



50th Anniversary Conference

Why Community Development?
Continuity and Innovation

University of Edinburgh
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Participant Feedback

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Introduction

To celebrate its 50th year, the Editorial Board of the Community Development Journal (CDJ) organised a number of exciting activities. These included including a special issue of the Journal, themed issues of critical contemporary relevance, and an international conference.

At this 50th Anniversary Conference, we brought together over 80 scholars, policy makers, practice-based participants and activists from 17 countries. These participants shared a common interest in the issues of social justice, equality and community. Together, we examined the relevance of community development as a means to realise social justice goals within a global world and globalised society.

Amongst myriad community practices, community development stands out not only because of the historical and intellectual depth of its tradition, but also for its critical relationship to established power and hence its potential to go beyond addressing immediate social problems to a genuinely transformative and liberating praxis.

We acknowledge that community development is a contested practice. It is this inherent tension that demands practitioners and theorists be reflexive, acknowledging competing tensions and claims.



Through the contributions to this conference, we aimed to explore:

- 1) How community development retains its enduring relevance and importance in different contexts
- 2) The key issues for the future that community development will need to address if it is to retain this relevance
- 3) The range of meanings and strategies for community development in different contexts
- 4) The future role of the Community Development Journal in supporting community development internationally.

In this report, we reflect upon some of the strengths and limitations of both the conference and CDJ itself, through sharing ideas and feedback generated during the event.

In doing so, this report responds broadly to aims 2) and 4), which focus upon the questions and possibilities of the *future*. Details of post-conference materials that address aims 1) and 3) can be found in the 'resources' section below.

The views expressed in this document are not necessarily those of the CDJ Editorial Board.

Participation

At the heart of the conference was a *participatory* ethos. All speakers and facilitators were encouraged to consider the global relevance of their work, and factor group discussion prominently into their sessions. This approach was present from the early stages of conference planning: following the acceptance of abstracts for the event, presenters were invited to revise their proposals in order to speak to an international audience and plan for participation.



The result was an event at which critical, productive and friendly conversation took centre stage. A range of verbal feedback from conference participants confirmed the value of this approach. New international working relationships were proposed. Participants explained that they found the atmosphere to be both welcoming and dynamic. As one attendee stated on the final day:

‘Normally at this kind of conference I might get to know four or five people. At this event, I feel like I’ve got to know everyone’.

Inclusion and access

CDJ took a number of actions to ensure ease of access to the event. These included:

- An international open call for contributors
- There was no conference fee
- CDJ provided food and refreshments for all attendees
- Dietary needs were catered for
- Participants were asked about access needs ahead of the event
- The conference venue was accessible to individuals with reduced mobility
- CDJ booked hotel rooms and subsidised the cost of accommodation for guests
- A number of travel and accommodation bursaries were available, with priority given to students, individuals representing small, independent organisations, and travellers from the global South.

These actions had the effect of ensuring a relatively diverse range of attendees from many parts of the world. However, the associated costs also ensured that a strict cap on numbers was necessary, meaning that only a limited number of people were able to attend the conference.

Resources

We are disseminating a variety of resources generated from the 50th Anniversary Conference through our website, CDJ Plus:

<http://www.oxfordjournals.org/cdj/resources/cdj50/>

These materials include –

- Video footage of Professor Marjorie Mayo's keynote speech.
- Five specially commissioned video interviews with practitioners and academics from across the globe, discussing both situated practices and wider issues for community development.
- Videos shared by participants, looking at community development with women in Georgia, and participatory visual methods in a variety of contexts.
- Presentation slides from a number of talks and workshops.
- Blog posts reflecting upon the event.
- Photographs taken during the event.
- Original conference materials, including the call for papers and conference booklet.



Feedback

Flipchart paper and sticky notes were available in the entrance to the main conference hall. Participants were encouraged to share thoughts and ideas throughout the event. Notes were also taken during presentations and discussions by session chairs. This feedback was later transcribed, and informs the reflections that can be found in the following pages.

Responding to the event

The event received an overwhelmingly positive response from participants. In particular, attendees praised the participatory ethos of the event, the prominence of both *theory* and *practice*, and the extent to which CDJ provided financial and administrative support for international travellers. There was also some constructive criticism provided amongst the conference feedback.

Conference size

Conference participants generally welcomed the number limit on the event, with comments suggesting that it was both large enough to accommodate a diverse range of individuals and ideas, and small enough to be focussed and friendly. However, some suggested that the conference could have been larger, enabling more to benefit from attending.

Diversity

Many participants from the UK in particular commented positively upon the international diversity of the event. However, others noted that the conference still had a broadly 'UK-centric' flavour. Conference sessions took place entirely in English; some participants suggested that academics and practitioners from non-Anglophone countries less likely to attend as a result.

A number of individuals noted that all of the keynote speakers at the conference were white. It was suggested that future international events hosted by CDJ should ensure a greater diversity of keynote speakers.

Community involvement

A number of participants noted that the conference reflected the Community Development Journal itself in taking a broadly academic approach. There were, however, some panels that involved contributions by individuals from community groups under discussion. This was particularly the case with presentations based around work being done in Edinburgh. Some suggested that future CDJ events would benefit from more sessions like this, with greater community involvement in presenting and sharing their experiences.



Challenges for practice

We live in a time of rapid social, political and technological change, on both a global level and in many local contexts. Drawing upon their experiences and discussions at the conference, participants identified a range of challenges for community development practice in the present and future. The bullet points below are based upon conference feedback, and identify issues that practitioners and academics alike may wish to consider in planning, undertaking, studying and evaluating community development work.

Sustainability and accountability

- Measuring outcomes can feed into modes of accountability, and thereby help with sustainable practice.
- Frames of accountability need to be designed in a participatory manner.
- There are issues with representation and ownership: who do projects belong to?
- There can be tensions between slow reflective processes, and neoliberal demands for measurable outputs/results.
- What are the consequences of involving 'dirty politics' in community development work when private money (e.g. from oil companies) and/or regressive government policy is involved – who has power, and how is it wielded?

Constraints and contradictions

- Partnerships with the state can result in both benefits and drawbacks.
- It can be difficult to practice transformational politics and values across challenging/contradictory settings.
- How can community development work promote radical values and radical change in a context of constraint (e.g. state funding)?
- How open are practitioners to 'radical' practice, and how much are we able to talk or think about 'radical' practice?
- There can be tension between the 'collective' and individuals in community activism.
- There can be factionalism within communities: practitioners must often address the fragmentation of community.
- Community development workers may find themselves involved in the creation of neoliberal subjectivity.

Looking to the future

- Community development must assert its place and advantages as an approach.
- Practitioners should avoid the temptation to go into 'new democracies' and tell people what to do: they can work it out for themselves!
- Community development and social enterprise may be held back by 'gender blind' approaches; this can be addressed by practitioners sensitive to gendered social differences within communities, who draw upon this knowledge to build more inclusive projects.
- There are interesting and productive comparisons to be drawn between global North and global South, particularly in terms of addressing issues such as climate change.
- It is important to understand history, drawing upon the lessons of the past.

Issues for further discussion/debate

Conference participants and sessional chairs identified a number of issues that would benefit from further discussion and debate, be it in future conferences or within published writing. This section looks at some of the thoughts and questions raised in this context.

Community development as a concept

A key question that arose on many occasions was: what *is* community development? Some felt that the field would benefit from a clearer definition, whereas others believed that community development benefits from being a 'messy', fluid discipline. Proponents of the latter position argued that practitioners and communities need to be able to negotiate what community development means to *them* in their own context. It was also suggested that community development is best understood as multidisciplinary, with parallels to be drawn across numerous fields.

Regardless of how community development might be defined, participants felt that it was important to assert its value. The question then becomes: how best to assert the value of community development? This challenge is shaped by changes in language, such as the 'fossilisation' of some terminology associated with community development, and the co-option of other ideas.

Reflecting upon community development

There were questions asked about the process of reflecting upon and theorising community development. Some queried the production of project 'outcomes', asking how much these might sometimes be a mere 'shadow' of community-based discussions and conversations. Others questioned how we might assess the 'value' of reflective practice in and of itself. It was also suggested that there needs to be more space for community organisations to publish outside of formal processes within academia and government.



Neoliberalism

Neoliberal approaches were broadly seen as presenting difficulties for community development. With capitalism in crisis, participants asked: how should community development respond?

In addressing the challenges of neoliberalism, a couple of cautious notes were sounded. Firstly, some participants asked to what extent neoliberalism is monolithic, suggesting a need to acknowledge that it is not the same in all contexts. Secondly, some asked: are we overstating the power of neoliberal discourse?

Professional identity

A range of questions were asked about the role of professional identity within community identity. Some asked: to what extent can or should professional identity service as a 'defence' for community

development approaches? Others reflected upon the role of training within university contexts, and how this might relate to or impact upon the possibility of radical practice. Some queried the motivations of those who submit papers to journals for publication: what is more important in doing so, self-advancement or challenging the status quo?

Community development in a changing world

What is the future of activism and community organisation? Participants wondered how transferable various community development approaches might be in an increasingly connected world, and how ideas might adequately exist across time and across borders.

Many asked how community development approaches might productively embrace digital media, citing the benefits of being at the forefront of innovative approaches in the dissemination of media. Could this be used more in the development of organic, integrated community development networks?

Questions were also asked about the role of philanthropy in a world of increasing wealth inequalities; as well as how the role of philanthropy might differ in different regions with various socio-cultural and economic histories (such as the Western and Islamic worlds). What role should philanthropy play in community development? How can this role differ across the globe?

Finally, in the context of contemporary political debates and violent conflicts, there is the question of how community development might productively respond to extremism.



What is valuable about CDJ?



Conference participants were asked for their perspective on CDJ itself. The following aspects of the journal were identified as particularly *valuable* to academics and practitioners working in the field of community development.

A focus on community development

Conference participants valued the existence of a journal dedicated specifically to the field of community development. It was felt that the journal provides good quality, reliable and 'forward-looking' material that both shares and critiques contemporary community development work. The wide thematic scope of CDJ was praised, with participants citing the way the journal allows for diverse meanings and understandings of community development to co-exist, hosting debate on a range of themes and developments. It was also felt that CDJ enables community development to intersect productively with related fields, such as social work and education.

Academic credibility

A number of participants argued that CDJ provides vital credibility and validation for the field, with a good academic grounding and high impact rating ensuring parity with other, better-known disciplines. This was portrayed as particularly valuable by academics and practitioners from areas such as East Asia where community-oriented work is increasingly marginalised; CDJ was seen as offering a site of resistance. Moreover, it was noted that 'practitioner' authors are valued by CDJ, and offered academic credibility through the publication of their articles.

International status

The 'international flavour' of CDJ was praised. Conference participants valued the range of learning experiences offered through the journal's role in sharing practice and debates from around the world. They felt that it provided valuable links with people working elsewhere, allowing individuals to identify others with shared interests and breaking down some of the barriers between global North and South.

Content

A number of conference participants identified their favourite parts of the journal. Several mentioned the Special Issues as particularly interesting and valuable. Some noted the benefits of experiential case studies, whereas others preferred theoretical work (albeit when grounded in practice). The journal's practice of revisiting older texts was praised, along with the space given for less academically rigorous writing in the reviews section.

Inspiration

CDJ was described as challenging and stimulating, offering a source of insight and inspiration. It was argued that the journal is also a useful resource for teaching, passing on those benefits to a new generation.

Ideas to consider for CDJ

Participants were asked for ideas about the future role of CDJ. A large and thoughtful range of suggestions were offered in response. Inevitably, there was no absolute consensus on how CDJ should look in the future, with some proposals contradicting others. The intention of this report is to reflect upon discussion from the 50th Anniversary Conference rather than to offer concrete proposals: as such, all relevant perspectives are shared below.

Defining the role of the journal

Some participants questioned who CDJ is ultimately *for*: activists, professional practitioners, or academics? Some believed that there was perhaps too much of a focus on the latter group. Others suggested that the journal itself – like the conference – could benefit from less of a UK focus, building upon CDJ’s international standing.

It was suggested that CDJ could perhaps provide help for all of these groups to submit their own practice-focused papers.

Defining community development

It was suggested that CDJ could play a role in defining ‘community development’ itself, perhaps by affirming the validity of some core or guiding principles for the field. It was argued that maybe authors should be encouraged to emphasise particular values within their articles.

In a separate – but related – suggestion, it was argued that CDJ could perhaps do more to explore the relevance of the *language* of ‘community development’ across a number of different contexts.

Engaging with writers and practitioners

A considerable number of suggestions centred upon how CDJ could better support the ‘community’ of community development through investing more in relationships with writers: in particular, writers from the global South, and non-academics.

A number of these proposals centred involved some form of peer support system. This could build upon existing support mechanisms within the editorial process, or perhaps involve the encouragement of co-operative or collaborative submissions from writers with different backgrounds (or even in different countries). It was felt that this could help encourage a ‘new guard’ in the field, and better involve community members as writers and co-authors.

Conference participants also suggested some ways in which CDJ could communicate better with readers and writers alike. One participant argued that the editorial process could explained more clearly; another proposed that CDJ do more to encourage writers to create a brief profile on themselves and their work to help others feel more connected.

Ensuring access

A number of conference participants proposed that CDJ could do more to increase access to the journal, particularly in regions with weaker ICT infrastructures such as sub-Saharan Africa. It was argued that the increasing move towards digital circulation has implications for access due to digital inequalities. A proposed solution was to work with OUP on a simplified payment system that could increase physical access to the journal in areas with poor digital access.

It was also suggested that CDJ would benefit from more translations into languages other than English.

Ideas for future articles

A variety of proposals from conference participants related to ideas for future articles. These included quite specific suggestions:

- Community development with people in transience: e.g. the role of refugees in regeneration
- Accounts of the way workers may resist or navigate New Public Managerialism
- Articles challenging apolitical approaches to community development
- Articles looking at the tensions between challenging and accommodating the state.

There were also a number of suggestions proposing broad areas that could benefit from more discussion in the journal:

- Community development in the Arab world
- Community development in contexts of political oppression and active conflict
- LGBT politics
- Gender-based violence
- The education of girls
- Faith and religion
- Explorations of power.

Several suggestions focused specifically on the notion of productive *failure*, suggesting that CDJ would benefit from more articles looking at problems from the field, or ideas that have not worked, so as to better learn from mistakes and problems.

Finally, there were several suggested Special Issue themes:

- The 'health' of community development as a discipline
- The state of professional training for community development
- Radicalism within universities.

