

Approaching the community: a guide for service providers



Rural Community Network
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Service providers who are using a community development process to fulfil their aims and objectives can improve their experiences of working with community groups by recognising some of the factors of community development which may not be immediately obvious from their side of the relationship with the community. These guidelines briefly illustrate this.

Build on what is there

If you look at a community and only see what it lacks, you might needlessly be putting some obstacles in the way of progress and increasing your workload. Some guidelines for your initial approach include:

- Do not worry about what is not there. Use what is there. This might mean meeting in some unorthodox venues, conducting some unusual business at meetings and being open minded about how you initially engage.
- You might not see them immediately, but every community has assets: physical, natural, human and cultural which you can use and upon which they can build. The easiest way to identify these assets is to ask the people who live there. An Appreciative Inquiry approach is one way of doing this (see Appreciative Inquiry Fact Sheet). It is helpful if you and the people you are working with consider that the people in the community are one of the biggest assets.
- Expect that the outcomes you are looking for might take time to materialise. Allow that they might materialise through means you were not expecting. The reasons for this guideline are developed in the next section.

Conversations and Imagination

The community may not immediately connect with the purpose in your own agenda as they may not see the area where they live in the way you do. With good reason, a community is chosen for community development intervention because it is showing statistical indicators of need. However, expecting the community to tackle this need directly might not foster the enthusiasm you expect and might inhibit engagement. Therefore, the following is recommended.

- Rather than starting with what the community lacks, find out what the people are really interested in. To get a meaningful insight, invest some time in having group conversations with people. Listen to what interests them and explore those interests.
- Find out what quality of community life means to them. The information you gather through direct discussion with the people who live in the community will provide the qualitative baseline for your work. If you share this with them, over the course of time the community will be able to see the difference your intervention and their efforts have made. The Service Provider should recognise that the quality of community life may not improve through its intervention directly but in the change it stimulates indirectly, through the voluntary activity of the community.

Variety and Unity

If everyone was to follow the same rules, there would be less uncertainty in working with the community, fewer unknowns and more safeguards. In reality, the community is made up of diverse and varied elements and this should not be considered an inconvenience, but a strength. Adjusting how you work to accommodate this diversity can be as fruitful as asking the community to conform to your guidelines,

if you are willing to judge each situation on its merits. Here is an example:

A small isolated, rural community of 20 households is united in its desire to make some changes to the pavements and the roadways serving the houses in the interests of greater mobility of elderly and disabled residents.

Ask yourself if the people in this community really need to be the same as every other group before you work with them. Placing pre-conditions on intervention, such as insisting that a group be constituted or constitute within a few weeks, identify office bearers, buy insurance and open a bank account might not be appropriate in every case. Unless the group actually needs the trappings of a formal group, it might be possible to work informally and productively in the interests of the whole community. The service provider may still be able to fulfil its aims without serious risk.

Function before Form

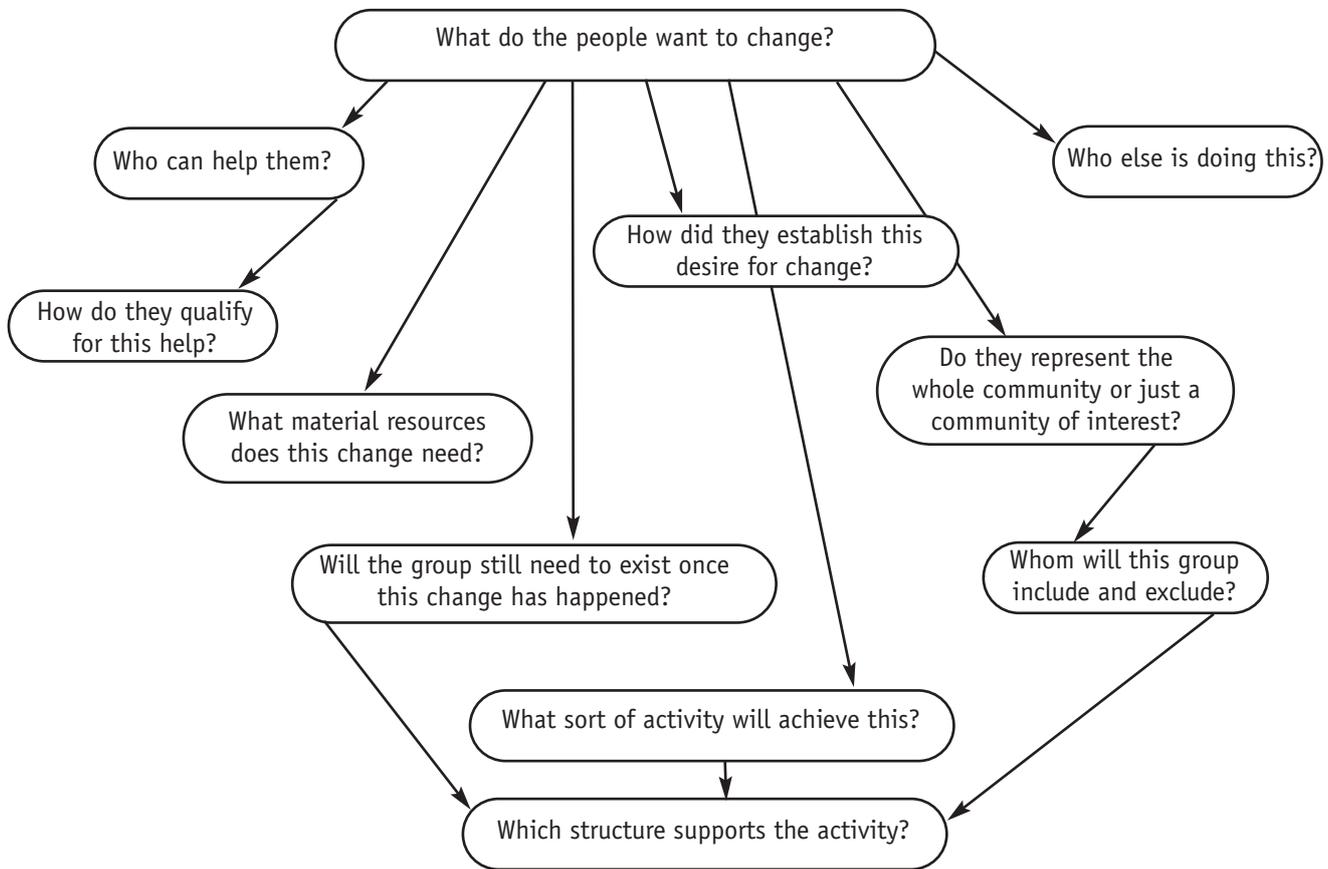
There are numerous examples of groups who have formally established and constituted to suit a service provider whose help they needed but who would have constituted differently had they been encouraged to consider carefully their function before they decided on their form. They might only have the answers to the questions they should ask themselves once they have been working together for a while. It is worthwhile, therefore, to take the group through a process of deciding when to constitute and more importantly, why.

In fact, it would be worth pausing to consider if the establishment of a formal community group in a small rural community will divide the community into those who are members and those who are not, rather than unite the community.

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Change the portrait, change the landscape

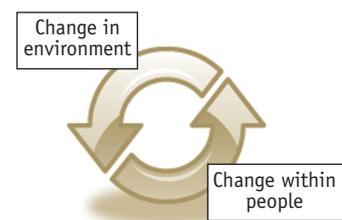
Did removing the graffiti from the bus stop, which you and the group worked so hard for, really improve the quality of community life long term? This is the challenge.

Changes which everyone can see can certainly provide the stimulus for more change, so the opportunity they present for further activity must not be missed. This physical change is not the end of the work because if it was a physical change, the benefit of which few people experience, there will be little longer term impact. Service providers should bear in mind the following.

In order for the work to have a long term benefit, the attitudes and behaviour of the people with regard to collective

activity and community life must change too. Ideally, this change would be simultaneous with the activity, but in areas where there is no history of people tackling their community needs, it might have to precede the activity.

Intervention usually starts with the premise that the need to solve a problem will bring people together. However, it is easier to invite people to come together to enjoy themselves than to solve a problem. It is this social occasion which aims to build the relationships and develop the habit of working together which will later help the people to address material changes.



The process of engagement with people and in facilitating conversations between the relevant people is one of the most important vehicles for action. Keeping the focus of your work primarily on how people work together will help build the ability of the group to deal not just with one problem but sustainably with any issues as they arise.