A social justice approach to community development

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Background

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) has been in existence since 1979 and over the past 30 years has worked with communities within Northern Ireland by using grant-making and fund development to drive social change (CFNI, 2012). Their work has promoted community development whilst supporting a context for peace and aiming to reduce poverty amongst the most disadvantaged communities. In recent years they have been engaged in facilitating communities to become increasingly aware of human rights protection and have worked to strengthen advocacy capacity amongst local groups. Their new programme, A Social Justice Approach to Community Development, aims to continue this work whilst combining theoretical and practical support to communities for the development of community-driven advocacy plans. The objective includes the facilitation of connections and networks within and between groups, policy-makers and politicians.

This article discusses the adopted theoretical position on social justice. It then explores the practical tools created to run this ambitious, yet timely, action research project to further develop community development methodologies that will support local communities and marginalised groups to work towards solutions to contentious issues.

Social justice

This article does not seek to replicate the wealth of academic debates surrounding the term social justice. Rather, there is a focus on the way the concept is used by this project and how this translates practically as a model for community development. As a basis this project recognises that justice is closely interlinked with human rights. Human rights within the Northern Irish context are in themselves highly debated and
over past years have often followed the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist fault-line. This project accepts the position set out within *Towards Standards for Quality Community Work* (Community Workers’ Cooperative, 2008) that social justice is a core value for community work and is centred on promoting human rights for everyone in society.

Achieving social justice is about identifying and attempting to address structural disadvantage, discrimination and inequality. Fraser (2009) summarises two main approaches to social justice. The first focuses on redistribution of resources and goods, whilst the second focuses on politics of recognition. Fraser argues that far from dislocating the two strands of justice there is a need to address both. Similarly, Lister (2008) advocates the need to integrate redistribution and recognition, claiming that this integrative approach allows policy demands that result in a genuine voice for all and social security that pays sufficiently to ensure a dignified existence.

The struggle for recognition happens throughout society and can be manifested at a number of levels. There can be a lack of political/policy recognition with different access to things such as income, employment, education and healthcare. There is also the need for recognition of voice and identity, not only ensuring that various identities are acknowledged, but revaluing undervalued, devalued or ignored identities. Recognition must not be granted in a tokenistic sense but must actively provide space for voice, for involvement and for genuine inclusion. Lack of recognition is often intertwined and heightened in cases of material deprivation. Taylor (1997) suggests that recognition shapes the identity and expectations of individuals and groups and its absence can have serious, negative impacts.

The conception of social justice used within this community development context seeks to address and focus upon the collective broader rights for groups and communities whilst still recognising that the rights of the individual should not be negated nor ignored by the collective. If our understanding of social justice, based on the work of Fraser (2009), is that there is a need for collectives to gain justice of recognition as well as justice of economic distribution, question for this project is how to practically engage groups in this two-layered notion of social justice.

**Practically**
Practically, this project aims to create a framework that can facilitate communities and collectives to understand, identify and reflect upon the importance of recognition and redistribution, whilst simultaneously providing the support required to find solutions and pathways to better relations in order to begin to redress identified injustices.

Ginwright et al. (2002) have employed a social justice approach to youth development. This approach potentially ensures there is critical consciousness of the social context. However, I argue this should be married with social action, or what Freire (1996) terms ‘praxis’.

Part of social justice, as a form of community development, is to encourage groups to reflect on their situations, analyse the options and then act on their reflections. If social justice is about social and economic inequalities, as well as a belief in human rights and providing the capabilities, opportunities and resources to take action to address the inequalities, then there is a need for consciousness and the ability to act.

Practically, this project aims to ensure genuine praxis on a number of levels. Initially the groups will be supported to reflect and act on the identified injustices. Mentors are employed to work with the groups and will be required to reflect on their own role and practice to ensure they are not perpetuating existing norms. On a third level the Development Officer for CFNI will liaise with the groups and the mentors to capture the praxis process, to document and disseminate the problems and processes with this model, both in policy and academic fields. In essence there is a three-tiered process of praxis in practice, ensuring a continual theory-practice feedback loop where each continually modifies the other. Although Ginwright et al.’s (2002) work is with young people and youth development, this model can be drawn upon and used with community groups in a community development context. They advocate that the way to foster praxis with young people is to address three key levels of awareness:

1. Self-awareness - where issues relating to identity, race, class, gender and sexuality are identified. Although it may be more straightforward to work with individuals, our challenge is to get a community group to work collectively to discuss and identify these issues.
2. Social awareness - where there is a focus on the misuse of power. This stage provides a framework to analyse community relations. However for this project, it is suggested that social awareness is multi-faceted and should be divided to create clearer analyses:

2a. Firstly, internal social awareness - both within the community and with others from differing communities, which within the context of Northern Ireland is of critical importance.

2b. Secondly, strategic awareness, as key strategic relationships impact on the day-to-day lives of young people and community groups. These can be both horizontal within communities and vertically within society and include relations with the police, politicians, paramilitaries, educational and health services, to name but a few.

3. Global awareness - where empathy for other oppressed people throughout the world is fostered. In the Northern Irish context this adds a further complexity. The view of ‘oppressed people’ or those experiencing injustices is often divided between communities. There is often no clear-cut, universally accepted, global oppression, emphasising the need for further negotiation and understanding.

The four stages can combine when a group creates an action plan to address a redressable injustice (Sen, 2009). It is envisaged that even if an action plan is minimal in substantive content, participation in the overall process, and particularly in the reflective discussion, will shift the consciousness of the group/community members to question ‘common sense’ norms and to generate alternative views of societal/community possibilities.

To achieve this there is the need for support and critical questioning of the social context in which groups operate. There is also the need to provide resources and support to facilitate action. There is a danger that community groups become socially aware and critically reflective on the structural and/or power imbalances faced but are left with little support to take action to make changes. Thus a twofold approach to practical engagement with groups is beneficial. The first element is providing a self-reflective mentor, who can enhance and support critical questioning and
consciousness-raising. The second is the provision of a small grant, providing groups with resources to begin addressing the injustices identified.

Involvement

Twenty community groups throughout Northern Ireland have been identified to be involved in the programme. The table below highlights the mix of groups involved:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communities of interest</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An over-50s group</td>
<td>4 Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist</td>
<td>4 Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT group</td>
<td>2 Catholic, Nationalist, Republican</td>
<td>3 Catholic, Nationalist, Republican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Ethnic minority groups</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Youth groups</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Women’s group</td>
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The aim is to use the above approach to get community groups to:

- Collectively identify the forms and sources of injustice affecting a group, both as a result of the institutions to which they are subject and the behaviour of those around them;

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1The twenty enlisted groups were selected with two main aims in mind: 1) to select the geographical areas most suited to (and most likely to benefit from) the programme; and 2) to provide a wide mix of areas from across Northern Ireland for comparative research. Initially statistical analysis were conducted to discover those Super Output Areas (and estates via NIHE data) with the highest levels of a) multiple deprivation; b) economic inactivity; c) educational under-attainment (no qualifications); d) long-term illness (unable to work); e) child poverty; f) poverty among older people; and g) lone parents. Then there was a deliberate mix of a) urban and rural communities; b) single identity PUL/single identity CNR/mixed communities; and c) a balance of communities from across Northern Ireland. Finally, desk-based research (including phone interviews) was conducted in order to ensure a mix of communities with strong/weak infrastructure was included, as well as to determine the levels of community participation (number/range of community groups) and other funding (including statutory support) that has been provided to the local communities.
• ‘Justify’ the need for redress – there has to be a reasoned argument (with appropriate evidence) that compares the position of the group with other groups in similar circumstances;
• Set out the practicalities of redress – what needs to happen and what is the appropriate contribution of institutions and the group itself;
• Make sure that redressing these forms of injustice does not leave others isolated or create new types of injustices for some members of the group or other groups.

Methodologically this process is based on an action research framework where groups reflect on their own practices and question their position in addressing injustices. This work is fed back to CFNI and the mentor and groups can share their learning experiences with other groups involved in the process. The collated information will be disseminated within academic and policy fields, ensuring grassroots learning can have a broader impact.

Practically the mentors will work alongside community groups to explore:

• how the group works within their local area and within their local committees and evaluate if more effective ways of working can be developed;
• relationships with other groups and areas to evaluate if better ways of communicating needs and sharing resources could occur;
• the group’s relationship with councils, statutory and voluntary agencies and politicians to create a strong and participative means of working;
• support groups to develop advocacy skills and plans;
• skills and awareness of social justice principles.

The mentor is expected to adopt the role of a ‘critical friend’ where they facilitate discussions and adopt a challenge function. This will encourage groups to assess the differences between real and perceived injustices and to be self-critical, to examine their own role in perpetuating injustices as well as to reflect on how they can act upon these identified injustices. Groups are encouraged through the framework below to examine justice/injustices at the various levels of society, the internal community as well as the institutional/decision-making levels.

**Self-awareness or internal reflection**
Self-awareness involves the group internally reflecting on how they work. This ensures that there is self-knowledge and reflection on working practices. Without knowledge of internal workings it is difficult to attempt to address injustices. Furthermore some injustices may not be being solved due to the internal practices of the group. An example of this may be the practice of gatekeeping by a collective. Certain individuals may be perceived to be or in reality be in control of the workings of the group. This can prevent others from engaging with the group, voicing their concerns or feeling secure enough to challenge the internal power structures.

Facilitating critical discussion within the group may give space, time and opportunity (something which is often not afforded due to the practical demands of the job) to discuss how to self-improve their workings whilst also reflecting on those voices who are not included within their community organisation. It provides an important space to assess if they as a group are in fact perpetuating injustices internally by excluding others or by being closed in their workings whilst claiming to be representative of a geographical community or a community of interest. In the specific Northern Ireland context there may also be issues of whether the group is seen to be politically/paramilitary aligned and how this impacts on the potential for broader community participation.

**Social-awareness or external reflection**

Once the group has critically reflected on their own composition, workings and actions, they can begin to question how they engage with others. This stage should analyse both real and perceived perceptions within broader society. This involves how the group themselves perceive, work and engage with others, but also how they feel they are perceived by people outside the community group. This starts a process of reflection, whilst also allowing the mentor to pose critical questions about where perceptions come from. This is particularly important in Northern Ireland as it will begin to unpick the historical, normalised stereotypes and perceptions of others. The question of perception is not only important to encourage effective community development but also to consider the levels of recognition apparent. This is demonstrated clearly in the next section.

**Strategic-awareness or strategic reflection**
This stage allows the analysis of power structures within society. It is impossible to address social and economic injustices or justice of recognition without identifying who holds the power within the community. Often community groups find it relatively easy to assess strategic injustices without identifying their own role. The perception that particular areas, religions etc. get more than others is an easy charge. However, if the internal workings have not been assessed there is a danger that localised power dynamics are disregarded and, rather than being addressed, are protected. This is not to suggest that there are not high levels of injustice within society, as on the whole there are. It is the aim of this programme to begin to address some of these injustices, but a parallel aim is to build effective community development for the groups involved. This means reflecting internally as well as externally and strategically in order to achieve voices for all (Lister, 2008) and strategic change.

**Global awareness**

This programme is not specifically designed at this stage to focus on global issues. However, in developing this framework there could be an additional stage for mentors to focus their attentions on global awareness in groups and it could be used as a means to also reflect back on local issues, such as racism, sectarianism, immigration, poverty and discrimination.

**Learning to date**

In 2011 there was a small-scale pilot project that has allowed the framework to develop and be implemented. The pilot involved seven geographical community groups engaging with a mentor over a short period of time to explore the concept and potential application of this social justice approach. Many mentors faced initial problems explaining the project to groups and encouraging them to participate when there was no money available and the process seemed complex and somewhat unclear. However, after groups were involved they articulated that they had never been asked about these types of issues before – they had never been asked to look at local concerns through a social justice lens – and that they found the conversations in themselves cathartic and enlightening.
The pilot project demonstrated that once groups engaged they found positives in analysing and reflecting on their work, their practices and the practices of others in a new light. The groups were afforded time, albeit limited, to discuss internal and external perceptions of their areas, their local needs, local injustices, barriers to local rights, voice and the resources, strategies and supports necessary to begin to realise those rights at a local level.

The issues identified in the pilot process resonate with initial discussions within the larger programme. Issues of perception arose with many feeling they were viewed in a negative light by outsiders: ‘We are seen as sectarian and scary, that nobody works and we are scroungers’. Others thought outsiders see their areas as controlled by paramilitaries and so feel intimidated to enter. Many of the pilot groups wanted to work on the perceptions others had of their area by engaging with the media and by confidence and capacity-building training. By engaging in the dual process of internal training and building relations with external institutions they felt they could respond to the negative sentiments often associated with these areas.

Other issues such as unemployment, lack of public transport, paramilitary control, drug and alcohol abuse, and poor relations with the police, were also identified. Though some solutions were discussed, these were not acted upon in the pilot project. The expanded programme will seek to discuss these issues and facilitate redressable solutions for participants.

CFNI has gained considerable learning from the pilot project and the early stages of the broader programme. Firstly, the role of the mentor is critical. The mentor has to have the capacity, ability and nuanced knowledge to challenge when necessary yet support when required. They must be capable of reflecting on their own prejudices and ensure they do not perpetuate current behaviour or stereotypes. The role of being a ‘critical friend’ is paramount for the success of the project. This requires a confident yet empathetic approach of both informed challenge and support. Mentors have to be capable of building rapport, questioning, being critically reflective, supportive, challenging and facilitating sessions. Thus the training of mentors, ensuring they understand the project brief and can theoretically and practically engage with the programme, is crucial for this model to work.
Secondly, the model can provide groups the opportunity to explore issues that may not have arisen using other frameworks. Importantly, it should also begin to work towards building the capacity to address identified issues using a social justice approach. The exploration of issues and the level of reflection and action will vary for each group. For some the ability to view issues from differing perspectives may be a significant starting point. For others the willingness to engage with all parties, even if not directly to begin with, may be a move towards sustainable action and change.

Thirdly, CFNI must remain realistic throughout this process. Many of the identified issues cannot be remedied overnight and it is acknowledged that economic, social and political issues raised through this model have a very real impact upon the lives of local people. Thus, though the space is provided for reflection and a process of capacity-building can be started, this is a lengthy process and reflection, acknowledgement and understanding are key steps towards sustainable and substantial change. Equally, from its many years of engagement in support for community-based groups, the Community Foundation is acutely aware that community processes are seldom linear in nature and that the pace of social change is irregular.

**Conclusion**

This programme attempts to develop a way of working that allows a social justice model to be used in community development practice. The aim is that this model will enable groups to assess and identify the needs of their local areas, how they might tackle injustices and how they might become more inclusive and accountable. Alongside looking at 'local' relationships, the programme will support groups to look at their relationships with 'others' – be these neighbouring communities, the other community, new communities within Northern Ireland or agencies and service providers. Finally, it will support groups to build or capitalise on relationships with politicians and other decision-makers (Healy and O’Prey, 2011). The marriage of consciousness and action allows for the process of development and sustainable change to begin. It also allows space for reflection on current beneficial practices and provides opportunities for shared learning between different groups and communities.
In a practical sense this model relies heavily on groups being willing to participate in the exploratory process and to be open to communication, reflection and action. It also places a lot of emphasis on relationship-building and trust developing between the mentor and the group. The mentor has to have the ability to support but also at times to question and criticise.

The practical implementation of this model will be collated and will provide future learning about how best to use social justice as an approach to community development. For the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland this will bring together its commitment to supporting community action and promoting social justice in a society that has been previously focussed to a much greater extent on the uni-dimensional constitutional issue.

References


