

Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit

PRACTICAL ISSUES IN COMMUNITY WORK

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PREFACE

There is a mushrooming of grassroot groups under the auspices of both government and non-government institutions. This is generating interest and a challenge to training institutions. Training institutions have an obligation to offer both theoretical and practical aspects of community work which produces effective results. The complex third and first world nature of South Africa should always be taken into consideration. Presenting guidelines and assistance to those who embark on community work is timeous. Emphasis has been laid on self-help and community development projects.

This article explains why and how a community worker should conduct a community profile. A case study is presented to illustrate how a problem of malnutrition can be addressed. The role of the community worker in applying specific skills for stimulating the community to carry out tasks and assignments towards accomplishing the project is high-lighted.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION	1
1. A COMMUNITY PROFILE AND REASONS WHY IT SHOULD BE DONE	2
2. DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND TECHNIQUES	2
(a) Secondary Data Sources	2
(b) Primary Data Sources	3
3. CATEGORIES OF BASIC HUMAN NEEDS	3
4. CONDUCTING A COMMUNITY PROFILE	5
Steps in Conducting a Community Profile	5
Specific Data required for knowing a Community	6
5. A CASE ILLUSTRATION OF MALNUTRITION AS A COMMUNITY PROBLEM	8
6. CONCLUSION	12
BIBLIOGRAPHY	13

INTRODUCTION

Community work has its roots embedded in the well-established and honourable traditions of a society. There are people committed to the belief that working together can effect social change. This is a genuine driving force for involvement in community work.

These persons work closely with community groups in all walks of life. Some are employed by voluntary and government institutions and others are doing voluntary work.

Much of community work (Thomas, 1983 p. 108) done is based on the organisations engaging community workers in establishing programmes that provide service for meeting the community needs. (Brody, 1982 p. 18).

There is always a need for persons involved in community work to know exactly how to deal with practical issues. Such an approach would render a viable means of community work. Community work is action oriented. It should bring about community betterment for all citizens in a specific geographic area.

This paper will discuss why and how a community worker should conduct a community profile.

The paper will be presented in five distinct sections as follows: The first explains why a community profile should be done, the second, data collection methods and techniques, third is a presentation of categories of the basic human needs, fourth is how a community profile is conducted, fifth is a presentation of a case study and lastly the conclusion.

1. A Community Profile and reasons why it should be done

A realistic approach to community work is to know the community you are going to work in. The process of knowing your community is generally known as conducting a community profile. There are several reasons for conducting a community profile, among which the following have major significance:

- (a) Determination of the nature and the extent of needs in a community.
- (b) Identification of the resources and facilities in the community.
- (c) Determination of the causal factors.
- (d) Setting a baseline against which intervention programmes may be launched.
- (e) Providing a base to trigger a process of participation from the community.

2. Data Collection Methods and Techniques

Conducting a community profile involves data collection. (Polansky, 1960, p.131). The community worker should be aware of the information which will be useful for his work. The best methods should be selected for yielding the most reliable type of data. In practice, a combination of more than one method or technique is utilised: methods of data collection can be divided into two groups, viz:

- (a) Secondary Data Sources: Analysis of secondary data sources i.e. the written and published material such as local newspapers, census (Kahn, 1970, pp.9-16) data and existing programmes in the area. However urgent the community worker may perceive the need for a programme in redressing a need/problem, it is imperative that this data source be fully tapped in order to get an overview of the community. In this approach, there is relatively easy access to the information. It is not costly in terms of money as most information is already available.

(b) Primary Data Sources consist of the following methods and techniques:

Participant observation (Buzzard, 1984, p.273). This is the mainstay of anthropologists. It requires that the community worker makes observations; records what he sees the community do in the real context. The community worker will quantify observed activities. The advantages of patterns and trends is noted in this technique.

Interviews: These may take two forms, viz: semi-structured or intensive interviews. An instrument or questionnaire may be designed for this purpose. The need to keep consistency and room for objectivity should always be kept in mind. In this approach, there is relatively easy access to the information and it is not costly in terms of money as most information is already available.

Oral histories and case studies. Listening to life stories and studying the life histories provide insight into what is considered significant in a community.

Primary informants and social networks. Many communities have persons who 'know everything' that goes on in that community. Good examples to be cited are the local post delivery men, and the local priests. In most communities these persons can facilitate the process of identifying the social networks that operate in their communities.

Other methods and techniques which may be used in the primary data sources include community meetings, experimental studies, genealogical reconstructions of field journals, mapping and audio-visual productions of resources and facilities. Essay writing and competitions by school children are becoming popular methods of describing what is happening in the local community.

3. Categories of Basic Human Needs

An important issue to be borne in mind is the kind of data which the worker should collect irrespective of the method or technique utilised. Also the purpose for which the data is collected. The community worker should have clarity in his mind that human beings have certain basic

needs that must be met by the groups, community and society in which they live. In most communities these needs may be met by a variety of social units, but the worker should understand that no community is an island. All communities are interdependent for survival and this should be the guiding principle in his efforts in working with communities. The basic human needs are of five types:

1. The Biophysical needs. This category includes shelter, clothing, food and water, waste elimination, treatment of illness, control of harmful environmental factors and reproduction.
2. Economic needs include producing, distributing and consuming of goods and services.
3. Political - legal needs include the maintenance of order, resolving conflict, making decisions for social purposes and development of leadership.
4. Educational needs include training of children and newcomers to become functioning members of a community.
5. Interactive-Communicative and effective needs which include among others, being accepted by others, having a social status and an orderly view of the world, as well as ability of expressing self and group through art, folklore and symbols.

There are six main types of organisations which are a major concern for community work, viz: health, education, personal service, employment, housing and income-maintenance.

Health Service

Data regarding health service would be important as health is at the heart of human survival. Health facilities are basically provided by clinics, hospitals, health centres and other practitioners. The community worker should also take into consideration the networks and other institutions in existence in a community that still provides for health care in other forms.

Cultural Services

Cultural services in a community provide for the preservation and in-culturation by other members of the culture of a community. It would be useful for the community worker to be able to make a distinction

between government institutions, voluntary institutions and informal networks. Such a distinction would enable the community worker to identify the kind and type of intervention programmes appropriate at different levels. These institutions are interdependent and cannot be separated from each other.

Every community has problems which it grapples through in its lifetime. The various aspects of the community life will affect the problem being tackled to a greater or lesser extent. This process will enable the community worker to start connecting the bits and pieces of the whole. It may be possible to identify causal factors which greatly assist in consideration of strategies for action.

4. Conducting a Community Profile

Conducting a community profile should be viewed as a process consisting of a series of steps. These steps should follow a specific order depending on the nature of the community.

Steps in Conducting a Community Profile

Basic steps in conducting a community profile are the following:

1. Identifying (Kahn, 1970, p.24; Biddle and Biddle, 1965, p.257) the community you plan to work with. This step involves mapping out the community clearly. It involves issues such as the geographic and functional aspects of the community.
2. Identifying the office which provides census data for the particular area. This is closely related to the step described above. Note should be taken that data may be available from other offices as well.
3. Carrying out an analysis of secondary data (written and published materials) - local newspaper, government publications/bulletins and existing programme publications or reports.
4. Enquiring (Kahn, 1970, p.21) about those who have had experience working within these areas; ask for names of individuals who may be knowledgeable about the community in which you wish to undertake a project.

5. Approaching each individual, personally telling them that they have been recommended as someone who is knowledgeable about this community; explain that you are interested in obtaining more information to help you develop a programme with those people. There is always need to avoid mistakes committed by previous workers in this community and to take advice in order to get the actors of the community involved right from the beginning of the project. Steps 4 and 5 mainly involve the primary data sources.

All the above steps used will help in determining the factors/characteristics that broadly distinguish this community from the other communities existing in your area.

Specific Data required for Knowing a Community

There is always need to know and analyse a community adequately before a project is embarked upon. The process of conducting a community profile provides gaps between resources and needs. It also reflects the extent of some of the needs the community experiences. Those problems which need urgent attention usually emerge during this stage. Also, a base to trigger a process of participation from the community is provided. Local community should be active partners. As one moves into the community word will spread around about your intended actions.

The success of a community project depends on the acceptance by the community. It is important to solicit participation from the onset. Participation has the advantage of mobilising the community as well as giving them confidence in self-determination. This enables the community worker to have a clearer understanding and a better conception of how he engages a community into a programme which would redress the problem. A useful way to adequately collect data on a community is to draw up a worksheet. This process should enable the worker to depict the following issues:

(a) The kind of community

No community should be taken for granted however small it may seem to be. A community may have a mixture of groupings. It would therefore be important for the community worker to identify the

major population groups. This is important from the power structure point of view as well as decision-making process.

Other issues to be determined include:

- their size, income level, where they work, venues to play and pray and their origin;
- social values and behaviour patterns;
- the dominant trends/pace of this community;
- voluntary and other social units which provide access to social participation and mutual support;
- whether it is an arena in which an outside change agent might operate or it is a vehicle, containing within it the necessary resources for modifying harmful conditions.

(b) The power structure

Every community has structures and a power structure. These structures affect the pace of the community in one way or another. An example is a community which may wish to have electricity installed, but has to go through a bureaucratic structure which delays the process.

The power structure also has to do with:

- the social control functions, and
- the distribution of influence within the decision-making process.
- The community structures also relate to other political characteristic systems outside this geographic or functional community that have significant impact upon it.

(c) The physical/environmental aspects

These are important issues to consider in relation to the type of project the community may undertake. The interdependence of a community is an important variable at this stage. Transport as a means for mobility and communication can facilitate a project which the community may need in redressing a problem.

The physical well-being of the people:

- Where people go for illness treatment, and
- where they eat, and where the food supply is located as well as how people get to and from this place are other important aspects to be known regarding the physical aspects of the community.

As the community worker conducts the community profile, he would be in a position to identify ongoing projects and be able to assess their status. It should be possible for the community worker to indicate the status of the project. With further skill and experience he might even be able to evaluate the project, and assist in motivating a community towards improving a project. This may be done by locating the number of projects operating in an area and their inter-relationships.

Issues such as tasks and activities of each project should be delineated. This would help the community worker to engage the community in programme planning and eventually with the evaluation of the entire programme.

Projects are undertaken to meet specific goals and objectives, if there are changes, it would be important for both the worker and the community to shift and/or identify why and how such changes have happened.

As part of his formal and informal networks, it would be helpful if the worker has identified and gained easy access to all the voluntary organisations e.g. women's groups and other community networks. Voluntary organisations provide a great resource which needs to be tapped in order to enhance citizen participation and effective service delivery.

5. A Case Illustration of Malnutrition as a Community Problem

There are many practical issues which one could use as a focal point for initiating a community work programme. The community worker will assume various salient roles during the process of working with the community. The writer has chosen malnutrition as the focal point because he believes its devastating effects are equally recognised by sophisticated health professionals and by ordinary mothers in the community. It is also a problem that requires a broad range of community level workers from the human service arena to be involved in its solution in order to be effective.

We must assume in this case illustration that the responsible organisation in the area also agrees that malnutrition is a priority problem for their department and that it is willing to provide a worker trained in community work to be the key initiator to work on this problem.

As the initiator of the action the community worker recognises and identifies the need for tackling malnutrition as a hazardous disease. His or her initial tasks will require conducting a community profile. As the focus is geared towards a specific identified problem, the collection of information will include the extent to which the community is affected by malnutrition. Identifying publications and studies regarding the disease and exploring past health care programmes that have dealt with the disease will be done.

The community worker would utilise the basic information about population characteristics, organised groups in existence and key leadership to engage in planning for the programme. He would identify key leaders in a community (depending on whether it is in rural or urban areas). These may be the Chief and the headmen, the town councillor, the school teacher, the shop-keepers, the church ministers, the leaders of women's organisations. The community worker would arrange for a meeting with this nucleus group. He would present information about the extent of malnutrition, soliciting in the process, participation in the programme that would decrease the disease.

If the nucleus group approves this initial presentation, the community worker would move forward to the next step. If not, he or she must re-evaluate the approach they have taken and try to find another approach.

If the nucleus group approves, the community worker would then enlarge the interested group. Relevant leaders of organisations such as the youth organisations, teachers association, church ministers, women's organisations, local business association, agencies such as the local commissioner's office, the agricultural extension office, school district office, the local hospital, the local clinic, local public works office and other influential people would be included. These contacts will be undertaken with the purpose of soliciting their ideas and advice on establishing an action organisation in the community to be represented by all community groups and organisations.

Malnutrition as a disease will be presented showing its extent in the community, its causes and the benefits of reducing and eradicating it.

Each time a contact is made, the community worker will ask the person to identify those who should be contacted in the community about the issue. From these contacts a steering committee will be selected among the people who are most interested in the problem. Care should be taken to solicit membership on the committee from the widest possible representatives in the community and from those people who clearly carry a great deal of influence.

Some care should also be taken to keep the steering committee small enough to be manageable while still representing a balanced range of opinions in the community and a balanced range of influence.

The steering committee would also need to establish a plan for what their rôle should be, how they should proceed and how they plan to develop an action organisation. (Some training sessions on grassroot level to be done). In preparation for broadening of awareness and involvement, the community worker will guide the steering committee in selecting an area or section of the community for undertaking a special community survey regarding malnutrition. This will be done in one area or section in order to reinforce some principles offered during the initial training session. The results of such training will enhance gaining support from the leaders of the organisations and the community. A series of community meetings for presenting the results will be arranged. Sufficient time for discussion and questioning should be given to enable the community to learn how they could be involved. The information that would be presented will be done by the steering committee covering the results of the survey, i.e. the distribution of malnutrition, its causes and the benefits of reducing and eradicating it. Some ideas regarding plans for attacking the disease and the role the community could play will be solicited.

Evaluation of the steps taken will be done in order to assess what progress the community has made and what direction it should go. The writer assumes that by now the steering committee will have built up momentum, and mobilised the community for action. The community worker will then assist the steering committee in drawing the agenda for the

election of members to form an Action Organisation. Publicity and good timing for launching the Action Organisation will be planned. The election and launching of the Action Organisation should be done and it is assumed most members of the steering committee will be elected to form the Action Organisation. Care should be taken to design structures that include representation of all sections by creating sub-committees. As the work of the Action Organisation progresses, issues that require attention of the group will be considered, for example, alternatives for provision of supplementary food, an analysis of food patterns available in the community will be an element necessary for planning of action. In rural areas, Public Works would provide basic equipment for clearing land for communal gardens; that of Agriculture will demarcate land and render extension services; while department of Education in conjunction with Health and Welfare would provide health and nutrition education. Studying the available resources within the villages and communities (possibilities of labour, availability of land and water as well as means of improving soil and agricultural methods) could be given high priority. The government service departmental representatives by virtue of their membership of the Action Organisation will take the responsibility of studying and informing in partnership with the group that will have such assignment as a result of division of labour. Communication to the relevant government department will be facilitated as can also be seen during this stage.

In urban areas, the nutrition unit of the department of health would render the necessary assistance in providing advice for well balanced diet and/or establishing other alternative programmes. Evaluation of the resources both within the villages and communities will be done. Supplementary cash as a resource from the community should also be considered a viable element to be done by villagers in acquiring such items as fencing material for a communal garden.

Another area which needs attention is the role that tradition and customs play in determining the food pattern with the concomitant result of malnutrition. For example, the prevailing cooking methods may be destroying a large fraction of nutrients in the available food. Some of these procedures are needed to effect the desired changes which will

introduce green vegetables and other foodstuffs which increase the nutrients in the food the community uses as a staple diet.

6. Conclusion

This article has attempted to respond to the ongoing and agonising search for ways of addressing the real needs in all communities.

This search has been haunting leading community workers. This is reflected by the recurrence of theoretical issues in recent publications. Community workers from the grassroots organisations are in dire need of knowledge and skills on practical issues in community work. These grassroots organisations are sinews of the community. They have the conviction and belief that community work can bring about social change and enhance quality of life.

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