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Community Development in America: A Brief History

Bryan M. Phifer

ABSTRACT

This article traces community development from early self-help efforts through community organization, university, social work and government thrusts to the field as we know it today. It describes the roles of key individuals, organizations, and literature in the growth of the field. The author looks ahead to crucial issues facing community development in the future. The references cited in the article are a rich source of information for anyone interested in the history and current status of community development.

Community development in America as an organized, purposeful, self-help activity has its roots in late nineteenth century rural life. Some may argue that its roots go back to Jamestown since its very survival depended upon self-help and almost total reliance on local resources. However, Jamestown, like many early American communities, was directed in a very authoritarian manner with survival as the main objective. There was little democratic participation until the coming of the New England town meeting.

During his tour of America in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville observed both democracy and a desire for self-improvement in action. In one of the most quoted passages from his book *Democracy in America*, he observed:

This article is based on the chapter "History of Community Development in America," in *Community Development in Perspective* (1989).

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute.

Americans combine to give fetes, found seminaries, build churches, distribute books, and send missionaries to the antipodes. Hospitals, prisons, and schools take shape in that way. . . . In every case, at the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the government or in England some territorial magnate, in the United States you are sure to find an association. (Tocqueville, 1966:485)

Undoubtedly, self-help and self-reliance were mainstays of early American history. However, community development as we know it today—a purposeful attempt to improve communities through democratic participation as well as self-help—did not begin to appear until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A number of influences formed the roots of this emerging field.

Early Roots of Community Development

Numerous organizations and movements devoted to improving rural life emerged in the post-Civil War era. Summers (1986:348) points out that the radical agrarian mood and proposals of the Populist party “had grown increasingly ugly in response to the farm crisis that had escalated during the last quarter of the 19th century. . . . The Country Life Movement emerged as an urban-sponsored alternative to the radical economic proposals of the Populists.” The movement, along with Pres. Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission, were major forces in urging the U.S. Department of Agriculture and land-grant colleges to play a more active role in the improvement of rural life.

“The report of the Commission covered thoroughly the most prominent features of rural life in America and the nature of remedies available” (Bailey, 1945:246). Its most urgent recommendation was the “establishment of a nationwide extension workforce . . . without which no college of agriculture can adequately serve its state” (Senate Document 705, 1909:56).

Of equal importance to these growing demands for extension was the pioneering farm demonstration work of Dr. Seaman A. Knapp who Bailey (1945) called the “Schoolmaster of American Agriculture” in his book about his work. Knapp successfully demonstrated the control of the cotton boll weevil which was devastating the South’s most important cash crop. His work received national acclaim and greatly influenced the Congress.

The fruition of effort by these many forces was the passage of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. It established the Cooperative Extension Service as a joint endeavor of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and state land-grant colleges with matching federal and state funding. In submitting its bill authorizing extension work, the House Committee on Agriculture stated:

The theory of the bill is to extend this system to the entire country by providing for at least one trained demonstrator or itinerant teacher for each agricultural county, who in the very nature of things must give leadership and direction along all lines of rural activity—social, economic, and financial . . . He is to assume leadership in every movement, whatever it may be, the aim of which is better farming, better living, more happiness, more education, and better citizenship. (U.S.Congress, 1915:5)

Rural Community Organization

In its 1909 report, the Country Life Commission found that a major problem of rural people was lack of organization. Consequently, following passage of the Smith-Lever Act, several states, including Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, West Virginia and Virginia began community organization work under the direction of their Extension Services. Extension agents in the South began organizing community clubs in the early 1920s. By 1923 C.B. Smith, Director of the USDA's States Relation Service, could state in his annual report of extension work:

The maxim that all programs of extension work should be based on an analysis of local or community needs has been given increasing support, as shown by the greater number of community programs developed throughout the United States. More than 21,000 communities . . . have local committees or clubs which join with Extension agents in developing and working out local plans of work. (True, 1928:175)

It didn't take long for pioneering extension agents to learn that their most successful efforts were those involving local people in identifying needs and developing appropriate educational programs. True (1928:175) states:

Extension forces were also realizing that they could not reach large numbers of people effectively without the active cooperation of many local leaders. They, therefore, increased their efforts to get beyond the county organization supporting their work and to build their programs on a community basis.

Frank Farrington was one of the first writers about community development. His book *Making the Small Town a Better Place to Live and A Better Place in Which to Do Business*, published in 1915, is a handbook and guide to community organization. It emphasizes the economic aspects of community improvement, business and commercial organization, and the function and importance of service clubs. Although intended primarily for small towns, his book found a wide audience among residents of large towns.

Educational Associations

Educational associations have long supported community development and, in fact, were a major force in developing it into a field of study and practice. At the first conference of the National University Education Association (NUEA) in 1915, President Charles Van Hise emphasized the importance of "informal community service." The term "community development" appeared in the association's 1924 proceedings and in 1935 the association called for university-sponsored community development workers. During the 1940s the community development movement within universities was spearheaded by NUEA leaders Howard McClusky at the University of Michigan, Jess Ogden at the University of Virginia, and Baker Brownell at the University of Montana.

The NUEA established a community organization committee in 1948 and a division of community development in 1955. Katharine Lackey of Southern Illinois University prepared an extensive report in 1960 about community development work through member institutions of the NUEA. Her report highlighted work in thirteen universities.

The Adult Education Association has long been a strong supporter and advocate of community development. Among its various sections is one on community development. The classic 1960 *Handbook of Adult Education*, edited by Malcolm Knowles, includes a chapter on community development by pioneer practitioner and scholar Howard McClusky.

University Efforts

In addition to the early work through extension services of the land-grant universities, several universities have a distinguished history of community development education and service. One of the early pioneers is St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, whose program started in the 1920s. Known as the Antigonish Movement, it was started by Father M. M. Coady who helped organize the United Maritime Fishermen Cooperative. Coady later became the first director of Xavier University's extension

department which gained international acclaim as the Antigonish Movement. The Coady International Institute, with its emphasis on grassroots training in community development, was founded in 1959.

Not all early university-based community development was practice oriented. As Cary (1980:144) points out, "teaching community development grew, in part, out of the earlier teaching in community organization in social work and rural sociology and the early training of extension workers." He mentions the paper presented in 1919 at the first National Country Life Conference by Dwight Sanderson of Cornell University entitled "Community Organization for Extension Workers." Cary (1980:144-45) adds that "the teaching of community organization in rural sociology placed its emphasis on the small rural community and, with some notable exceptions, focused on the study of community organization rather than the practice of it."

Dr. William Biddle's Program of Community Studies and Dynamics at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana began in 1947. It combined graduate study with field experience until 1960 when the program was discontinued. Dr. Biddle became well-known from his books and articles about community development.

Baker Brownell's work at the University of Montana in the 1940s had a profound influence upon the field of community development. Brownell conducted a study aimed at determining the potential for revitalizing dying lumber towns in the Northwest. Dr. Richard Poston's famous book, *Small Town Renaissance*, published in 1950, was an outgrowth of this study and gained him a national reputation. Poston later became director of the Bureau of Community Development at the University of Washington. He and his staff worked with small communities emphasizing citizen involvement, study and analysis, town meetings, and action. In 1953 he joined Baker Brownell at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. Brownell had earlier moved there to begin an area services unit and community development program. Southern Illinois' Community Development Institute was founded in 1959 and its Department of Community Development in 1966.

The University of Missouri's community development program began in the 1950s as a response to requests for assistance from rural communities suffering out-migration, economic stagnation, and reduction in essential services. The program began as an extension effort utilizing both university funds and special funds provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for rural development. The Center for Community Development was established on the Columbia campus in 1960 to provide formal training and supporting services to field practitioners. In 1962 the Center became the Department of Community Development, offering a master's degree and diploma program while maintaining its extension work. Currently, the university has 20 extension field staff

servicing a multi-county area throughout the state. The department also conducts an annual Community and Rural Development Institute in which more than 800 persons from 69 countries have participated.

By 1976, some 63 colleges and universities offered majors in community development (Cary, 1976). The 1987 directory of institutions providing community development training or education lists 52 programs in U.S. and Canadian institutions plus several in other countries (Robertson, 1987). Although there appears to be a significant decline between 1976 and 1987 in the number of majors or degrees offered, the actual change, if any, is unknown. In both the 1976 and the 1987 survey, only those institutions responding to the survey were listed. Lack of a response may be attributable to the survey being sent to the wrong person and not forwarded to the right person.

Community development extension work is carried out by all land-grant universities. Some states call it community resource development, some resource development, and some rural development, depending upon its focus. The University of Wisconsin Extension Service, for example, has 40 resource development agents. The latest data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Extension Service shows approximately 949 staff-years devoted to this work nationally.

Institutionalized Community Development

As mentioned earlier, community clubs and "organized communities" became a major vehicle for rural community development in the 1920s. Prior to that, community organization was more related to sociology and social work than to community development. As early as 1887, Stanton Coit founded a settlement house in New York City. The famous Hull House was founded in Chicago in 1889 by sociologist Jane Addams and Ellen Starr (Deegan, 1988; Fritz, 1989).

Settlement houses focused their efforts primarily on helping immigrants to large cities adjust to their new culture and environment. A high priority was the Americanization of immigrants who generally could not speak English, lived in crowded and unsanitary conditions, and often worked in sweat shops. English and other adult education classes, day care, baths, recreation, and savings banks were provided through the houses which became community centers.

According to Fritz (1989:99):

Addams was definitely an organizational development specialist. Within five years of the establishment of Hull House, some forty clubs were based there, eleven kinds of community activities were connected with the settlement and over 2,000 people came into the facility each

week. . . . Addams' years of work and writing in the interest of peace earned her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

As important as the settlement house movement was, its focus was more on providing services for people as opposed to people providing for their own needs. Many modern-day community centers grew out of settlement houses.

A more participatory approach to community development was the "Back of the Yards" movement begun in Chicago by clinical sociologist Saul Alinsky in the 1930s (Alinsky, 1969). Its major purpose was neighborhood stabilization. Polish stockyard workers were not so much trying to keep others out, Alinsky maintained, as they were trying to keep their own in. In 1940 Alinsky started the Industrial Areas Foundation whose aim was to empower people through their own organized efforts. Known as the conflict or confrontation approach, Alinsky's work grew beyond Chicago as he directed major projects in several large cities. His community organizing skills gained him national recognition in the turbulent sixties (Fritz, 1989:82-83). Alinsky demonstrated that major organizational work could produce power as well as local participation. Institutional barriers to change often crumbled when confronted with such power.

The first major American city to have a community development department was Kansas City, Missouri. Its Division of Community Development was established in 1943, primarily to combat juvenile delinquency. Following World War II, the division focused its work on citizen participation through community and neighborhood associations. The division remained highly active until the early 1980s when its role was diminished.

Almost all major cities and many smaller communities now have departments or divisions of community development. Their primary focus is that of generating and administering government grants such as the Community Development Block Grant program, rather than initiating locally-based community development efforts. Although citizen participation is a requirement of the federal Community Development Act, interpretation of what this means varies widely. This ranges all the way from true citizen involvement in problem identification and decision making to perfunctory public hearings and legal notices published in newspapers.

The community education movement, carried out primarily through local school systems, has played a major community development role since its inception in the mid-1940s. Greatly stimulated through grants from the Kellogg and Mott Foundations, the movement encourages communities to use their schools for a variety of after-school community functions. The National Community Education Development Act passed in 1974, which provided seed money to initiate such programs, grew out of this effort. In addition to traditional adult education and recreational roles, community education emphasizes citizen involvement in community issues.

State-Sponsored Programs

Several states have community development recognition programs. Often these programs include cash awards, recognition plaques, and achievement signs which communities erect along highways leading into their community. Most of the programs are based on achievement of prescribed goals set forth in the criteria developed for measuring local initiative, participation, and accomplishment. The Missouri program, known as Missouri Community Betterment (MCB), was started in 1963. It encompasses six classes of cities based on population, plus neighborhoods. Thus, communities of similar size compete for recognition. Judges visit communities that make it to the finalist list for recognition to evaluate their accomplishments. The Governor presents plaques and other prizes to winning communities at the annual awards program.

Almost every state has a department of community and economic development to promote the state's economy and to help local communities through technical and financial assistance. Following the federal government's lead, some states offer special incentives for development efforts in depressed areas, including tax incentives to encourage investment. Missouri's Neighborhood Assistance Program goes further by providing tax write-offs to business and industry for investment in neighborhood and community development projects regardless of location.

Community Development Literature

A distinctive body of community development literature began to emerge in the 1940s. The Ogdens published *These Things We Tried: A Five Year Experiment in Community Development* in 1947. Ruopp's *Approaches to Community Development* and Poston's *Democracy is You: A Guide to Citizen Action* were published in 1953. The United Nations published *Social Progress Through Community Development* in 1955. The International Cooperation Administration, forerunner of the Agency for International Development, began its *Community Development Bulletin* in 1956. This publication was known as the *Community Development Review* from 1957 until its last issue in 1963.

Other literature began to follow, including Batten (1957, 1967), Sanders (1958), Mezirow (1962), Warren (1963), the Ogdens (1964), Clinard (1966), Biddle (1968), Cary (1970), Littrell (1971), Phifer (1975), Roberts (1979), and Christenson and Robinson (1980, 1989). In 1964 and again in 1972 *Sociological Abstracts* and Essay Press published *Community Development Abstracts* covering the literature through 1972 as prepared by Alvin Lackey. The first issue of the *Journal of the Community Development Society* was published in the spring of 1970.

Community Development Society

The Community Development Society was organized in Columbia, Missouri in January 1969 to provide practitioners and teachers of community development their own organization devoted to study of the field, improvement of practice skills, and sharing of knowledge and experience.

The society grew out of a mid-continent conference on the role of the university in community development sponsored by the NUEA. Many of the participants were active in the community development division of the association. The division was exploring the need for a separate professional association. During the conference, seventeen participants met to further explore the value of such an organization. After considerable discussion, which revealed that other national groups were interested in community development, the group adopted the following motion:

That a small committee be established to proceed with the organization of a professional community development association, to explore the sources of funds, and to take other action as indicated toward the establishment of a professional association (Anderson, Cary, Gibson, Houde 1989:2).

In subsequent meetings the committee agreed that membership would be open to anyone interested in community development. In their history of the first 20 years of the society, Anderson, Cary, Gibson and Houde (1989:4,5) state:

In some ways it could be said that the establishment of the CDS was that of an organization waiting to be born... There is little doubt that the 1960s was one of the most active periods for community development through citizen participation both in the United States and throughout the world. Though none of the events described (in the history) led directly to the founding of the Community Development Society, they surely helped to create the climate out of which CDS emerged.

The society was chartered on October 15, 1969, four days before its first annual meeting. On October 19, 1969, nine months after the original organizational meeting, the first annual meeting of the society convened at the University of Missouri in Columbia. Meanwhile, plans for the society's journal were formulated and Bryan Phifer of the University of Missouri's department of community development agreed to serve as the first editor.

More than 200 persons from 30 states, Washington, D.C., and Canada attended the first meeting. In addition to addressing major issues facing community development, participants adopted a constitution and bylaws, and elected officers

and a board of directors. Dr. Lee J. Cary, chair of the department of community development, University of Missouri, was elected first president of the society. Dr. George Abshier of Oklahoma State University was elected president-elect, and Dr. John Dunbar of Purdue University was elected secretary-treasurer. By the end of 1969, there were 442 members of the society.

As stated in Article II of its constitution adopted on October 21, 1969:

The purpose of the Society is to advance the community development profession through educational and scientific means by:

1. Providing a forum for the exchange of ideas among the members of the Society;
2. Providing media for the publication and dissemination of professional and scholarly works;
3. Advocating excellence in community development scholarship, research and practice, for the good of mankind; and
4. Providing an opportunity for the development of common interests among the members of the Society.

Since its founding, membership in the society has fluctuated between approximately 400 and 1,000 members. As of June 30, 1989, the society had 555 members in the United States and 15 other countries. The society publishes the *Journal of the Community Development Society* twice a year and its *Vanguard* magazine quarterly.

Christian Community Development Association

The Christian Community Development Association was organized in Chicago in October 1989. It grew out of the congress of community ministries that met there October 26–29, attended by more than 300 Christian leaders. Delegate John Perkins said:

We are not forming the CCDA to patronize the poor, organize a protest, or go over the facts of poverty again. We're not trying to help the poor get more out of welfare, but to put an end to welfare. We want to help people break out of the welfare system—and we're determined to do it right along beside them.

Federal Government Thrusts

Major federal government involvement in community development came with the *Rural Development Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture* in the mid-1950s. Special funds were authorized by the Congress for the employment of rural development agents through the extension services of the land-grant

universities. This was followed in the early 1960s by the Area Redevelopment Administration which was one of the first of many federal programs offering financial incentives for community development. President Johnson's War on Poverty, begun in 1964, created community action agencies funded through the Office of Economic Opportunity. The remainder of the 1960s and the 1970s saw a flood of programs providing funds for local, regional, state, and multi-state development. By the time the first catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance Programs was published in the mid 1960s, more than 1,100 federal programs were available. Many of these programs offered technical and financial assistance for community improvement projects. They came to be known as "categorical grant" programs since the grant was limited to a specific purpose, such as hospital, library, or swimming pool construction.

Categorical grant programs often tended to work counter to true community development in that:

1. Local funds which should have gone for priority needs often were used as matching funds for projects which may not have been needed.
2. They discouraged citizen participation except in a perfunctory manner to meet legal requirements.
3. They created a dependency on federal financing rather than encouraging use of local resources.
4. They discouraged a holistic view of the community and an integrated development approach based upon real community development principles and practice.

Moreover, the proliferation of federal grant programs in the 1960s nearly overwhelmed the capacity of communities to use them effectively. Consequently, it produced an explosion of so-called "planners," who often had neither community development nor planning experience, and created a new science of "grantsmanship."

In response to increasing demand for more local control over federal community improvement funds, President Nixon introduced his Revenue Sharing Act which the Congress passed in 1972. It lasted until 1986. Special revenue sharing and community development block grants let communities concentrate on their own priorities within broadly defined national purposes. This allowed for much greater flexibility and local control over the use of federal funds than was the case with categorical grant programs. Community development block grants also combined many of the categorical grant programs into six broad categories, thereby eliminating much paperwork and red tape.

Today there is a hodgepodge of programs under the label of community development. Most cities have departments of community development whose

primary purpose is to administer grant programs, and most states have regional planning commissions or councils of government. The range of local, state and federal development programs varies from true citizen participation and initiative to those almost wholly directed by governmental units.

Looking Ahead

Community development has indeed become an in-word, but its meaning is akin to what Humpty-Dumpty told Alice when he said, "When I use a word it means just what I want it to mean—neither more nor less" (Carroll, 1872, new edition 1946:245). Our challenge is to recapture community development as a true citizen effort emphasizing democratic participation and self-help and to make sure that it conveys this meaning. It is indeed ironic that in many totalitarian countries fresh winds of democracy and local control of people's destinies are blowing while in the United States we have come more and more to look to the federal government to do many things for us which we would best do for and by ourselves. How well we recapture the spirit of local decision making and self-help will not only determine the future of community development but of democracy itself.

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