

CD Queensland. 21 July 2021

The Honourable Member Leanne Enoch; Dr Ann Ingamells, Members of the Community Development planning committee; Anthony Kelly, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I invite you to journey with me as I reflect on the evolution of 56 years of practice, and to understand why I am committed to a participatory community development way of working which facilitates individual, group and social change. A practice that can engage those amazing people who might never have thought that they could change the circumstances of their lives, or the communities that they live in.

I have seen and experienced the changes which occur in people, groups and the wider community, as people are supported to come together around matters of their concern; when they build relationships with each other; when they work together talking about how things could be different; when they develop action plans, and take the steps to bring about change.

So many skills are learnt or enhanced as people share their experiences, and discover how together they are more resourceful than as separate individuals. Their confidence grows and they learn to make decisions, reach agreements, organise meetings or gatherings, record decisions, discover who are the people they should talk to, the people who make decisions which impact on their lives. They become a resource in their community. Instead of being a client in a service delivery programme, they are community members or citizens working together to achieve something of benefit for themselves and each other.

No one would question the importance of service delivery. Services are essential. What we should question is the predominance of this way of responding to individual need, and the idea that “one shoe fits every foot”. In other words, the assumption that services centrally designed, will match all local needs, and that local people should not have any input into the services from which they are to benefit, is a fallacy.

Participatory community development is intentional work, where the relationship we have with another is central to the process of individual and social change. It is based on social justice principles which allow us to inform and reflect on our work.

We know this way of working requires us to be humble, vulnerable, and not to control. We collaborate with the people, respecting people's knowledge, skills and experiences whatever their circumstances. We begin where the people are at, moving at their pace, supporting them to connect and form relationships with one another, individually and in groups, as they take the beginning steps in their journey towards change.

Sadly today, we are locked into an individualistic culture which holds the belief that social problems are 'our fault', the result of individual weakness which can be solved through personal change. Also, this contemporary world privileges corporate interests over community interests. These notions take hold in all our mindsets, and we must work hard to think differently.

The Participatory Community Development method of practice is a way of thinking and acting across multiple levels and layers, from individual, family, community, and through to the various levels of social and economic institutions. It mobilises change within all these points of contact and in the interconnections between them.

If you haven't seen this happen or felt it, you must try to imagine it and then, with support, try to do it.

I have chosen some stories to highlight some of the special moments when I felt it, and when I saw the amazing outcomes this way of working can bring. I call these moments 'plateaux', and there are a few of them.

Even though my first plateau is not community development, I share it with you as, like many people today, I was locked into individualised service delivery. It took years before this participatory community development way of working became my practice. Fortunately, now, this practice is a well-articulated, tried and tested method.

Plateau 1: Private and Public

Working from Within and Outside an Organisation for Social Justice

My Story

In the 2nd year of my degree, I was awarded a cadetship with the then Department of Social Security, now known as Centrelink. On graduation, I worked with that department, in the very small, all-female Queensland social work section. We were doing what was known then as casework, working with individuals focusing on their personal private pain. This is an individualised non-social change form of service delivery. Through that work I encountered many women, who had made the difficult decision to leave a violent situation, but struggled to find financial support. The Commonwealth policy was, that a widow could receive a pension immediately, and a deserted wife could receive a benefit after six months, but a woman who left her marriage found it almost impossible to obtain any commonwealth financial benefit. Within what was then a male dominated department, there was a concern that “yes, it is unfair on women, but that is the policy”.

I began collecting the women’s stories, always protecting their privacy, and shared them with the departmental social workers and the members of the Queensland Branch of the Australian Association of Social Workers. I was told that the social workers had tried to change the policy in the past, but to no avail. Well, I was young, inexperienced and with a fire in my belly. I really thought I could make a difference in the world.

I kept raising the issue. The experienced social workers, within and outside the department, skilfully collaborated again with colleagues throughout Australia. Finally, there was a policy change.

My Learning

At that time in my life, I was embedded, and almost captured, in individualised casework. It didn’t cross my mind that I could work any other way, or that the

women themselves could have a say in the wider process. I did not facilitate their coming together; I saw them all as individuals experiencing discrimination because of the policy. Unintentionally, I had excluded them. At no time did they have a collective voice. The advocacy of the social workers for a policy change, was embedded in an individualised service delivery practice.

However, I learnt three important things: (1) That private/personal is also a public matter, and change needed to occur. (2) That we should never be silent when we see an injustice, and (3) That we can and indeed must work both inside and outside a system as we facilitate change.

Imagine, however, if I had listened deeply to the stories? Imagine if I had supported the women to come together to hear each other's stories? As they explored many options, they may have decided how they wanted to share their stories. Just think of how different my story would have been if I had involved them in the change process, so that finally, they knew they had been heard and that they had contributed to a major policy change?

Although the final policy outcome would have been the same, at another level so much more would have happened. The women would have had a new sense of self, new skills, new relationships, a better understanding of how democracy can work, renewed trust in, and respect for, their government and institutions, and a very different start to their new lives.

In a participatory community development method, there are very different sets of process outcomes when we work with people to achieve something important to them. Those process outcomes often are not understood or recognised by Government.

Plateau 2: The Strength of Community: A Parent and Community Member

My Story

In 1969, my husband and I moved to a small western Queensland town. Here, as a parent and a member of the community, I was involved with other parents as we talked about the need to establish a kindergarten. I became very aware of the capacities and resources that are held in any community. I also understood that community is a lived experience, and that community is built when people work together on issues in common. I know that the more we do this, the better we get at forming public relationships, at initiating public processes, and at understanding how the world we live in, works. We must never take power away from communities.

My Learning

Although our family left that small township before the establishment of the kindergarten, on reflection I learnt such a lot. In that context I did not see myself as a professional person, separate from others, but as a citizen being with other community members who had skills. There was no artificial barrier between me, who had been trained as a professional, and community members. We had a common purpose, similar experiences, and we were working for a desired change. Our relationships were mutual with no power imbalance.

This was different to my social work training where boundaries and professionalism had been given great emphasis, rather than the experience of truly being together with people as community members.

Plateau 3: A Major Social Experiment: The Australian Assistance Plan (AAP), 1974-1976

My Story

Fast track to 1971, and our move to the regional city of Mackay. Here I joined the newly formed Mackay Council of Social Welfare. This organisation was the outcome of the work of Les Halliwell, the then lecturer in Community

Development at the University of Queensland, and that of his students. They had come to Mackay at the invitation of a small group of citizens. It was this organisation, which Marie Coleman, Chair of the then Social Welfare Commission, personally invited to apply for funding under the experimental Australian Assistance Plan (AAP). I had the privilege of working with that organisation and the people of eight local government areas (now known as the Whitsunday, Isaac and Mackay Region), implementing the Australian Assistance Plan.

The first thing that the people did was establish the Regional Social Development Council. Then, they decided where the four community development workers would be placed throughout the vast geographic area. At the same time, they concentrated on developing their skills to allocate \$2 per head of population to community groups, who had developed local responses to local needs.

I will never forget this experience. We went to every nook and cranny of this huge region, an area much larger than Tasmania. This is where I experienced the 'power of the people'. Three hundred plus community members came together to form their people's organisation. They enshrined in their constitution, their right to speak, their right to be involved, their right to participate in the design and implementation of local solutions to local issues, whilst shaping their huge region and inputting into local, state and commonwealth policies. They also defined the social sector as anything pertaining to their well-being, such as health, education, environment or the arts.

This is where I understood truly, and enacted Les Halliwell's mantra, "go to the people, be with the people, listen to the people, work with the people".

As part of the implementation of this innovative plan, Les Halliwell and I travelled south to engage with the small group of people from other states who were in that early experimental stage of the plan. We shared how the plan was being implemented in our various areas. We also began the process of teasing out what community development meant.

The people we met there spoke with such confidence and authority. But how they described community development seemed very different from my own experience. I struggled to understand their perspective.

On the plane home to Queensland, I found the courage to say to Les Halliwell, “Mr Halliwell, no-one seems to work the way we do.” I will never forget his reply: “Go home, be with the people and keep doing what you are already doing”.

My Learning

The Australian Assistance Plan was an ambitious and visionary programme that changed the national social policy debate in the 1970s. It also had very important implications for regional Australia, because it looked at new ways to support and involve regional communities. It only lasted for 3 years whilst the Whitlam Government was in power. However, in those few years I believe that it had the strong potential to change relationships in ways which would generate better policy, better practice and greater social cohesion. Perhaps in time, resources would have reached the most pressing needs of the most marginal people.

However, it required:

- A shift in how people operated at every level;
- Structures through which people across the community could meet and work things out together even if they held diverse views;
- Practitioners who knew how to ensure that the people who had not had a voice, were supported to speak up publicly;
- Shifts in how local and state governments saw their role.

Sadly, the AAP also generated much national backlash from those who felt they would lose power and entitlement, and it was ended abruptly.

The key learnings for me were the power of people’s voices, and that movement needs to occur from the smallest voices, into larger groups, and successive levels through to governments.

How privileged I was to be part of this experiment and to have lived at that time in history.

Plateau 4: Elected Status and Developmental Work 1976-1982

Many people were surprised that I was elected to the male dominated Mackay City Council. I was a woman with a young family, and my place was in the home. In that structure, I initially felt devalued and often experienced discrimination. I grappled with the question of how, as an elected representative, I could still enact participatory developmental processes. How could I be a bridge between the community members and the council, on issues of importance to the community, whilst being someone who had to vote on the issue?

Local government holds a perspective of the community as a whole. The range of issues is extensive (arts, social issues, physical infrastructure and economics, to name a few). As an elected representative, I had to discover how to work inside the system as well as outside the system across this diverse range of issues.

My first awakening to these matters occurred in my first term of office, when I read a letter from a woman who wanted a narrow two-way street changed to a one-way street. My developmental method had begun to emerge through the AAP and it was implemented in this period.

I contacted the woman and listened to her story. She told me the narrow two-way street didn't have a footpath. It was dangerous for parents pushing prams, children riding bikes and the elderly people going to the local shops. After asking that person if she knew others who were also concerned, she went ahead and arranged for about 35 people to meet together under the tree in the nearby park.

Whilst the woman was talking with people in her neighbourhood, I worked within the structure. I spoke with the appropriate committee chair. I knew that without his support, the community members had no chance of changing that street into a one-way one. I encouraged him to go to the meeting, and prepared him to listen to the people. He was so impressed with the people, that he spoke to other elected representatives and told them of his experience.

It was a wonderful moment seeing the public gallery filled with community members, and watching their surprise and hearing their joy when the elected representatives voted against the engineer's recommendation. The street became a one-way street and still is to this day. The people had "done it themselves".

Over successive years, I kept refining this practice, as community groups sought to have a public library, an entertainment centre and so on.

Although I recognise this might not happen today, I learnt that I could:

- Support people as they came together on a range of issues;
- Be a bridge between the community members and the council on issues of importance to the community;
- Work inside a closed statutory structure, encountering resistance within that structure to community voice, and play my small part in opening up that system. I did this through respecting diverse opinions of the elected people and forming relationships, no matter how difficult it was to do.

During my second term of office, we created a community development position funded from the rate base. This was one of many revolutionary changes for that local government. Unfortunately, many of these community development local government positions today have been converted to 'top down' project service delivery work instead of participatory community development work.

I thank Anthony for coming up and supporting that change process over many years. He formed a relationship with the mayor and eventually the mayor decided to create the position. I congratulate Bea Rogan for being an amazing, pioneering Community Development Worker in the then Mackay City Council.

Plateau 5:

A. Mid-eighties to the Newman Government in 2012

In this period, I observed the voices of many being heard in a range of different settings, new skills being developed, and the articulation and the writing of the short course in a participatory community development method, which enabled training to occur. I have selected a few examples.

i. Call for Recognition:

The South Sea Islander people in Mackay were supported by a visionary, skilful developmental worker, Maggie Shambrook, as they found their voice and linked with others in the wider public world (regional, state and national). They wanted to be recognised as a unique minority group who was severely disadvantaged by racial discrimination.

Following the national 1992 report, 'Call for Recognition', the Australian South Sea Islander people achieved their goal in 1994. The Queensland Government followed in September 2000. This recognition acknowledged the injustices and discrimination they had suffered for over a century, and their desire to maintain their identity.

As my dear Australian South Sea Islander friend and colleague, Rowena Trieve, used to say to me, "We want a hand up, not a handout". Once again, we see the power of the people where they find their collective voice, collaborate with government, and change occurs.

ii. The Articulation and Development of a Short Course in Community Development

The writing of this short course in what is now known as the Queensland community method, by a small group of experienced people, most of whom you would know, occurred in the late 1980s. With the advent of competency-based training in the 1990s, some of those practitioners went on to influence the development of certificate and diploma courses at a national level. Eventually, this short course was converted into competency-based language. It was accredited by the State Government, thus enabling participants to receive a Certificate of Achievement. In two years alone, over 300 people were trained both in the State Government and in the community.

iii. A Social Change Framework: Finding a Voice.

For some time, Bea Rogan, who was still the Local Government Community Development Worker, kept returning home to Mackay from various conferences, and telling me that the way we worked in our region was different to the way she was hearing down south. A number of visiting practitioners also confirmed what Bea was

saying. For a long time, I wouldn't believe this, but Bea kept urging me to do something.

Eventually, through Anthony's efforts, I enrolled in the Queensland University's Research Master programme as an internal student who seldom appeared. Anthony handled those politics. Anthony exposed me to the writings of amazing authors - Buber, Freire, Schumacher and Narayan, to name a few. This enabled me to understand the influence of these authors on this method of practice. Anthony supported me to work with others, especially Bea in Mackay, to articulate a social change framework, central to which was the participatory developmental methodology. At long last, we, in the Mackay region, had found our voice.

The conceptualisation of the framework, my local voluntary work, opportunities to work with James Cook University and TAFE and the supervision of students, strengthened my understanding of this people-centred/developmental/participatory way of working.

B. The Newman Government of 2012 and Beyond

The decisions made by the Newman Government elected in 2012, were immense, and in many instances the fabric of the community was ripped apart. The Regional Social Development organisation lost its one funding source for a developmental worker, and has never received State Government funding again. The sense of government and the community working together was undercut. Many government workers were made redundant, and this was devastating in our region. These were the workers who understood community development practice, and the importance of structures which enabled the facilitation of the voices of people. Relationships were severely damaged.

Gradually, a community oriented, potentially transformative approach to development was becoming harder and harder to hold. People were being pushed out, or pushed into, positions that cut them off from their strength in community.

- The pressure of the competitive, managerial, rational forces became overwhelming, and some of the surviving organisations began to compete against each other for funding. The collaborative, supportive culture was severely undermined.

- The corporatisation of community organisations saw governance as emphasising financial and legal responsibilities, and often neglecting the reason organisations were formed in the first place.
- Large not for profit organisations, some even with international and national interests, were funded to run services in local areas, undercutting the fabric of those communities.
- Some of the well-intentioned church-based organisations developed their corporate structures, and obtained funding and provided services with no real linkages back into the community, except through their workers. People were shut out of the process.
- Although the people kept the Regional Social Development organisation alive, without any core financial resources, increasingly it became difficult to stabilise a practice within it - a developmental structure which would continue to 'hold in' the various voices of the people across the region.
- There were few, if any, community development field placements for University and TAFE students. Even Neighbourhood Centres were delivering individualised services and losing the skills of community development.

However, against all these odds, the practice does continue, and I believe it has the capacity to flourish.

Let me summarise why I believe that:

1. I have heard an increasing number of people say that service provision is not changing the circumstances that create poverty in communities, and that there must be other ways.

For this to happen:

- i. We need our existing organisations to structure in, and enrich their capacity to hold both service delivery and participatory development programmes.
- ii. We need to recognise that this way of working is central to every sector. (For example, the national disability scheme, youth, aged care, and mental health services, education, and the arts and the environment).

- iii. We need to identify paid workers and community and board members in every sector and in government, who want to work in this way, and who are eager to engage in training and mentoring. We must find a way to do this.
 - iv. Government needs to recognise that some of the present funding programmes are stifling innovation. That although we do need service delivery programmes, we also need participatory community development programmes.
 - v. Government and community need to work together to develop ways so that there are local responses to local needs, and understand that the centralised service delivery programmes do not do that.
- 2 Recent research by Griffith University, in collaboration with Queensland Family Centres Association and Neighbourhood and Community Centres, has shown that many people in those centres are hungry for conversations about this practice. It is exciting to know that the new technologies such as the webinar, enable us to engage with people in the regions. It offers us a mechanism to train, mentor and to continue to hear people's voices around their concerns.

How exciting it is to see a Peak Body, the Queensland Family Centres Association, thinking about what this developmental and participatory way of working means both for Neighbourhood and Community Centres, their communities and for the internal workings of its own structure.

In conclusion, what I know is, that we can honour people's right to have a say, whilst also ensuring they own the processes and outcomes of a social change method based on social justice principles.

The values, skills and social structures to support this way of working must be struggled for over and over, and passed on and further enhanced from generation to generation, if we are to create a society of cohesion, of increasing equality, of non-violence and respect.

All it needs is for us together, to have the will and commitment to be part of this struggle.

Thank you for listening to such a long and rambling reflection on some of the plateaux in the 56 years of the evolution of my practice.