

# Beware the trojan horse of professionalization: A response to De Beer *et al.* (2012) *Africanus* 42(2).



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## INTRODUCTION

During the past decade community development has become an important field of practice within South Africa. Volume 42(2) of *Africanus*, focusing on the professionalization of community development in South Africa, is therefore timely, updating and informing the reader on some of the history, progress, tensions and challenges facing community development within that context. The collection of articles within the special edition reflects on ‘the quest for professionalization of community development within South Africa’ (De Beer 2012: 2) and represents several South African scholars’ arguments, alongside others from around the world invited to participate in the conversation. The offerings from Ireland and Kenya add to the depth of analysis and importantly situate this conversation within a broader global dialogue about the future of community development. As Australians engaged in scholarly community development work in multiple geographical spaces (for example, Australia, South Africa and Vanuatu), we found the collection to be rich, well-written and thought provoking. It certainly achieved the goal of providing an ‘invaluable source of reflection’ (De Beer 2012: 2).

Our reflection has led to an appreciative and critical consideration of the important concerns and conclusions raised within the issue and we are pleased to share our response. We are also conscious that the authors of this set of articles are well-respected South African and other scholars and engaged policy makers. We offer some thoughts in the spirit of collaborative scholarly engagement and a deepening of discussion, not in any way wishing to offend. We are conscious of our voice coming from Australia, a supposed ‘northern’ space and we offer these thoughts in collegial solidarity. It should also be noted that one of us has published several scholarly articles based on research within South Africa and has worked there on and off for over 20 years, and the other has extensive engagement with the role of the state in development.

Much of what is argued within the set of articles would resonate with community development scholars around the world. The references to community development dilemmas and tensions, the challenges of effective community development practice, the ongoing question around growing social inequalities, all represent crucial debates. Their diagnosis is useful. There is much here that engages critically, that challenges traditional binaries (such as that of paid and unpaid work – see Chile’s (2012) work in particular) and that shows awareness of the ‘smothering

embrace of the state' (De Beer and Swanepoel 2012: 8). Nonetheless, a few critical remarks may be also made about this collection. More importantly, from our perspective, the prognosis of ways forward is worthy of further consideration.

## FIRST THEN A FEW CRITICAL POINTS

Our first point concerns what we understand as *the discourse of community development*. Through the editorial, the edition is constructed through the essentialist language of 'true' or 'authentic' community development (CD) (De Beer and Swanepoel 2012: 3); others also invoke sets of 'characteristics' of (implied true) community development (Maistry 2012: 35). From our perspective, this is problematic because notions of CD as 'true' and 'authentic' invite both a disciplining discourse and also conceive of community development 'itself as an agency or actor that, by its nature, has a commitment' (Mowbray 2012: 2). From a disciplinary perspective, any discussion of 'authentic' and 'true' community development can only be understood within the structural relationship of the existence of a supposed non-authentic community development. Such a discussion lends itself to gate-keepers, policing the inclusions and exclusions of practices and practitioners that are an inevitable consequence of such framing. This requires a level of vigilance on the part of the practitioner as authentic practice must be continuously asserted and defended. Through this axiological struggle community development practitioners then subject themselves to a process of internal and external surveillance. This limits practitioners by articulating a preferred way of being that is more ethical and 'true'.

Not only is this approach disciplinary and potentially exclusionary, but also it will inevitably close down diverse perspectives and the accompanying debate and discussion – all-important in a post-modern age where differing perspectives and a willingness to engage with diversity are crucial. This is not to say that 'anything goes' in terms of what can be understood as community development (a point we return to later on in this response), but it is to say that a more open and diverse approach to understanding community development would be crucial.

True and authentic notions of community development also potentially disable scholars and practitioners in terms of seeing 'actual practice' as opposed to ideals about practice. Instead there is a tendency to not see what is happening and see only the ideals wanted to be seen, or distortions to those ideals. Lippmann frames this dilemma astutely arguing that, 'for the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us' (2007: 31). Such self-referential views run dangerously close to solipsism. Whereas from our perspective, 'seeing' what actually occurs is then best understood through community development as multiple traditions (informed by deep notions of normativity), multiple frameworks and as a paradigmatic site of struggle (a discursive contest) – discussed in more depth within the second part of our article. Our argument is closely aligned to Mowbray's critique quoted above and invites consideration of 'actual' community development practice rather than 'ideals'.

Our second critical reflection focuses upon what we also understand as *the credibility challenge*. Many of the articles in the collection argue that a key rationale for professionalization is the lack of credibility among community development workers (for example, Chile 2012: 53). The lack of credibility is due to perceived ineffectiveness, resultant from inadequate skills,

knowledge, ethical codes and so forth. There are a couple of assumptions underpinning this argument that require closer scrutiny. The first is the assumption that there *is* a lack of credibility. The politics of evidence debate, which is unfolding globally (Institute for Development Studies 2013), foregrounds the contestation around issues of evidence and the accompanying claims of credibility. Credibility is often associated within concerns around quality and, as Denzin (2009: 139) observes, ‘standards for assessing quality are forms of interpretive practice that enact a politics of evidence and truth’. In turn, what counts as knowledge and truth sits within broader relations of power and any assertion of the credibility of community development or otherwise needs to be engaged with critically.

The location of many traditions of community development within a humanistic knowledge base and an anarchic power base automatically locates it on the less credible, soft-skilled, ‘feminine’ side of the knowledge continuum. And, as Thomas notes, ‘not only is much of what we call knowledge socially constructed, the boundaries between subjects are also socially constructed. It is not simply that we can suspend the objective basis of knowledge, but that knowledge is compartmentalized: some kinds of knowledge are considered more important than other kinds’ (1990: 19). In the debate over the credibility of community development we need to pause and ask what kinds of knowledge are being valued and in whose interest.

The next assumption to be considered within *the credibility challenge* is that the ‘architecture’ of professionalism (association, council, credentialism, standardization, uniformity, and so forth) would solve the credibility challenge. The assumption is that people in communities, particularly the vulnerable, would be able to trust community development workers to ‘do their job’ if they were ‘professionals’. Mechanistic models are reductionist – decreasing things to their most basic form to enable control. For example, intricate skill sets are reduced to a series of tasks; multifaceted relationships are reduced to roles; sophisticated ideas are reduced to bullet points and memos; complex ethical decisions and behaviours such as duty of care are reduced to risk management inventories. Our current systems of government work ‘as a kind of machinery governed by self-regulating checks and balances, rather than by great abilities or insightful minds’ (Evans 1996: 37). We might do well to heed Gandhi’s warning against wanting systems so perfect, that no one needs to be good (cited in Evans 1996: 37).

In contrast, leading complexity scholar Margaret Wheatley observes that the things feared most in organizations – disruptions, confusion, and chaos – need not be interpreted as signs of impending destruction. Rather, such conditions are necessary to awaken creativity. Thus ‘dissipative structures demonstrate that *disorder* can be a source of new *order*, and that growth appears from disequilibrium not balance’ (Wheatley 1999: 21). Such thinking suggests that if quality is in question, the solution does not lie in trying to develop tighter controls: ‘[I]f people are machines, seeking to control us makes sense. But if we live with the same forces intrinsic to all other life, then seeking to impose control through rigid structures is suicidal’ (Wheatley 1999: 25).

The third point of critique centres on what we understand as *the tension between community development as a professional and citizen project*: with the former more aligned to state goals and the latter to activist or civil society goals. The articles do acknowledge a tension between the two, even if not using this exact language, but the tension is then submerged. The key concern

is the absence of engagement with how the tension between the ‘two projects’ can be massaged within the prognosis of professionalization. It would appear that community development as a citizen project, deployed by civil society, will be rendered marginal or invisible, excluded on the basis of ‘lacking skills, knowledge, qualifications’ and so forth.

Finally, our fourth area of concern, extending from the idea of the citizen’s project of community development, speaks to a contradiction at the heart of this analysis, and reflects a *paradigm dilemma*. There is a desire to move from one state of being in community development – one named as a lack of credibility and a drift – to another state, requiring ‘a new way of thinking, a different set of lenses or worldviews, values, attitudes and behavior’ (Maistry 2012: 32). The problem is that the vehicle proposed for this movement – that of professionalization – is already compromised. It is in many ways a disciplinary tool of neoliberalism and there is evidence of its limitations already available that should give pause for further consideration. The professionalization of the disability sector in Queensland, Australia, is a case in point (Queensland Government 2010). Since the introduction of the quality improvement agenda in 2004, the sector has undergone fundamental reform including the introduction of quality systems and auditing regimes, mandatory qualifications and onerous recognition of prior learning (RPL) systems, risk management procedures, occupational health and safety (OHS) adherence, continual improvement requirements, volunteer registers, and volunteer and employee criminal background checks. There is no question that it has led to some positive outcomes, with improved industrial conditions for workers, greater role clarity and increased financial accountability. One could argue that it has also been successful in skilling people in surveillance and compliance. But for all the talk of ‘quality’, to date there has been no evidence that it has actually led to better lives for people with disabilities. Instead the result has been the creation of a risk averse culture and a closing down of community spaces. Despite increasing professionalization of workers there is evidence of a worsening of people’s social and economic lives (Lunn 2011).

## **SECOND, WHAT CAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARS OFFER AS AN ALTERNATIVE?**

So, as engaged scholars rather than merely providing a critique, we would like to build upon the work of the authors and offer a few ways forward.

*A different way of thinking:* We start by returning to the problem of essentialized notions of ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ community development. As alluded to in the previous reflection, we instead argue for a notion of traditions and frameworks of community development alongside deep normativity. The argument provides the focus of ‘content’ for reflective community development practitioners, whether citizen or professional. We would suggest that there are two ways forward – one way more orthodox and a second way alluded to above, as per a post-modern and deconstructive perspective. The more orthodox way of viewing community development could be to draw on the notion of normative but be clear about whether to subscribe to what we call a shallow as opposed to deep normativity. Shallow normativity is a way of thinking about community development in terms of a limited normative set of principles or orthodoxies. The discourse of such approaches would be something like ‘community development is always ...’. For example, ‘community development is always ‘bottom-up’ or ‘community development

is always people-led development'. Within this approach the norms and customs, that is, normativity, of community development practice, are considered shallow because there is no discussion about where these norms come from. They are discussed as being self-evident and are usually framed ahistorically.

Alternatively, deep normativity is a way of rethinking community development in terms of diverse sets of norms and customs that are situated within diverse cultural, literary or historical traditions. The norms and customs of practice, also potentially discussed in terms of principles, ethics and orthodoxies, do not claim to determine what community development is but rather to describe what a *particular* tradition or framework of community development is. There is depth to the norms, because they are grounded in historical and other dimensions that are particular and that have stood the test of time. Within this perspective, discussions of so-called authentic or true community development immediately invite the questions, 'Whose truth?' and 'Under what circumstances?' Put more simply, community development can be understood as a set of traditions and frameworks/approaches. Traditions could include social mobilizing, social learning and social guidance communitarian, anarchist, Freirean, Alinskian or the Settlement House tradition (see Campfrens 1997 for an excellent discussion of these). Examples of frameworks would be assets-based community development, sustainable livelihood, critical community development, a networking approach, 'rights from below', dialogical community development, human-scale development, and so forth. Again this is not to deny orthodoxies, but to simply argue that orthodoxies much be understood historically, culturally and contextually.

A post-modern and deconstructive perspective would reframe practice not as 'authentic' or 'true', but as deeply contextualized and requiring practitioners to stand in multiple knowing spaces. Such thinking re-imagines community development not as a profession but as a discourse (with diverse ideas, ideologies, practices) that is constantly contested, and this contestation is what keeps it alive.

*A different way of relating:* While the first point discussed above argues for a different way of thinking about community development to what the authors within the *Africanus* edition offered, this second point considers the kind of alternative structure for reflective and reflexive structure. In challenging the idea of 'the architecture of professionalization' we recognize the need for infrastructure to facilitate reflective and reflexive practice about the kinds of community development required to achieve emancipatory hopes. We suggest that, within the intellectual and practice traditions of systems theory and holistic practice, a more useful way forward would be to constitute 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1999) through a non-professional association. As Chile (2012) observes, such associations have already thrived in the community development spaces (such as the IACD and CDS). Communities of practice would provide a framework that enable community development workers and citizens experimenting with community development approaches to gather regularly, learn, exchange, engage in 'horizontal learning', and *in situ* mentoring. In other words we advocate a movement away from consideration of mechanisms for control and exclusion and towards a discussion about what constitutes and encourages learning among thoughtful practitioners. Structuring up transformational learning would focus on processes that nurture confidence, relationships, skills and resources (or at least linkages to people who have resources). Research from recent 'capacity development' literature, particularly the work of Jan Ubels and his colleagues (2010 174–177), Robert Chambers'

evaluative work on ‘scaling-up’ participatory practice (2005: 119ff), our own research within the South African national community development programme training regime (Westoby, 2014) and Shevellar’s experience with communities of practice (for example the 2012 practitioner dialogue in India offered through IACD) provide various ways forward to ensure on-going learning.

For example, good practice invites participants in a community of practice to discover inspiring stories through initiating local-level action research and action learning processes. These stories can then be disseminated through existing networks, particularly through horizontal learning peer-oriented processes, whereby people in one locality could visit people doing something inspiring in another locality. Doing this enables people to gain confidence – seeing it done elsewhere; build networks – meeting the people who have done it elsewhere; and acquire skills – learning from those people who have ‘gone before’. Ubels *et al.* (2010) and Chambers (2005) also build on a long lineage of research and reflection going back to Reg Batten’s (1962) seminal work on training within community development work. Batten argues that it is important for community development initiatives to take training seriously to accompany local change agents in understanding their local situation and working contextually. However, he argues that it is not a case of experts (including university-based experts) providing training and then sending people into the field. Instead transformational capacity building needs to be a process of supporting local workers *in situ*, helping them to learn how to navigate the complexities of their daily activity, while holding to the transformational heart of the community work.

*A different way of being:* finally, our prognosis argues for a more holistic approach to considering the future of community development within South Africa. Such a holistic approach rejects a starting premise of control or standardization. Instead it invites questions such as ‘how do we enable practitioners to be skilled and open to new approaches and to continually see their work anew?’ A holistic perspective would ask, not how to control community development, but how to grow community development and see it flourish. Wheatley suggests that to flourish, fewer descriptions of tasks are needed (to which we could also add standards, position descriptions) but instead focus would shift to learning how to facilitate *process*: ‘We need to become savvy about how to foster relationship, how to nurture growth and development’ (1999: 39). As community development practitioners, we have skills in these areas that we can use to great effect with those we are invited to work with. The challenge is how to turn these same skills of thinking, relating and being inwards upon ourselves as a community of practitioners.

The impact of professionalism, professionalization and the advent of the profession have long been criticized in the literature. McKnight observes that communities are often disabled rather than enabled by professionals (1996). Friedson (1988) observes that a ‘profession’ is not a mere structure but is itself an act of power. A profession creates for itself a state of ‘splendid isolation’ (1988: 369), which in turn becomes self-deceiving, whereby, ‘The problem is that once given its special status, the profession quite naturally forms a perspective of its own, a perspective all the more distorted and narrow by its source in a status answerable to no one but itself’ (1988: 370). Thus, the loyalty professed, (as per the Latin root *profiteor*) risks a shift from loyalty to those being served, to loyalty to a regulatory body. Professionalism and/or professionalization may – as Hart (2012) hopes – lead to engagement with distinct values and create awareness of moral obligations. But we need to be careful of the Trojan Horse of the professional project and be conscious of what else we are allowing to roll through our community gates.

## NOTES

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