

# Reflections on ‘community organizing for social action’, CDJ Thinkery, July 2019

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**Abstract** In July 2019, the CDJ held a Thinkery which was attended by 57 people from 11 countries. It was an opportunity for people from a range of backgrounds to reflect on community organizing for social action, its achievements and challenges. The discussions that took place were rich and varied, highlighting both similarities and differences across the different countries. This article summarises the themes that concerned participants, wherever they were studying and practising, and considers the role the CDJ can play in continuing these valuable and challenging conversations.

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At the beginning of July 2019, the CDJ organized a ‘Thinkery’ in Central London, inviting policy makers, academics and practitioners to reflect on community organizing for social action—what we have learnt, what we have achieved and the challenges we face going forward. A total of 57 people came from 11 different countries and the Thinkery was followed by a two-day meeting between the CDJ Board and the International Advisory Board. The feedback from the whole exercise was extremely positive. People valued the opportunity to step back from the pressures of the day to day, and particularly to share ideas and experience from different parts of the world.

The Thinkery took the form of four provocations from the United Kingdom, United States and India followed by some fascinating small group table discussions. The report of the Thinkery and later discussions from the CDJ/IAB meeting is on CDJ Plus along with films of the four ‘provocations’, some of the IAB presentations from different world regions and an overview,

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including comments from participants. Readers are strongly urged to dip into these CDJ Plus materials to get a full insight into the issues and ideas that were discussed. But here, we can give you a flavour of what went on and what it might mean for the CDJ.

So what came out of our discussions?

### **The environment in which we work**

The first thing was the extent of agreement across countries and world regions—about the values of community development and about the challenges facing the communities we work with. Of course, global issues impact differently in different countries—climate change, for example, is having a particularly devastating impact on poorer countries, coastal regions and small island states. Participants also highlighted the lasting legacy of colonialism and exploitation in many parts of the world. But participants also highlighted many similar challenges, whether they came from Asia, North America, Europe, Australasia or South America.

Climate change was high on the list but so too was the breakdown of democracy. Participants from across the world talked about the rise of populism, increasing polarization and intolerance of 'others' along with the erosion of citizenship rights and the hollowing out of the state and the public sphere. Similarly, there was universal concern about the dominance of the market, increasing individualism and the performance culture that now drives what counts in our work and study, as well as 'the unjust influence over society of unaccountable wealth'.

Digital technology could be a force for good, for sharing experience, networking and mobilizing collective action. At the same time, it has demonstrated its potential to promote intolerance, prejudice and exclusion as well as replacing necessary human contact in services that are increasingly going online. Measures to increase security were another two-edged sword: in principle positive but in reality creating a surveillance culture, 'gated' communities and barriers between people. Concerns about the economy vary between countries—poverty and reliance on the informal economy are higher in poorer regions, but more affluent countries, too, report growing inequality and the casualization of labour.

### **How can community development respond?**

Community development, with its concern for social justice, its focus on collective action, and its attention to power has an important role to play in addressing these challenges. But creating space for the voices of the least powerful communities to be heard and ensuring that they can drive the

changes that they see as important is a long-term process. And the context for this work is itself changing with less investment and a reliance on short-term project funding, along with increased regulation, measurement and monitoring. Those in power expect communities to turn themselves around, and the focus of policy is often on making individuals more 'employable' and on growing their capacity to make the right choices, run their own services and fend for themselves. In contrast, participants at the Thinkery spoke about the need for the basic foundational work of listening, of building networks, of encouraging critical thinking and challenging dominant narratives that blame the poor for their exclusion and marginalization.

There was some debate about the differences between different community approaches—between community development and community organizing, for example. But participants felt it was important not to get distracted by semantics on the one hand or 'turf wars' on the other, while 'the world changes around us'. Instead, they described a spectrum of community practice, with a consensual practice at one end of the spectrum – service-based and 'safe' – and a more radical confrontational approach at the other – rights-oriented, more concerned with power. Some were concerned that community development was being appropriated by the state and becoming more consensual, losing its edge. But radical organizing does not always serve the interests of social justice, as the success of far right movements illustrates only too well. In reality, a range of approaches were needed along this spectrum and one did not necessarily exclude another. So in this article and the fuller report, we have used community development as an umbrella term to capture the range of approaches. What emerged as most important was to adopt a critical practice—always to challenge 'what you think is right'. I return to this later.

### **In or against the system?**

Much has been written about the way community development has been appropriated by the system in different countries—to encourage self-help, self-responsibility and privatization. Thinkery participants provided plenty of examples of this—from Ireland to Pakistan, from the United Kingdom to India. Mainstream civil society organizations were criticized as much as government for normalizing privatization, while nation states were themselves losing power in the face of globalization and multi-national corporations. As a result, the nature of the citizen relationship was changing in a way that challenged traditional community development practice. So, working with the system risked co-option—shifting power was an enormous project.

But radical practice was also risky—the backlash can be life threatening in some countries. Participants also warned of the danger of preaching a

radicalism that was not borne out in practice and left communities distrustful; 'none of us is beyond compromise'. Change has to happen from the top down as well as the bottom up, and there were positive examples of alliances with insiders and opportunities to exploit 'the cracks in the system'.

### **Who is the community?**

This was another question that provoked considerable discussion. Communities—whether of place or identity—are not homogenous and, as societies become more diverse and more mobile, belonging means different things to people. It is always essential to ask: who is not in the room? But could too much emphasis on identity lead to divide and rule or even paralysis? Participants emphasized the importance of a class analysis in revealing the commonalities between different groups and forging solidarity. But is this in danger of being lost as 'culture trumps economics'?

How to engage the disaffected is another persistent challenge for community development. It is hard to motivate people who are struggling with the grind of everyday survival. In some countries, there is a distrust of collective action; elsewhere, the costs of confronting power can be very high. So-called 'apathy' can itself be a form of resistance. Sometimes, it takes a dramatic catalyst to galvanize action—a preventable disaster like a fire for example. But populism—Brexit, Trump, Modi—has also been a potent reaction to people's feelings of being ignored.

There was a strong feeling—across all nationalities—that democracy was in crisis. The public sphere—and with it civic space—is shrinking. In the United Kingdom, local government has been stripped of resources. With the decline of large industries and the public sector, the workplace organizing that Alinsky promoted is harder to apply. But the breakdown of traditional political institutions may be a catalyst for new forms of democracy and resistance. Participants celebrated the new forms of dissent manifesting across the globe; Extinction Rebellion, for example.

Community development has an essential role in promoting conversations, bridging divides and rebuilding democracy from the bottom up. But how can it respond to the polarization that we see around us? What can it do when dialogue no longer seems possible? It needs to find the points of solidarity across the divisions that are so evident today, create spaces and enable conversations across these divisions, feel and understand the anger but offer frameworks for overcoming it and moving on, to be creative. There is no quick fix. It takes time to establish the kinds of trust that make this possible.

## Resident led?

This took us into a conversation about the role of the worker. There is a lot of emphasis these days on 'lived experience' and 'community led'. But this raises the question again of 'who is the community'? It also fails to acknowledge the value of building on that experience and providing communities with the opportunity to think about how their experience connects with others and with what is going on elsewhere. It is important to acknowledge the importance of small steps towards change but local action, while necessary, is not sufficient. Our discussions illustrated the value of seeing the connections between local issues and their global causes, and of seeking common cause across boundaries.

Workers have resources to bring and need to be honest, challenging even, as the previous discussion about anger and conflict demonstrates, whilst recognizing the responsibility carries with it. This raised questions too about the balance between professional boundaries and authenticity and how to find the right balance.

One of the provocations addressed the different kinds of relationship between workers and community members, moving from apathy and pity, through sympathy and empathy, to solidarity—where there is no distinction between worker and community members. Workers need to be clear about where they stand and aware of their own biases. But some participants questioned whether solidarity was always the goal, counselling against a 'false equivalence', which failed to acknowledge power differences. Negative experience of past solidarity claims could lead community groups to distance themselves from outside support.

## Critical practice

The above discussions demonstrate that community development is a contested and complex practice. It is important to keep that contestation alive. But if critical reflection is to be constructive, discomfort needs to be recognized as a means of learning. There was some frustration in the room with what community development had achieved given the challenges facing the world—and particularly the most marginalized—today. Nonetheless, there were many positive stories in the room. These gave examples of 'micropower' as important building blocks not only for change but also of broader campaigns, as well as examples of international transfer, sharing new forms of action across countries and communities. Participants also embraced the social movements mentioned earlier. And even where programmes and movements that promise much have not been sustained (Occupy! was one example), they leave behind a residual core that is energized and politicized.

So what does this mean for the CDJ? One other concern that surfaced during our discussions was the erosion of the academic base for community development in terms of training, theory development and research. Universities, which should provide spaces for independent learning and critical thought, are becoming corporatized and increasingly entrepreneurial. The knowledge certification industry has become increasingly powerful, privileging certain kinds of knowledge over others. So one of the important roles that the Journal can play is to support and validate what is going on within and beyond the academy. It can provide the space for debate on all the issues that were raised in the Thinkery and continue the debates that started here. It can support critical reflection on the enduring tensions and dilemmas within community work, some of which we have touched on here. It can ensure that we are constantly willing to challenge our assumptions. And it can build essential bridges between the local and the global. The Thinkery, the report and the accompanying films are the beginning of a process. We welcome comments and discussion on CDJ Plus that will help to inspire us and to inform our future direction.