

## **Towards unsettling community development**

**Professor Sue Kenny**

**Director**

**Centre for Citizenship, Development and Human Rights**

**Deakin University**

**Australia**

[suek@deakin.edu.au](mailto:suek@deakin.edu.au)

### **Abstract**

Community development was born out of a commitment to practising ways of empowering people to take collective control of their own lives. This empowerment requires profound changes in the ways in which societies are organised, and community development has held out the promise of heroic change. While community development practitioners have been able to secure spaces for community development processes and policies, overall the successes of community development have been uneven and often quite modest. Indeed, the story of community development so far is one of considerable unfinished business. Drawing on two research projects, this paper considers whether third sector organisations, which form the bulk of organisational sites upon which community development take place, generate and nurture types of active citizenship that are appropriate to community development activities. The paper develops a typology of active citizenship and considers manifestations of the types in seven countries. The applicability of the types to community development is dependent upon what form of community development is being considered. The position presented in this paper is that we need more than a settled form of community development based around maintaining and defensive active citizenship. An unsettled and edgy community development is also needed and this requires critical, proactive, visionary and cosmopolitan citizens active citizens who are prepared to challenge existing power relations.

## Introduction

The literature concerning community development over the past twenty years more than adequately covers the practices, visions and ideological contexts of community development. There is less coverage of the formal organisational settings of community development, namely the state, third sector organisations and more recently (and some would say contradictorily), the corporate sector, and the ways in which formal organisations can facilitate or hinder community development activities. What is surprising is the limited discussion of the role of third sector organisations (also known as voluntary associations, NGOs or non-government organisations, community organisations and nonprofit organisations) as formal structures, in supporting community development activities.

Since the beginning of the 1990s there has been a burgeoning of the third sector, with a corresponding growth in the academic field of third sector research. This field now comprises extensive national and international studies of the dimensions of the third sector, focussing on the discourse of NGOs and civil society in the 'developing world' (see for example Edwards and Hulme, 1992; Hudock, 1999; Pearce and Eade, 2000; Howell and Pearce, 2001) and the discourse of nonprofit management and functions in the 'developed' world (see for example Salamon, Anheier and Associates, 1999; Werther and Berman, 2001; Evers and Laville, 2004). Yet there has been little engagement between the related research pursuits comprising the study of third sector organisations in so called developing and developed societies and the study of community development. In part this lack of engagement might be the result of different framing of the discourses of community development and the third sector. Community development discourse has a normatively Left and human rights orientation, whilst third sector research has a wider political framing which can embrace 'third way' and neo-liberal views as well as Left vantage points. In its neo-liberal form in particular, third sector research is focussed on management themes rather than, for example, strategies for local empowerment. Nonetheless these areas of difference do not explain the apparent reluctance of community development researchers to explore the question of how far the third sector actually cultivates practices, processes and cultures appropriate to community development practice.

Much of the discussion of community development, and indeed other approaches to 'development', now assume that the third sector, whether in the form of community organisations, voluntary associations or NGOs, is the main site upon which community development takes place. Yet with some exceptions (see for example, Alcock and Christensen, 1995; Opare, 2007; Bratt and Rohe, 2007; Donelason, 2004; Knottes, 2006), there is little explicit acknowledgement of, or indeed critical reflection upon, the assumption that third sector organisations are the most appropriate settings for community development activities. This paper investigates this assumption. Its focus is one of the key promises of third sector organisations, namely, the claim that the third sector generates and nurtures an active citizenry.

### **Active Citizenship**

To understand active citizenship it is important to begin with the concept of citizenship itself. Citizenship has become a central concept in sociology since the seminal articulation of the sociological meaning of the concept by Marshall (Marshall, 1950). Citizenship is concerned with questions of what it means to be a member of society, how identities and loyalties are constructed, how we are supported and resourced as members (our rights) and how we contribute to society (our obligations and duties). Marshall's view was that there has been a gradual extension of citizen rights, from civil rights (such as the right to free speech) to political rights (such as the right to vote) to social rights (the right to welfare) (1950: 8). Using Marshall's formulation as a starting point, much of the discussion of citizenship views individuals and collectivities as more or less passive citizens, to whom rights are handed down from above, and who accept what is given to them (Turner, 1992:55). Yet as many commentators have also pointed out, the explanation of citizenship rights is more complex (Turner, 1992; Isin and Wood, 1999). The development of citizen rights can involve the bestowal of rights from above, to citizens who perform their duties and receive their rights passively. But it can also involve the empowerment of individuals to shape their rights and obligations through participation in society as active, rather than passive citizens (Turner, 1992). Active citizens are autonomous, self-conscious beings who are concerned to shape their own destiny.

Community development requires active citizens who are able to work together for the purpose of improving the well-being of their communities. But this bald claim begs the question about what type of active citizenship is required. It is important to understand that there are several types of active citizenship. For the purpose of analysis it is useful to construct a framework of ideal types of citizenship (1). Four ideal types can be discerned. First, active citizenship can operate to *maintain* existing relations. Active citizens involved in community cohesion, aged-care and disability projects all have maintenance roles. And when third sector organisations become 'shunting yards' for the social problems facing the state, active citizens can have a role to play as volunteers, for example in assisting young people to adapt to their powerlessness. Active citizens concerned with 'helping the less fortunate' maintain the asymmetrical power relations between the recipient and giver of welfare, in some situations reviving the charity notion of deserving and undeserving poor. Indeed this type of active citizenship can be brought into the service of the state under the guise of civil virtue.

The second type of active citizen is the *individualised self-help* or 'do-it-yourself' (Cornwell, 2008:272) variety. It involves nurturing 'entrepreneurial', self-motivated individuals, who can develop personal initiative and take responsibility for their own affairs (Edwards and Gaventa, 2001 :278). The idea of self-responsibility is expressed in the concept of individualisation, whereby, according to Beck (1992: 135), 'each person's biography is removed from given determinations and placed in his or her hands, open and dependent upon decisions'. This type of active citizenship is championed in neo-liberal circles, because it involves individuals fulfilling their obligations to society, but it has also been sustained by 'third way' approaches to welfare, whereby individuals become risk managers of their own lives (Giddens , 1998).

The third type of active citizenship is *defensive opposition*. It comprises ideas and actions involving the defense of existing assets or relationships, or defensive resistance to a proposed change. While oppositional, this type of active citizenship operates within existing structures and it does not challenge unequal power relations, for oppositional activity does not necessarily mean contesting the existing distribution of power (Pretty, 1995; Cornwell, 2008). For example, a person might oppose a particular project or policy,

but not question the power of those who drew it up. Actions undertaken as defensive opposition include writing a letter to a politician, ringing a local radio talk-back program with a complaint and organising a protest march.

The final ideal type can be identified as *visionary* active citizenship. *Visionary* active citizenship is proactive rather than reactive. For example, it involves scoping alternative futures and finding better ways of 'doing things'. Unlike the other types of active citizenship, this type challenges existing structures, values and power relations underpinning existing societies. Prefiguring different types of social relations and structures, such as occurs when a community organisation adopts processes of deliberative democracy, or establishes a Transition Town program, is a manifestation of this kind of active citizenship.

In practice of course, it is often difficult to distinguish clearly between these four types. For example, some active citizenship might begin in oppositional mode, and if successful, might later become a form of maintenance, or be ratcheted up to a visionary mode. Nevertheless the distinctions can be useful in exploring how people respond to issues as active citizens, and for the purposes of this paper, understanding various types of citizenship can be useful for drawing out the affinities between active citizenship and community development practices.

It is possible to identify other dimensions of active citizenship that cross-cut the typology above. Four are particularly important for the purposes of this paper. First, citizenship is both about attitudes and activity or action. The two do not necessarily go together. Respondents may hold a particular attitude without necessarily doing anything about it. Second, attitudes and action around a particular issue may be relevant to the local community level, or they may refer to national or global events. Third, active citizens might be those who speak for themselves or they might be advocates for others. Finally, active citizenship can be of the type that is explicitly individualistic or it can be an explicitly collaborative endeavour. This last consideration is important for community development in so far as explicitly individualistic active citizenship can undermine the collective action which is at the heart of community development.

## **Applications**

How active citizenship is manifested in third sector organisations has implications for the ways in which these organisations can support community development, because, as indicated above, some forms of active citizenship have more affinity with community development than others. This paper is a modest attempt to understand the types of active citizenship in third sector organisations. It draws on two studies of third sector organisations carried out between 2002 and 2009. The first project, referred to in this paper as the *Comparative dimensions of active citizenship study* (2), was concerned to map and analyse the forms of active citizenship in a sample of third sector organisations in 6 countries, namely Australia, Sweden, The Netherlands, Britain, Russia and Spain. This study involved both a survey of attitudes and activities of third sector participants (N = 1610) in the 6 countries, and field visits and in-depth interviews covering 40 organisations across five countries (Spain was the exception) (3). The second project was another Australian Research Council grant called *Capacity-building in Indonesian Islamic NGOs* (4). In exploring capacity building in Indonesia the types of active citizenship became evident. Whilst the focus of this study was Islamic organisations, the vast majority of organisations in Indonesia are Islamic in one way or another, given the dominance of Islam in this country. This research involved in-depth interviews with participants in 36 organisations in different provinces in Indonesia. Fourteen NGOs were singled out for detailed case-study examination.

### ***Comparative dimensions of active citizenship***

In the *Comparative dimensions of active citizenship study* the survey questions and interviews probed for information on attitudes, experiences and activities which could be understood as active citizenship. These included questions about beliefs in regard to the power of citizens to influence government decisions, attitudes to people agitating for change, engagement in global issues, commitment to collective action and responses to specific case-study scenarios (5). What was especially interesting in the research findings was the minimal differences between countries. There were greater differences between the aggregated data for small and larger towns than between countries, with Russia being the exception on some questions.

The dominant type of active citizenship in the study, in all locations, and in terms of both attitude and activity, was concerned with the maintenance of existing relations at the local level. Active citizenship was about action by third sector participants to (re)create and (re)affirm mutually supportive networks of common interest and caring within the community, and thereby preserving valued activities or ways of being for the particular community concerned. It was about civic consciousness and civic obligation. Thus active citizens were those people who 'looked out for neighbours' and helped those less fortunate. For example, question 20 in the survey asked respondents to choose from a list of options the characteristics of a 'good citizen'. The dominant response was that 'a good citizen is someone who 'helps others in need'. Only 7.3 % of respondents stated that a good citizen was a person who 'minded their own business'. Interestingly, the responses in Russia defied this trend: 25.4% of respondents rated 'minding one's own business' as a key criterion of good citizenship, perhaps a legacy of the Stalinist policy of 'informing' on neighbours.

Whilst the wider context of the third sector has been one of growing encroachment of neo-liberal and third way ideas of self-responsibilisation, particularly in the United Kingdom and Australia, there was little evidence of the adoption of the entrepreneurial and individualised self-help type of active citizenship. There was a very strong commitment to collective endeavour and action, as indicated in positive responses to question 15 in the survey: 'If ordinary people combined their efforts, our world would be a better place'.

There was only limited evidence of a desire to be involved in oppositional activity as a defensive action to protect existing assets or relations in a community, and as resistance to a proposed change in a community. For example, question 32 in the survey was 'If, in a place not far away, the community is becoming concerned that a proposed new highway will destroy the last remaining area of natural forest, what would you do?' In Spain and Russia the dominant response was supportive of protest action, whereas elsewhere it was to 'find out more'. This defensive type of opposition did not challenge existing power structures and it was rarely confrontational. Indeed, most people interviewed were at pains to point out that they were not 'radically inclined'.

Interestingly, while the survey data indicated that a number of members were interested in monitoring global politics and issues, the interview data revealed that there was little

attention paid to wider politics, unless those politics directly impinged on the organisation itself. There were negligible international links or involvement in action around international issues or events, except where there was an explicit brief regarding the objectives of an organisation, such as was evident in some of the Swedish organisations. For example, question 28 asked respondents if they had ever belonged to an international organisation whose aim was the elimination of inequality based on wealth, race or sex. With the exception of the large town in Sweden the dominant response was clearly 'No'. One of the strong findings of the study, evidenced in both the survey and the field interviews, was that active citizenship was largely local in object and style and was not about challenging underlying inequalities.

Overall, there was virtually no interest in visionary active citizenship. Discussion of ways of prefiguring alternative 'ways of doing things' had no resonance in interviews. Activities and processes continued in much the same ways as they had been 'done in the past'. Where there were changes, these were externally generated, and usually the result of new external regulations or changes in funding formulae. That is to say, changes to the missions, objectives, styles and structures were as a reaction to external policy requirements rather than as proactive decisions to alter the organisation from within. The effect of a new regulatory environment was most clearly seen in regard to changes in operational style and processes in several organisations in Britain and Australia. A final and important point for community development approaches, was that active citizenship, as expressed in this study, did not involve ensuring that minority and disadvantaged groups had a voice of their own. Rather, it almost always involved 'speaking for others', mainly in the form of advocacy.

### ***Indonesian NGOs***

While there is a body of research into the contributions of third sector organisations, or NGOs, to civil society in the 'developing' world (see for example Edwards and Hulme, 1992; Huddock, 1999; Pearce and Eade, 2000; Howell and Pearce, 2001 ) and a number of analyses of the management weaknesses of NGOs in 'developing' countries (see Lewis, 2001; Edwards and Fowler, 2002), we know little about the specific forms of active citizenship in these countries. Responding to this lacunae is a significant challenge for third

sector research. The following case-study of NGOs in Indonesia might indicate just how important it is to understand the forms of active

In the study *Capacity-building in Indonesian Islamic NGOs* active citizenship practices were investigated through a series of questions about the motivations of participants, attitudes to social change, national and international collaboration, existing capacities, and capacity building needs. The features of NGOs studied in Indonesia stood out as quite different, in their roles and the types of active citizenship generated, to third sector organisations operating in Western countries. In the Indonesian third sector there is a strong commitment to oppositional action and visionary attitudes and ideas. The Indonesian study revealed that participants were keen to articulate and act on ideas for a pluralist and tolerant Indonesia. They were prepared to challenge ideas, practices and policies that they disagreed with. Critique of government policies and disagreement with conservative and Islamist religious leaders were central to their activities. What was noticeable about these organisations was that their activities were more national and even international than local, and there was no reluctance to engage in confrontation. They were willing to speak out and organise social action around issues that were important to them. Indeed, much of their time was spent envisioning different futures and developing strategies to achieve these. Within a human rights context they spoke for both themselves and for others. Some participants in the NGOs explicitly argued that their role was to provide a place where those who marginalised could feel comfortable and express their views. This commitment was most evident in the support given to an Islamic sect, Ahmadiyah, which was the subject of a fatwa during the period of the research.

Third sector organisations in Indonesia are different to those in the Western study in other ways as well. What became evident early in the research was the often strongly individualistic and narrowly instrumental conceptions of active citizenship, and the way in which active citizenship is sometimes performed opportunistically. Opportunistic active citizenship is often (inadvertently) encouraged when Western funds are in abundance (Hadiwinata, 2003; Antlov et al, 2005), such as occurred in the period of reconstruction in post-tsunami Aceh (see Kenny, 2007; Cosgrave, 2007) or when they need to liaise with a beneficiary group and require an English speaking, educated person (Platteau and Gaspart, 2003). Thus in a particular way, for many Indonesian participants in third sector

organisations, active citizenship tends to be of the individual entrepreneurial type mentioned above. That is, while there is commitment to change and alternative futures, this is often conceived within the terms of personal interest. This feature of active citizenship is not framed moralistically as a form of self-help that builds character and resilience, as occurs in third way approaches to welfare in Britain and Australia, but as a pragmatic way of 'getting on' in Indonesia. People become active citizens because of the personal benefit they might enjoy through participation in an organisation. The opportunistic approach to active citizenship is a rational response to the often desperate need for resources on the part of many Indonesian NGOs.

### **Conclusion**

Whilst this limited empirical data on the types of active citizenship fostered in some third sector organisations in some countries cannot answer the question of the suitability of all such organisations for community development practice, it does indicate some cautionary messages. It can also prompt a more critical discussion of what types of citizenship and third sector organisations are appropriate for community development. And of course whether they are appropriate or not depends on what type of community development we are thinking of. If we are thinking of community development as settled practice, that develops and nurtures supportive networks and is occupied with ensuring social and community cohesion, then the European and Russian third sector organisations, with their active citizens concerned with maintaining existing relations, might be exemplars of a suitable 'home' for community development practice. This type of active citizenship can reaffirm the historical roots of community development in locally based 'communities', involving an active citizenry that defends 'what is good about the community', 'looks out' for neighbours and speaks as advocate for those who are marginalised and disadvantaged. In many ways this is the basic ingredient of community development.

If, on the other hand, we are thinking of community development practice that involves more than endeavours to defend and reinforce existing communities and we are concerned to question existing processes and structures, envision a better future and also engage with international networks, then perhaps the types of third sector organisations operating in

Indonesia are more promising. Yet as suggested above, from a community development perspective there are some profoundly problematic characteristics of third sector organisations in Indonesia. Community development requires equal collaboration, trust, openness, shared purposes or interests and mutual responsibilities. Active citizenship in Indonesian NGOs tends to be more individualist and opportunistic. Whilst all active citizenship in all third sector organisations is probably individualist and opportunistic to some degree, these features stand out in the Indonesian case-studies. And indeed individualism and opportunism undermine the associationalism that is necessary for effective community development practice.

Of course, community development involves pluralist and contested practices (Craig, Mayo and Taylor, 2000; Shaw, 2007). It both opposes the state and works with state institutions; it can simultaneously develop defensive and proactive strategies; and it operates locally, nationally and internationally. Yet the position taken in this paper is that given the scale of the international structural problems currently facing the world, including crises concerning the environment, entrenched poverty, civil conflict and omni-present human rights abuses, we no longer have the luxury of resting in the relative comfort zone of the hard won spaces of 'our own', in localised communities. We now need to focus on challenging wider power relations and envisioning and acting upon alternative ways of organising human existence. We need to shift from the myopic focus on 'our own backyard' to international collaboration. For this to happen we need to generate an international, visionary active citizenry and we need 'homes' that are different to most of the current third sector organisations through which we work. Such active citizenship and 'homes' do exist (see DeFilippis, Fisher and Shragge, 2007, for example), but they are rarely framed as correctives to conventional citizenship discourse or presented as alternatives to the pragmatic, incorporated third sector organisations that now provide the bulk of the settings for community development activity. We need an unsettled third sector and unsettled community development.

Perhaps we could return to reflect on lessons offered to us some 30 years ago, when Piven and Cloward (1979) argued that the more poor peoples' organisations are 'organised' the more likely it is that they will fail. Maybe it is time (again) for community development to

throw off the mantle of responsible and effective management by a sensible citizenry, for a visionary, internationally connected active citizenship without the conventional organisational baggage. We need an edgy community development that is never secure and does not operate in a comfortable 'home'. This edgy community development needs to challenge existing power structures. It also needs its own practices and values to be continually challenged. This community development involves critical, proactive and visionary citizens. On the basis of the analysis offered in this paper, it would seem that there is a lot of unsettling to be done.

## ENDNOTES

- (1) The original construction of this typology was a collaborative effort by Jenny Onyx, Terry Burke, Kevin Brown and Sue Kenny.
- (2) The full title of this Australian Research Council funded study is *Comparative dimensions of active citizenship: an analysis of indicators of inclusivity and exclusivity in civil society*. The study has been a collaborative project undertaken by Chief Investigators Sue Kenny, Kevin Brown, Jenny Onyx and Terry Burke, and many other researchers in each of the countries, whose contribution to the project has been invaluable. In particular I would like to express my appreciation of the work of the contributions of Leonid Reznichenko, Maree Harris and Fiona McKinnon. I would also like to acknowledge the generous giving of time of the many participants in third sector organisations without whom this research would not have been possible.
- (3) This paper provides a very brief summary of some of the main findings of the overall project and does not do justice to the complex and rich data of the study. A detailed analysis is being prepared for an expansive research monograph. While this paper draws on reports written jointly with colleagues, Dr. Kevin Brown, Professor Jenny Onyx, the particular application of the findings of the research, with any attendant weaknesses, is my responsibility.

(4) This research was undertaken by Chief Investigators, Sue Kenny and Ismet Fanany, and at the beginning of the project, Greg Barton. Analysis of the data presented here includes insights developed collaboratively. Many researchers and participants have contributed to this study. Particular appreciation is extended to Ahmad Suaedy at the Wahid Institute.

(5) The following are examples of the probes used in the survey.

The first type of question asked respondents to comment on their agreement with such questions as:

- In this country, average citizens can influence governments if they want to;
- Respecting the traditions of the past is more important than agitating for social change;
- If ordinary people combined their efforts, our world would be a better place.

The second type of question asked specific questions around activities, such as:

- In the past 3 years, have you joined in local action to deal with the threatened loss of a local service, such as a school or community centre closure?
- How often do you read about, listen to or watch news stories about global issues in newspapers, radio or television?
- Have you ever belonged to an international organisation whose aim was the elimination of inequality based on wealth, race or sex?

The third type of question asked for a response to hypothetical scenarios. For example:

- If, in a place not far away, the community is becoming concerned that a proposed new highway will destroy the last remaining area of natural forest, what would you do?

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