

Topics in Community Development Over 50 Years

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Community development is such a broad field of study and practice that it is hard to define and describe its evolution over the past almost 50 years that the CDS journal of *Community Development* has been published. There can be little question, though, that topics addressed in the journal changed as issues facing communities changed and as did the interests of researchers and practitioners. An especially important aspect of *Community Development* as a publication is that it provides an outlet for interactions between academic researchers and practitioners with definite advantages to each group. In fact, this interaction is often mentioned in discussions at Community Development Society meetings as a major reason for continued participation.

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Practitioners identify topics that need additional study and researchers apply scientific methods in identifying and evaluating potential strategies to address them. This collaboration contributes to effective practices and improvements in quality of life in communities. Interactions along these lines are what motivated launching the *Journal of Community Development* in 1970. It includes 50 volumes and, in the process expanded to the current five issues per year, spanning a broad range of topics.

The range of topics reflects issues that community development as a discipline needed to address. The early focus was on rural development issues with the major thrust in the early 1970s on rural development as a priority. The range of topics soon moved from economic development to much broader topics such as poverty, housing, health, and other social issues that community leaders in both rural and metro areas had to address. Especially important is the recognition that these issues are intertwined and require collaboration among practitioners, public leaders, and academics trained in many disciplines. *Community Development* continues to provide an outlet for these discussions making the editing process somewhat complex.

The journal remains broadly based in coverage to include contributions by disciplines that might not be included in outlets with a narrower and more focused coverage. Consequently, this broader and cross-disciplinary perspective sometimes made it more difficult for community development to earn recognition as an independent academic and professional field of study by both scholars and practitioners. The CDS still wrestles with this issue and is working to define topics and a field of study that should be covered in academic programs designed to train practitioners. Likewise, a debate continues whether a professional certification is appropriate and, if so, what topics should be included to maximize the value to practitioners.

Throughout these discussions, *Community Development*¹ (CD) as a journal promoted the credibility of CD professionals and helped them select policies and development strategies based on tested theories and approaches used elsewhere. Because CD is a peer-refereed publishing outlet, it is respected by scholars and its articles are cited in many other journals facilitating the advancement of knowledge on community development issues. As an outlet for interdisciplinary research and discussions, CD created its niche and continues to be used by a variety group of both academics and practitioners. Practitioners identify relevant issues and concerns while scholars explore and document contributing factors and potential remedies. This teamwork provides direction to CD practices and boosts the credibility of community developers as they address a myriad and changing set of issues in their practices.

Changing Community Development Issues

Defining community development in a precise manner is difficult but a suitable place to start is with the Principles of Good Practice (POG) endorsed by the Community Development Society (CDS), under whose direction *Community Development* is published.

- Promote active and representative participation toward enabling all community members to meaningfully influence the decisions that affect their lives.
- Engage community members in learning about and understanding community issues, and the economic, social, environmental, political, psychological, and other impacts associated with alternative courses of action.
- Incorporate the diverse interests and cultures of the community in the community development process; and disengage from support of any effort that is likely to adversely affect the disadvantaged members of a community.

- Work actively to enhance the leadership capacity of community members, leaders, and groups within the community.
- Be open to using the full range of action strategies to work toward the long-term sustainability and well-being of the community.

The Principles encompass a broad range of research and practice topics in CD. For many reasons, this breadth of topics has enabled CD to be a platform for active discussions among CDS members--scholars as well as practitioners. The topics covered have changed with both community development issues as well as interests by scholars/practitioners in researching these topics.

During the past several years, the authors (past editors of CD) compiled a list of articles published with the aim of generating a collection of representative contributions that CD made to the literature over five decades. Key researchers were surveyed and presentations with discussions were held at CDS conferences along with download counts in recent years. These efforts produced a list of articles by decade and topic that provide an overall picture of how issues changed, as seen by journal authors and contributors. The following discussion is based on those findings. Time and space do not permit an intensive discussion of these times; rather, the topics are listed along with references to articles during specific times that illustrate the thinking.

Rural Development. The journal began in an era that focused on addressing rural concerns through regional solutions. For example, the Appalachian Rural Development Act (1965) recognized concerns in many low-income areas and funded agencies to address them. The U.S. Economic Development Administration, under the Public Works and Economic Development Act (1965), took a broader approach to rural issues in general and with financial assistance for regions to design

¹ In 2006, the Journal of Community Development was renamed Community Development: Journal of the Community Development Society to reduce confusion by rating agencies with the Community Development Journal published in the U.K.

overall economic development strategies. These and other issues motivated early discussions by CDS founders as well as researchers and affected the types of topics published in the journal.

Thus, during the 1970s and 1980s, much research and interest by practitioners centered on issues facing rural areas including those resulting from the farm crises in that period (Pulver, 1989). Rural planning approaches with a more organized and consistent set of strategies were also researched in an attempt to manage some of the rural concerns addressed. These concerns brought research that was reported in *CD* on a variety of rural related planning issues (Blakely & Bradshaw, 1982).

Research on these topics were further stimulated by passage of the federal Rural Development Act (1972) that promoted efforts to find ways to help rural areas design a new future. Grant funds and technical assistance by federal agencies such as HUD provided opportunities, often with resources for local agencies in rural areas to expand planning and other efforts to address local issues and concerns. These strategies, sometimes based on research published in *CD* as federal financial support, enhanced the need for solid research and a theoretical base for planning efforts in both rural and metro areas.

The topics published in the Journal expanded as the CDS clientele and interests broadened into finding new ways to address both urban and rural concerns and as community development became more accepted as a discipline based on solid research with a theoretical base and documented practices (Shaffer, 1990). The latter 1970s and early 1980s brought articles that integrated research with local development programs, examined participatory evaluation as a tool to bring community members into finding solutions, and looked for new approaches to long-term solutions (Goudy & Tait, 1979).

Consistent through these discussions was a need to focus on finding consistent theoretical foundations that explain the inner workings of community development to continue enhancing

its respect and acceptance as a discipline to study and pursue (Bhattacharyya, 2003). This basic direction for *CD* continues as is true of most scholarly outlets that try to link scholarship and practice.

Journal at 25 Years. A useful way to trace the changing topics in community development, especially in the early years of the journal, is to examine issues summarized 25 years ago by Blair and Hembd for the 25th anniversary volume. The editors at that time intended the volume as a way to “reflect on and gauge the progress made in community development.” The theme of the 25th volume-- “What We Have Learned,” was a way to “reflect on the past and build for the future in community development...[providing] a forum to share important insights gained by people participating in community development the past quarter century.” While many submitted manuscripts focused on theory, most emphasized practice. This emphasis reflects the ongoing purpose of the Journal: “to disseminate information on theory, research and practice” of community development. Manuscript reviewers for the special edition included practitioners, researchers, and community development educators. The reviewers emphasized the reflective nature of the 25th anniversary. The articles selected by the reviewers and editors were grouped into three broad categories: the community as an entity; the changing practice of community development; and development of small or rural communities.

It is an enlightening exercise to compare the three general themes of 25 years ago to community development in the 21st century. Community development, for instance, increasingly has taken an urban and neighborhood focus. The community, as the building block of society, which is part of the CDS Mission Statement, was examined in the first set of articles in the special edition. This emphasis has not changed in the subsequent 25 years. Authors explored the nature and structure of community development as a collective and inclusive collaborative process of the community residents.

The second set of articles examined both the practice and the process of community development, focusing on the facilitative role of community development practitioners. It is safe to conclude that the role of the community developer has changed in the community development process with the growth in professionalism and knowledge of practices.

While the Principles of Good Practice maintain their relevance, community development has become more complex. Several authors in the 25th edition anticipated that controversy would increasingly impact the practice of community development, as is clearly the case in the current environment. Other articles discussed ways that the profession of community development could be improved. The last general topic in the special edition addressed rural and small community development, a continued focus of the profession in its diamond anniversary. As we know, that is not the case even in light of recent population declines and economic stagnation in many rural areas that, in some cases, is challenging their continued viability.

The 25th edition editors concluded from the scope of the articles that the theory and practice of community development had made significant strides from the birth of the Community Development Society in 1969 to 1995, but admittedly more progress was needed in several areas. While much has been learned about community development since 1995, the scope of the profession has expanded to addressing urban issues and challenges, and the quality of community development research has contributed to a more robust set of applied theories of community development but essentially the same conclusion can be reached: we need to keep working and learning about community development.

Community versus Economic Development. The early economic development literature devoted much attention job creation and especially the use of financial incentives to lure manufacturing and other high-paying industries. These jobs, in turn,

would have local multiplier efforts that would bring local development. Of increasing importance was investing in workers (human capital) through education programs and workforce development to increase their capacity thus making an area more attractive to private investment.

However, it also became clear that effective development practices required a strong community development focus, namely how to build and strengthen broader community participation and contributions to finding remedies (Green, 2008). Equally clear was that society had changed in activities according to the discussions by Putnam in *Bowling Alone* in 1995. Residents now engaged in different types of activities and membership/participation in traditional organizations was declining. Key to local development was to find new ways to engage these groups in community decision-making practices and betterment programs. With technology changes, residents spent less time in traditional group activities but, nevertheless, participated in other endeavors with special interest. In some respects, this contributed to a centralized decision-making “top-down” environment.

Community development practitioners recognized that under-engaged populations such as minorities, females, and other groups were important contributors to local decision-making. Residents were shifting in how they interacted with groups so new ways to engage these residents in decisions about community issues and projects were discussed in more detail as an essential component of the community development process to enhance social well-being. During the 1980s, CD articles described ways to better engage females and other groups in these processes (Lackey, & Burke, 1984; Scott & Johnson 2005).

Small Business Emphasis. In addition, economic development thinking shifted from focusing mainly on attracting large manufacturing plants to communities through incentives to finding

ways to help local investors launch new businesses. Interest grew in finding ways to stimulate these efforts by focusing on entrepreneurship, small business finance, existing business assistance, and related approaches (Lichtenstein, Lyons, & Kutzhanova, 2004). These initiatives, supported by federal agencies such as the Small Business Administration and the Economic Development Administration, were part of a national focus on state and local initiatives.

Local Leadership. The growing professionalism of community development recognized that effective local leaders are key to community sustainability and prosperity. CD contained an active discussion (1990s and later) of how to generate local leaders as well as the effects or outcomes. Issues such as the existence of a community lifecycle and can it be altered through aggressive external and local intervention through active leadership were discussed in CD.

Importance of the Capitals. Social capital grew in importance as an essential ingredient of community development theory and practice, deemed crucial to effective local development--both business and industrial development. The five capitals: financial, natural, produced, human, and social were recognized as elements that could be actively built and maintained in communities and, in fact, are essential for sustainability. Discussions of ways to engage broad participation by residents in a community continued as an important part of effective community development (Emery & Flora, 2006). Strategies to deal with these issues were developed and empirically tested under different scenarios. Community development relies especially on building and maintaining social capital and these discussions were an important part of discussions in CD during the 2000s.

Measuring Outcomes. Measuring the outcomes from community development practices has always been an issue but seemed to become more prevalent in discussions with both academics and practitioners as necessary to enhance the

credibility of community development in the 2000s. The multi-dimensional nature of community issues complicates measuring outcomes but without solid information regarding effectiveness of strategies it is more difficult for practitioners to select and implement effective approaches. Thus, the CD published many articles documenting the effects of development strategies to learn in which circumstances and scenarios they are effective and how they have a sound theoretical basis (Brennan & Brown, 2008).

Successful and lasting community change has been difficult to measure as well as to document strategies that have been effective. This concern has been pursued by academics, practitioners and agencies such as foundations that for many years invested in local groups interested in bringing about community change. (Blanke & Walzer, 2013) The growth in Collective Impact and similar approaches that provide a framework to bring lasting change was an outcome of these discussions. The debate on measuring community change and factors that are important will continue as new approaches are formulated and implemented by community leaders in efforts to make desired and sustained community improvements. These discussions are at the heart of overall community development practice and are key to maintaining the credibility that community development practices has earned over the years.

Summary

Community Development has provided an outlet for researchers on many aspects of community development. While its growth from two issues per year to five issues increased its standing as research journal, it still faces challenges as CDS works to increase its stature among other journals based on number of citations and other factors. These increases will attract additional authors and increase the flow and quality of submissions to the journal.

At the same time, CD must meet the interests of both academics and practitioners as well as a

diversity of associated disciplines. This will continue to be a challenge but it addresses the core audience for a journal such as *Community Development* and is its market niche. The range of topics included in CD will widen in the future as new topics become important. This trend is likely to make managing CD more difficult.

Community Development is a growing field of interest as the complexity of the managing projects increases. Workforces adjusting to demographic changes including an aging population, housing market changes as well as shrinking retail markets due to internet competition, and changes in transportation demands are just a few of the issues faced by community developers in the future.

Community Development also must adjust to competition from electronic publishing outlets that can respond to interest in specific topics quickly and inexpensively. Many, if not most, major journals offer electronic access to their publications. A growing number of private outlets can offer a quicker turnaround and if they are accepted in university or business promotion and advancement schemes, they will represent competition for journals such as CD.

Nevertheless, community development is increasing in professionalism and relevance for public policy development. *Community Development* has a definite market niche in serving both academics and practitioners. Combined with the presence of an annual conference on community and economic development that attracts an international audience, the future looks bright for both *Community Development* and CDS as an organization that continues to be a ready source of information about up to date and effective policies and practices.

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