this point of insight.

When reflecting on an experience we may do this by ourselves, with another or in a group setting. The level to which the reflection can take place will usually be limited by several factors:

* Our own level of self awareness
* The degree of safety we fell in the setting
* The clarity of knowledge or theory we have about what it is we are trying to achieve
* Limitations of judgement or perception, brought about due to our beliefs/attitudes tending to be self-sealing or self-fulfilling, i.e. we have a tendency to notice or are able to recognise the things that fit with our beliefs, and to overlook the things that do not (sometimes called ‘selective perception’ or ‘selective recall’.
* The degree to which the culture within which we work encourages reflection, and prioritises time and resources for this to happen.

For reflection to be truly effective it needs to include viewing the experience from three perspectives: the intellectual or rational, the emotional and the political. By also exploring the emotional level we may gain useful insight into blocks, resistances or reasons why we undertook the work in a particular way.

The political level is about having an awareness of power relationships that go on within any piece of work, and where we are positioned in relation to this. For example, within community development work, the view you have of any particular experience will be coloured by the beliefs, knowledge and analysis you have about institutional and personal power. As a community development worker it would be hoped that you would be wanting to constantly have an awareness of who you are, i.e. gender, race, class etc., the kind of organisation you work for, and the impact that these factors have on the work you are doing and those you are working with.

Why we aim to incorporate reflection as an essential part of our work may be slightly different for each of us, but it is likely to include the following:

* As a key tool in personal and professional development
* As a means of checking on or taking stock of what we’re doing, why we’re doing it, how we’re doing it and whether we’re meeting our original aims.
* As one tool for evaluating how effective we are in our community development role
* To ensure that we are working in a conscious way, and in a way that feels true to our own personal values and beliefs
* To help us to identify gaps in our knowledge, skills or qualities
* To more easily be able to choose the way in which we work, and to plan future action

Summary

In conclusion, community development is a conscious activity, a particular way of working, with particular common values and beliefs. The way in which we work with these is about linking that theory and the practice, and about wanting to ensure that we do this in a way whereby we empower both ourselves, and those we work with, to be able to chose and learn and develop from our experiences. The most effective way of doing this is through reflection.

# 2 A Framework for Reflection

Reflecting upon practice is not always as easy as we may think. It involves moving beyond reflecting on our experiences to a more detailed examination of our own practice. It also involves the need to recognise and identify the different elements of practice and how these are informed and connected.

We therefore start with some basic principles:

* Our objective in reflecting upon practice is to develop our own effectiveness in supporting and facilitating community development.
* Our practice involves self awareness and the application of values, understanding, knowledge and skills into action.
* Our practice is shaped and informed by the context in which we are working.

The framework

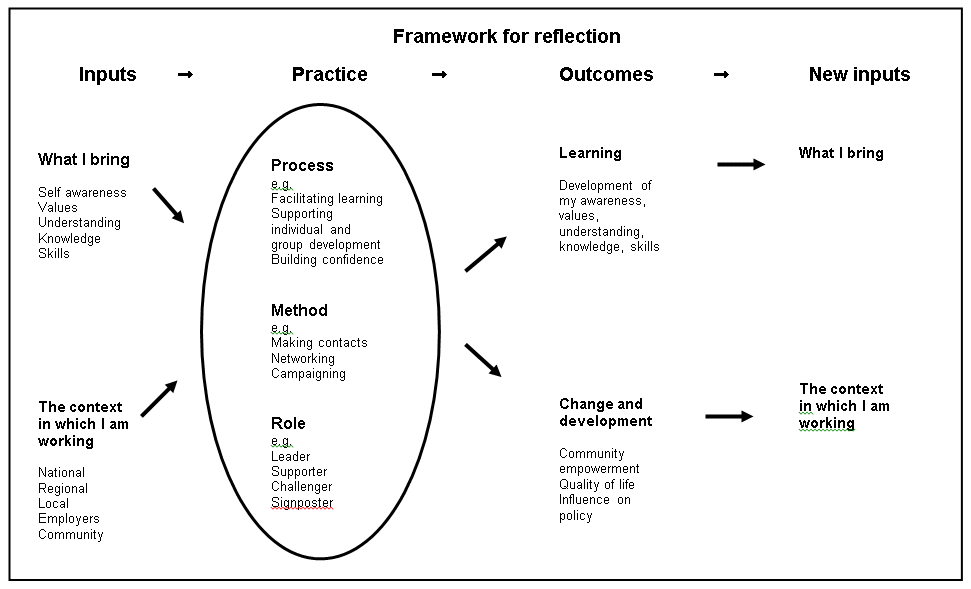
This is a theoretical tool which becomes real as it is applied and adapted so as to be relevant to the individual practitioner using it.

Reflecting upon our practice provides the opportunity to develop our awareness and understanding of both ourselves and the situation or context in which we are working. It involves asking ourselves questions about the inputs, the practice and the outcomes of that practice.

The framework below illustrates the connections between inputs, practice and outcomes of community development in what is a constantly changing situation. The detail of what we bring, the context, our practice and the outcomes of that practice is constantly changing but at any one time it is develops out of what has preceded it and leads us to what follows. It is like observing a movie – each time we reflect we are freezing one frame in the movie but in order to understand the whole picture we need to know what came before and what might happen later. It is a complex picture requiring awareness that there are different stories taking place for all players. Reflection helps us to direct our own part in the movie.

Unpacking the framework

Consideration and analysis of the inputs, practice and outcomes involves a ‘personal’ unpacking of values, understanding, knowledge and skills as well as an awareness that different situations may require varying roles and approaches. Below is a guide and more detailed explanation to the different elements contained within the framework.



Inputs

What I bring

As stated above, community development practice involves a level of self-awareness which informs our application of values, understanding, knowledge and skills. A good starting point for reflection is to identify what it is that you bring with you in terms of these ‘ingredients’.

Who I am describes our own sense of self-identity. Gender, race, class, sexuality, age may all be elements of this identity along with other factors.

Self-awareness enables us to locate ourselves in relation to issues of power and powerlessness. It also allows us to understand how our personality, style and motivation impact upon the crucial relationships we build as part of our practice.

Values describe our beliefs and politics about the society in which we live. An explicit understanding of and commitment to a ‘value base’ concerning societal inequalities and accessibility provides a key motivating factor for those who see community development as a process through which such values can be put into practice.

Values which are integral to community development include:

**belief**  that collaborative working is developmental in itself

in human rights and social justice

that people have something positive to offer

that everyone can learn

in the ability to change

in development of autonomy

**commitment to** accessibility

challenging social and aconomic inequality

positive action

self-determination

recognising difference and diversity as positive

starting from where people are

social change

The above three elements of self-identity, locating ourselves in relation to issues of power and powerlessness and underpinning values collectively provide the perspective through which we understand and analyse the world about us.

Understandingcommunity development includes an understanding of both process and outcomes. Community development workers facilitate a process which aims to be developmental in itself but which is leading to collectively sought outcomes relating to an improved quality of life. Encompassed within this understanding must be a realisation of inequality and resulting levels of power and powerlessness. This necessitates the involvement of community development practitioners in working with conflict at both personal and structural levels. This involves enabling people to recognise the roots of the conflict, supporting them through this understanding and to respond in a variety of ways.. Community development practice is concerned with positive resolution of conflict and is therefore a pivotal focus of reflection.

It is crucial that practitioners operate with a structural understanding of all equalities issues and apply this to their practice. (An integrated equalities approach is offered as an example of applying the framework at the end of this section).

Knowledgeas relevant to community development may include information about the people and the communities in which we are working as well as the implications of wider policy. For example, community development workers may need to be informed about:

* local agencies and groups
* organisational policies and plans
* local resources and services
* key people and structures in statutory authorities
* regional / national organisations
* networks
* organisational structures and constitutions
* funding sources
* local / regional / national policies
* legislation relevant to community activities
* implications of social policy

Skills - core to all community development practice is the ability to take on a range of roles to support the community development process. These roles include:

* facilitation
* training
* constructive challenge
* negotiation
* mediation
* networking
* organising

A wide range of skills are needed to undertake these roles to ensure that the practitioner is sensitive in carrying out the appropriate role in a way which advances community development and is conscious not to take on roles e.g. that of a gatekeeper, that hinder the process. In relation to the roles identified above then, practitioners would reflect on their facilitation skills, negotiating skills, networking skills etc.

There are additional skills which enhance practice but are not necessarily essential. The key is to be able to identify where other’s skills can be brought in e.g. publicity design, financial management, and passed on.

The context in which I am working

External factors that impact upon our work can have a positive and negative effect on our ability to achieve. The context within which we work may shape and inform our practice in relation to our overall strategy, our choice of approach and the roles we play.

The nature of our employing body; funding bodies and their criteria and expectations, the communities with which we are working, local / regional / national policy developments all contribute to a contextual picture which we need to analyse and understand. This informs our strategic practice in relation to process, methods and roles. For example we may need to consider:

**In relation to aims and process:**

At what stage of development are communities and groups?

What are the priority issues in relation to community development?

Which policies and programmes raise issues or provide opportunities for community development?

Are there differing expectations of my own role or conflicts between the strategies of different

stakeholders which need to be recognised and addressed?

**In relation to methods:**

What methods have been tried before and how successful were they?

What do I know about the people to be involved and what pointers does that provide?

**In relation to role:**

At what stage of development is this group?

What are the issues that need to be resolved?

What role/input is required to move the community development process forward?

Practice

The inputs to practice described above inform community development workers to make strategic decisions about their practice. This strategy is likely to involve a range of the following processes, methods and roles at any one time.

Process

Community Development processes can include:

• starting groups • supporting collective action

• community consultation • supporting group development

• facilitating learning • promoting / supporting equality

• promoting accountability • promoting accessibility

• dealing with conflict • politicisation

Methods

Community Development methods can include:

* mapping
* networking
* sharing practice and learning
* individual mentoring/ support
* training/facilitating
* making contacts
* building confidence
* identifying and securing resources
* listening

Roles

Community Development roles can include:

* catalyst
* initiator
* challenger
* negotiator
* information collector/ giver
* promoter
* steerer
* facilitator
* encourager
* advocate
* networker
* trainer
* co-ordinator
* clarifier/ analyser
* listener/ reflector
* supporter

Outcomes

Learning and change and development - The outcomes of practice for the practitioner relate to personal learning and growth which continually enhances what we bring to our practice. In addition, the practice itself alongside other interventions and developments change the environment in which we work. The picture is constantly evolving and changing and so reflection and analysis need to focus on what it looks like at different points in time in relation to the community development process.

Effective reflection can enable workers and group members to identify good practice and develop forward strategy by:

* identifying strengths and weakness in our practice
* reviewing our overall strategy and plan strategically
* reviewing and exploring our approach to different areas of work
* reviewing and exploring our role in different situations
* continuing to develop our own learning, understanding and practice

This is therefore an iterative framework which has no end but continues to inform and re-inform. Community development rests on an openness to learning and the reflective practitioner is continually learning from practice in order that they act strategically and appropriately.

Developing your own framework

This is not the only approach to reflection. Different people reflect in different ways and from different starting points. You may identify and include additional elements. It is our hope that the framework as outlined can be accessed in a number of ways, thereby recognising practitioners’ own starting points and having resonance for a diverse grouping of workers. Ideally it can be applied in such a way that any practitioner can use it, develop it and discard it - building their own unique framework for reflection.

Case study example: applying the framework to ensure an equalities perspective

The Black Development Agency illustrated how the framework can be used to ensure an integrated equalities approach to practice.

**Inputs**

* Who am I? (Black, a woman, Disabled, a lesbian or gay?)
* Where am I from? (class, country of origin, region of a country?)
* What is the context in which I am working?
* How does the above affect my values and practice as a community development worker?
* What experiences have I had that may influence the way that I work?

**Practice**

* Am I working towards implementing my core values?
  + equality – am I striving to eliminate disadvantage, discrimination and deprivation?
  + quality – am I working for the highest achievable standards in services and facilities?
  + empowerment – am I giving people real involvement in, and influence over, decision making?
* Are the methods I am using in doing community development work accessible to the communities to the communities I am working with?
* Am I ensuring that equalities issues retain a high profile in:
  + employment (practices and procedures of recruiting)?
  + service delivery that is equally accessible and ensuring there is consultation with users where appropriate and provides opportunities for excluded communities?
  + monitoring the work?
* Am I a leader, supporter, challenger, facilitator?
* Do I need to be aware of the role expected of me by the community I am working with?

**Outcomes**

* Have I used the core values pertaining to equalities issues in all aspects of my work?
* What have I learnt from this work with this group/community?
* Are there any improvements in my own practice that could be made?
* What skills have I learnt or could learn to help improve my wok further?
* In what ways has the community changed and benefited from the work?
* Has the community been empowered and how?
* What influence has the work had on policy?
* How has the work improved the quality of life for the participants?

This framework is intended as a starting point for people to think about all forms of oppression and disadvantage that could be worth considering as part of good working practice in community development work.

# 3 Practitioner reflections - emerging themes

Seven practitioner case studies informed the development of Building Practitioner Strengths. The participants were selected to include a range of contexts and to share potentially differing perspectives. Almost all had some experience of working in communities before choosing to work in a paid capacity and some had previously been involved as volunteer activists in the very same projects in which they became paid workers. This created an added dimension when reflecting on practice and the need to consider changes in context and role.

Some indicators of community development practice emerged from the case studies:

* the value of experience in the development of knowledge and skills
* the importance of “active” listening
* the necessity for skilful and constructive challenge within community groups and with resourcing agencies
* the merits of assertiveness skills - both for the successful practitioner and for community groups
* the role of advocacy in a community development worker’s approach
* being honest and open about who you are alongside a recognition that a paid worker shouldn’t be fighting their own battles
* the tension between outreach/development work and the funding-led aspects of some community development work
* the significance of the long-term process of building relationships and trust
* the recognition of small steps in personal and collective confidence and action as an indicator of successful community development
* the centrality of a power analysis and the need to tackle inequalities
* the importance of networking
* the personal rewards and benefits of community work

Characteristics of practice

The case studies illustrated the impact of experience, self-awareness, understanding of community development, and specific context on a community worker’s practice. So although we can discern some common themes, there are some differences of emphasis in focus, priorities and the practice itself. For example:

Practitioner 1

* highlighted some of the development and sustainability issues which affect Black led agencies who provide support to the community.
* recognised how awareness of differing cultures and use of language informed her practice

Practitioner 2

* focused on enabling people to campaign
* highlighted the importance of being out and about, keeping an ear to the ground
* prioritised collaborative working with other agencies

Practitioner 3

* articulated a theoretical understanding of community development, rooted in class analysis
* strove to promote and practice a collectivist approach
* informed his practice with an awareness of the motivation and agendas of others
* felt a tension in being a part of a state sponsored regeneration process and is concerned about being incorporated into the system

Practitioner 4

* recognised the value of ‘taking a step back’ to review progress
* saw herself as a leader in changing attitudes
* prioritised access to information as a method to empowerment

Practitioner 5

* prioritised training as a focus for community group development
* asserted the need to respond to community led needs rather than funding led outputs

Practitioner 6

* identified investment in process as developing responsibility and building accountability
* was wary of hiding behind professionalism “we have to be brave enough to be who we are sometimes”
* placed value on listening and listening skills

Practitioner 7

* had a clarity about the values and principles underpinning his practice and recognised the difficulties of retaining integrity and loyalty to these values on a day to day basis
* identified continuous learning as crucial to effective practice
* asserted the right to challenge and the responsibility of receiving and dealing with challenge

There are some distinctive perspectives on practice but there are also common values and approaches upon which practitioners place different emphasis. This serves to make the case that there is no one, right way of ‘doing’ community development though there are common features. The changing context of community development has led to new strategies and new dilemmas but the basic approach stays the same.

The seven case studies and a follow up conference discussion served to reinforce the significance of process in community development work. Tensions arise for practitioners when they feel that the effectiveness of their work is measured against short-term outputs with little qualitative value. The way in which we carry out our work, the quality of relationships between people, the recognition of inequality coupled with the active encouragement of change, and the learning that is derived from community development, are seen as defining factors.

‘Insights’ to community development

The case studies were presented at a weekend conference using a story telling method. Having listened to a story the participants were encouraged to draw out ‘insights’ about community development practice. The insights included:

**Understanding of community development**

* Community development focuses on enabling groups within the community who are ‘powerless’ (economically, socially, politically) to empower themselves to make more informed choices (personal or social)
* Community development is political and contradictory
* Community development is a long-term process and the sustainability of the work always needs to be considered
* Communities need to be able to make decisions from an informed position
* Experience of community development workers is very often very similar, whether different kinds of communities, different areas etc.

**Context**

* There is a need to recognise the particular (and often different) agendas of all those involved, and our own personal/professional/agency agendas
* Clarity is needed – both of purpose and to whom you are accountable
* Local authorities need to value and understand ‘grass roots’ community development work

**Practice**

* Building a relationship and trust is very important - giving time to people values them
* There is a need to be realistic about what you as a worker can offer
* Workers must understand their motivations; is it possible to detach our own social and political motivations from practice?
* Workers and their managers need to be flexible about methods of working
* Self-belief is needed in the ways you choose to work and recognition that your integrity may sometimes be compromised. Community development workers need to recognise tensions and where compromise may be needed
* Community development workers need to recognise and understand starting points in order to enable a group to reflect on group dynamics, power and powerlessness, strategies (personal and collective), challenge and collusion
* A team approach is needed where a number of workers/agencies are involved in an area
* There is often the dilemma of balancing the constant demands to meet targets and to develop funding with carrying out grass-roots work. Conflict can arise where consideration of both outputs and the process is needed
* Involvement in a piece of work with difficulties can be de-skilling for a worker – especially if they are not adequately supported

**Reflection**

* To learn there has to be reflection of experience
* The opportunity to reflect is important to:
  + give you the chance to praise yourself for work well
  + look at other – perhaps better ways of approaching a situation
  + remind yourself of what is important to you in the way you work and to check to see if you are doing it.
  + put things into perspective
* Reflection time allows us to look at how we work and whether we are really meeting the needs of the people we are supposed to be enabling / empowering.
* There is a need to evaluate outcomes – both to know what has worked and what has not.
* Community development workers should identify personal support including adequate supervision. Only ‘we’ know what types of stresses are involved in our work. How we deal with new situations and experiences can be made easier if we share with someone who can understand.

Summary

At the conference, the case stories became the starting points for a deeper analysis and understanding of the theme under question - in this case, community development - reflecting on practice and the challenges of the role. General conversation can be rambling and without clear focus or analysis. Reflection by community development practitioners needs to be more structured if it is to be effective in helping to develop our practice but it also needs to be flexible and open enough to allow the practitioner’s own experience, values and understanding to be genuinely reflected upon and built upon.

Reflection should be informative and developmental. It is not a vehicle for criticism and we need to beware of setting people up. What is apparent is the lack of opportunity for effective reflection in work-based supervision. Employers have a clear responsibility to allow and enable workers to develop their practice and build upon their experience whether this is through supervision from line managers or from peers. The framework provides a basis for constructing a supervision model. It may also be helpful to line managers who have little personal experience of community development work but find themselves managing community development staff.

# 4 Over to You

All the people interviewed in the case studies felt that the process of reflection was not only useful but refreshing. It also enabled some people to strategically plan for future work thereby helping to develop a “critical consciousness[[2]](#footnote-3). Strategic overview, planning and reflection are inextricably linked. Yet, despite a commitment to the process as evidenced in their willingness to enter their stories in this publication, the case study practitioners admitted to a lack of proactive reflection on a programmed basis. Most community workers feel over-stretched in their day to day work and many simply find the focus and methodology difficult. The following guidelines and ideas are provided to help you to both create opportunities for reflection and to use such opportunities effectively by developing your own reflective framework.

Establishing frameworks

The framework is intended to be a flexible tool that you may use in its entirety or in part. You may wish to use it as it stands or you may find it a useful starting point for developing your own unique framework – a tool that is relevant and makes sense to you. The framework can be used in a variety of ways both in relation to how you’re reflecting and what you’re reflecting upon.

These guidelines provide some reference points and suggestions to help you to reflect upon your practice. We anticipate that practitioners have different preferred styles and opportunities for reflection and have therefore outlined approaches that can be taken if reflecting:

* on one’s own
* with a peer/supervisor
* in a group/team situation

The degree of safety which practitioners feel in the reflection setting is a key factor in the extent to which effective reflection can take place. This should be recognised in supervision and group situations and requires clearly negotiated agreements about both purpose and confidentiality.

The framework will only be effective if it works for you and provides an aid to reflection that helps to inform and develop your own practice. It may be useful to have your own checklist against which you can measure the usefulness of your chosen approach to reflection. For example:

* Am I clear about why I am needed?
* Am I clear about what I am offering?
* Is everyone clear what my role is?
* Have I given sufficient consideration to the wider context?
* Do I have a clear strategy?
* Have I identified and reflected upon positive developments?
* Have I identified and reflected upon any difficulties and issues?
* Have I identified key learning points?
* Have I reviewed my strategy in relation to my own learning and current development?
* Have I got a clear action plan for the future?

# A **Reflecting on your own**

The first time you use the framework you will need to spend some time thinking about each of the elements in turn. The “Unpacking the Framework” section of Chapter 4, which includes an illustrative listing, may provide some helpful prompts for this initial reflection.

Reflection Exercise

1. **Focus**

Identify the aspect or area of your work on which you wish to reflect. This may be specific (especially if you set aside time to reflect on a frequent basis), such as considering your practice as a community worker in a particular meeting or activity. Or it may be a more strategic reflection on your part in a project or wider programme.

1. **Context**

Reflect upon the contextual considerations of the work. How does the context inform your strategy and approach?

1. **What you bring**

Why are you needed? What aspects of your own knowledge and understanding are relevant? How and in what way do you activate your value base i.e. how does who you are and your values impact on your work?

1. **Strategy, approach and role**

What are the developments in the work? Why? What are the difficulties? What have you learnt? Should you make any changes in strategy, approach and roles?

1. **Action plan**

What do you aim to achieve and what will you need to do over the next month, 3 months, 6 months?

Once you have worked through this process you will already have a good idea of the specific headings/themes which make sense to you. As you try it more and more it will start to become increasingly familiar and unique to your practice. Hopefully you will develop your own route map for reflection that has signposts you can follow, to provide a more thorough and directed analysis than intuition alone.

There are some potential barriers to effective individual reflection:

* lack of awareness (this usually diminishes with experience)
* facing up to exploration of the elements you find most challenging
* making the space to undertake reflection.
* lack of effective feed-back

It is not recommended that reflection of practice should be limited to individual reflection. However the development of effective individual reflection is a key input to and outcome of an equally important reflective dialogue with others.

# B Helping someone else establish a framework - peer reflection / the supervisory role

This can work well in terms of engaging, prompting and moving another person forward. However, criteria around negotiation, mutual understanding, trust and shared perspectives are critical if the reflective process is to be strengthening of practice. In situations of supervision it is particularly crucial that both parties are clear about the purpose and objectives of the reflective process.

Reflector / Facilitator Exercise

This exercise may provide some structure in situations where one person is acting as a facilitator in helping someone else to reflect upon practice, using the framework. The agenda for reflection is focussed on setting the scene, describing practice and developing practice.

The reflector’s role

1. **Setting the scene**

* Outline your community work situation and describe key values, understanding and aspects of self-awareness that underpin all your work.
* Identify the area of your practice that you wish to focus on.
* In what wider contexts is the focus situated?

1. **Describing and exploring your practice**

* Describe the detail of your own practice
* What is your strategy in relation to process, method and role(s)?
* What difficulties have you encountered?
* What have been the outcomes of your practice?

1. **Developing your practice**

* What have you learnt?
* What are the developments, issues and difficulties?
* What now? What strategy will help to further progress developments and overcome any issues and difficulties?

The facilitator’s role

Your role is to assist the person who is reflecting – it is not to be judgmental, directive or putting your own opinion. It is also important that the person reflecting gets most of the ‘airtime’ - your role is to listen. Your contributions should help the reflector to:

* Focus on their own practice rather than lingering too long on the collective developments.
* Recognise and explore the interplay of context and self into practice.
* Develop an awareness of their own strengths and achievements.
* Identify and analyse issues and difficulties.
* Explore possibilities for future practice.

1. **Setting the scene**

Are you beginning to get a clear picture of both where the reflector is coming from and the context within which they are working? If not you may wish to seek clarification or ask some simple questions.

1. **Describing practice**

Try to relate to the situation being described and to ask the questions which will help the reflector to explore that situation and their practice in detail. Questions beginning with what, why and how will help them to think about what they were doing, why they were doing it and how they were doing it. Share and check out your own perceptions of achievements and difficulties from what you have heard. Help the reflector to recognise positive aspects of practice as much as difficulties.

1. **Developing practice**

Help the reflector to identify areas of learning and development through simple questions and reflecting back possible lessons and developments you have drawn out of their description. Again sharing from your own experience can be helpful. Help the reflector to identify some key areas / issues they wish to address in relation to future practice and to explore options for practical ways forward. It is important that the reflector finishes in a positive frame of mind – having had their strengths as a practitioner affirmed and hopefully some new insights into their future strategy.

Reviewing and improving the process

It may be helpful to jointly review this exercise both to develop the framework and to improve your skills in the reflective process. The following questions should be considered in such a review:

* What does the reflector bring in relation to values, self-awareness, understanding, skills etc. which helps them to effectively reflect on their own practice?
* What are the difficulties and barriers that prevent or lessen effective reflection? How could they have reflected differently?
* In what ways does the facilitator help the process of self-reflection? In what ways do they not help? How could they have facilitated differently?
* In what ways does the framework help and provide a useful structure for the reflective process? In what ways does it not help? How could it be changed or improved?

# C Developing a framework in which teams and groups can collectively reflect

The concepts of shared meaning and dialogue are equally valid in team/group reflection. This storytelling method can offer a structured approach for groups of people to collectively reflect and draw out common ‘insights’ and ways forward. It may therefore be a particularly appropriate tool for community development teams to use as a way of exploring practice in depth. Commitment and understanding of the process from all those involved will be required and one person will need to take on the role of facilitator to direct the exercise.

Story telling begins with a verbal telling of the story. It is followed by a reflective circle, in which the participants reflect upon how the story and the issues it raises and addresses are similar and/or different to their own experiences. Participants then collectively document a number of ‘insights’ based on what they have heard and discussed. The key is that these statements are not judgmental but recognise the experience from which the practitioner is coming. Usually about 10 - 15 insight cards will be generated for each story which, if categorised, should provide additional elements to a developing reflective framework.

Each person’s story is a personal account and therefore no two stories will be the same and each story might only focus on one or two key issues/tensions within an overall theme of ‘Community Development – reflecting on practice and the challenges of the role’.

Collective Reflection Exercise

Facilitators Guidelines

It is important to allocate an appropriate proportion of time to the different stages of the process. The timings in these guidelines are those suggested if the total time available for the exercise is 90 minutes. This is probably the minimum time required for this exercise to work effectively.

1. **Introductions 5 minutes**

Remind the group that they are all active listeners within the group - ask them to imagine the story from the storyteller’s viewpoint while it is being told and to make brief notes throughout. Ask them to try not to make connections with their own experience until after the story has been told. The point at this first stage is to listen. It should be emphasised that confidentiality and respect should be observed.

1. **Storytelling 15-20 minutes**

The storyteller will now have a maximum of 20 minutes to tell his/her story to the group. The group may take notes which will include any points for clarification, key insights from the story, or any questions which may arise. Please ask the group not to interrupt the storyteller at this point, as there will be opportunities later to for dialogue and discussion.

1. **Reflection circle 10 minutes**

The purpose is to carefully consider what has been said and then to create some shared dialogue. The group can now begin to connect the storyteller’s experience with their own. So, the first 5 minutes should be to quietly reflect on what has been heard and to read any notes jotted down - this is done on one’s own. Next, everyone should be invited to say a few words about whether the issues raised in the story are similar to or different from their own experience - is this story also their own story? Please consider the following points:

* people should speak one at a time and respect that it is only a few words they have to share at this point - not another story!
* there should be no response or dialogue between people in the circle until everyone has spoken
* people can pass on speaking if they wish - no one should be forced to speak

1. **Structured dialogue - 30 mins**

This is when people can really begin to get involved in the story and unpack it. The facilitator helps the group to further explore the story which has just been shared by using the following types of open questions:

* descriptive questions - what?
* these invite the listeners to clarify any missing details of the story; e.g. what were the original aims of the project, who initiated it, how did you start off?
* explanation questions - why?
* these enable understanding of why things happened as they did, and provide an opportunity to discuss the causes which may underlie the story. Eg Whose interests were at stake? What roles were being played? Why do you think it succeeded/failed? What did you find most frustrating in what happened?
* synthesis questions - so what?
* this is the opportunity to draw together what was learned from the storyteller’s experience. Eg In what ways are our own values embedded in our practice? Can any conclusions about process be learnt? Does it deepen/broaden our understanding of community development and our work as practitioners?

1. **Creating insights - 20 mins**

This stage uses the participants’ notes and subsequent discussions to identify those insights which the group wishes to share and register. Each insight should be written on a separate sheet and should be clear and explanatory.

Insight cards should then be put onto a large space on the floor, or on the wall, so that they can be grouped to draw out and record the development of collective learning and understanding of the theme in question.

1. **Action Points**

By this stage, the group may want to develop positive pointers for future work. The insight cards will have helped to identify significant factors/issues from the story and the dialogue. The question - “now what?” - should enable the development of individual and collective strategies.

Tools for reflection

You may want to develop some practical and simple tools to make it easier to engage with the reflective framework. Here are some ideas that we have tried which you may be able to adapt or add to.

Reflection prompt cards

1. These provide a visual aid to both self and peer reflection. You will need a number of small cards or post-its and it may help to have a range of different colours available. You can then use the cards to develop your own reflection toolkit in the following way.
2. On one set of cards record the different elements of what you bring to your work. Each different skill, area of understanding etc should be recorded on a different card. These are your What I Bring cards.
3. On another set of cards (different colour) record aspects of the work context which impact upon or inform your own role. These are your Context cards.
4. Now identify the area of work you wish to reflect upon and:
5. Select from your What I Bring cards areas of skills and understanding etc. particularly relevant to the area of work you are focusing on.
6. Select from your Context cards the contextual considerations particularly relevant to the area of work you are focusing on. You may at this point wish to add new context cards related to the area of focus itself.

On selecting the relevant What I Bring and Context cards you can spread them on the floor or wall in order to begin to see some of the overall picture. The use of the cards, in this way, helps to focus upon the different input elements of the framework and to begin reflecting upon your practice.

You may wish to develop a further set of Practice cards to record the process, methods and roles you are using.

Finally you can record your own personal learning onto additional What I Bring cards and your observations of changes and developments onto new Context cards. In this way you can develop a live toolkit of prompt cards for on-going reflection.

1. Communities refer to those that can be defined by geography, identity or interest [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Friere, P. (1972) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Harmondsworth: Penguin [↑](#footnote-ref-3)