

Book review

The Well-Connected Community – A Networking Approach to Community Development (3rd Edition)

*Edited by Alison Gilchrist
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This is a substantial update on the second edition (2009), incorporating changes in the economic climate, including, of course, the effects of government cuts. Whereas the previous emphasis was on community development, often facilitated by statutory bodies, now the *modus operandi* tends towards community organising. Strength-based and asset-based are more the norm. I had not heard these terms before, but recently I came across an account of a community organisation locally in one area of Torbay, described as asset-based, with a list of some of the assets including schools, Torquay United Football Club, the Salvation Army, Community Café and parks. This enabled me to understand the term more fully.

“Hard times have undermined social relations and disrupted community networks” – the author sets the scene, with networking being the key to the process of community organising, described in the preface “it involves appreciating different perspectives and synthesising a range of ideas and interests, as well as challenging opposing and out-dated attitudes”. A theme runs through the book, of working *with* rather than *for* people. This enables people to be involved in inclusive decision-making.

One point that seemed contradictory was that the book generally views community organisation as a professional occupation, but given the economic climate, there is a shortage of professionals. As I see it, those who

are committed but unpaid can, have to, fulfil the same role; for example, in faith communities or in sport. It is mentioned that the role of professional development worker was first recognised in 2006. The author might argue that a professional can enable the community to develop in a more inclusive and well-organised way.

The book adopts the model of community development defined as pluralist, characterised by assisting communities to organise themselves. To the question, “What is meant by community?”, the answer given is that the book is “based on a belief that the experience of community is generated by, and manifest in, the informal networks that exist between people, between groups and between organisations”. There is an example from Xhosa, where the word for community is derived from “I am, we are”.

Various types of emerging communities are examined, such as communing: collective ownership. There are good examples of communities with shared decision-making, notably Citizens UK and Community Organizers. Citizens UK maps networks of decision makers to identify the distribution of power. Pressure is then put on a small number of relevant individuals. It has been an effective means of bringing about widespread application of the Living Wage, for example. At the time of writing, government funding was still available for Community Organisers Ltd. and the Community Organisation Programme. I wondered how these groups are distributed geographically – a map or visual data might have been helpful.

The term networking was first coined in the early 1980s, but it is well recognised that it has become more part of everyday and professional life in the past 20 years. The book is for students, researchers and those involved in community development, looking at the theory and how it is applied in practice. The language is

accessible and quite readable; but for the academic reader, there is a very extensive reference list.

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