

5

Social Planning Approaches to Community Work

Introduction

While the uniqueness of community work lies, I believe, in the community development approach, the social planning approach is now more common. To complicate matters further, social planning is a wide field in itself, encompassing many other activities, such as economic planning and national planning, which have little to do with community work. Thus, on the one hand, most community workers are involved in social planning; on the other hand, most people who engage in social planning could not be described as community workers.

My use of the term 'social planning' within community work needs careful defining. I have always noticed community workers undertake many activities other than assisting community groups to run their own projects. This can range from doing minor things for groups all the way to planning and implementing large scale projects such as a community care scheme for mentally ill people across a borough. I use 'social planning' to describe all this work.

At a philosophical level, the idea that community workers work with 'the community' in a neutral way on issues determined by the community, is open to debate. We are all bound to seek out persons in the community with whom we think we can work and who want to undertake the activities which we think are the most valuable. Neither on the whole do communities choose us to work for them; we choose the community. From this standpoint, therefore, all community work includes elements of social planning, since the worker or agency inevitably plays a large part in deciding where the

worker should work and what activities she should become involved with. Thus, to a greater or lesser extent, community work is not determined by the community but by the agency or its staff.

At a more practical level, there are three sets of activities which constitute a social planning approach within community work; doing work for groups (as opposed to acting as a facilitator), acting as an advocate or mediator with other organisations on an existing group's behalf, and undertaking an activity without reference to a community group. However, only the last of these could properly be called social planning: the first two are, perhaps, stages towards it, since the worker is no longer acting purely as an enabler.

Doing work for groups

Most community development workers undertake activities *for* the groups and organisations with which they work. This can include activities such as booking a room, undertaking a research project and even on occasion acting as chair, secretary or treasurer of the group, thus taking a leadership rather than an enabling role. It is my view that, properly carried out, undertaking activities *for* groups in this way, rather like being an ordinary member or leader, can strengthen the confidence, capacities and autonomy of group members, though, if it is done without due thought it can have the effect of making people dependent. Thus it should only be done for a limited time and preferably on the understanding that group members should take over that work at a later date, since the aim of a community development worker should always be to ensure that the members of the group learn how to undertake action themselves.

Acting as an advocate for a group

A worker often acts as an advocate when a group is unable to present its own case to another organisation. I once helped the secretary of an organisation for disabled people get the installation of a telephone paid for by the social services department after the organisation had applied and been