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A Peoplecentred Perspective on Peoplecentred Community Development

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the concept of 'peoplecentredness' to stress the fact that development requires that the people themselves – who are meant to be the beneficiaries of development initiatives – be placed in the forefront and fully involved in any projects or programmes which aim to assist them. The authors see this peoplecentred perspective as providing a new paradigm which is vital in the process of learning, growth and development. If empowerment of local people is to be achieved, this requires their complete participation – which implies sharing and working together and most importantly, for outsiders working with them, to trust their skills and abilities. The authors stress that development can only take place when agencies provide the services that people really want, rather than imposing pre-conceived policies and programmes on people.

Introduction

> *"We don't develop people, people develop themselves" (Julius Nyerere).*

> *"We need an alternative vision in which the well-being of people and the living systems of the planet that is their home, come first" (Korten, 1990).*

> *"Development concerns people, it effects their way of life and is influenced by their conceptions of the good life, as determined by their cultures" (Hettne, 1982 as cited by Burkey, 1993).*

We are in the new South Africa, with a new government, new regions and with hopes of a new peoplecentred and developmental approach to welfare. Peoplecentered development puts people in the centre of development and seeks to facilitate **transformation** in communities. Transformation means returning control over resources to the people and their communities to be used in meeting their own needs, including the basic needs of justice, sustainability, and inclusiveness (Korten, 1991:4).

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Peoplecentredness is of course not a new paradigm. It is old because in the breast milk of our social work training we learned about Roger's person-centred approach. It is new, because peoplecentred development is publicly stated as the new paradigm to follow in all aspects of welfare and development. It is also the basis for the new Reconstruction and Development Programme, but can only succeed if the people who have to implement it apply the peoplecentred approach. It is our experience that people and agencies in the development field often have good intentions and know the jargon of peoplecentred development, eg, "empowerment", "participation"," for the people by the people", and so on, without really knowing what it comprises, with the result that in the name of development, undevelopment and disempowering "providing for" could be actually taking place.

This short article attempts to give a summary of how we construct the peoplecentred paradigm. The writers of this article will try to articulate their perception and the implications of the paradigm shift, and how they introduce this paradigm to the social work students they are training in community development in under- and post-graduate level. The same approach followed is applicable when training NGOs and other interested people outside the academic situation. We have discovered that it is no quick and easy process (for us and/or the students), and at times quite painful. We do not claim in this article that we have already "arrived", but that we believe we are on our way to discover (or is it to construct?) the new (old) paradigm. We would also like to invite people to become people-centred community development constructors.

The Importance of Theory

Another aim of this article is to stress the importance of consciously using a consistent theory for development as we all have theories as guidelines when dealing with human beings individually and in groups, even though we may not be aware of them. Korten (1991:113-4) gives the following reasons for the importance of theory for development:
* Theory gives explanations to certain phenomena.
* Theory directs action.
* A consistent theory enables the agency/ worker to facilitate development and change instead of just being an 'assistance' agency/worker.
* Without a consistent theory the agency/worker runs the risk of strengthening the very forces responsible for the conditions of suffering and injustice.

The peoplecentred paradigm is one of many theories that could be used, but our construction of it is very meaningful to us and seems to comprise three aspects:

- A peoplecentred perception of development.
- A peoplecentred perception of people: individuals and communities.
- A peoplecentred perception of the development worker.

These aspects will be presented in the fist part of the article. In the second part we will refer to ways of working in development according to the peoplecentred approach.

A Peoplecentred Perception of Development

Rogers (1987:59), the father of the person-centred approach to helping, said the following about working with people in the community:

" ...an attempt to produce these changes for the community by means of ready made institutions and programmes planned, developed, financed and managed by persons outside the community are not likely to meet with any more success in the future than they have in the past. This procedure is psychologically unsound because it places the residents of the community in an inferior position and implies serious reservations with regard to their capacities and their interest in their own welfare. What is equally important is that it neglects the greatest assets in any community, namely the talents, energies, and other human resources of the people themselves...What is necessary , we believe, is the organisation and encouragement of social self-help on a cooperative basis".

The following story told by Mulwa (1987:107) illustrates the importance of placing the people and their capacity as central, rather than placing the solution central.

"A development worker went to a remote village. He was highly motivated and fully prepared to solve all the villagers' problems and transform the 'primitive' community. He saw the people as living in fear and apathy, not prepared to do anything to change their situation. The community told him about a 'monster' across the valley which they believed was sent by the evil spirits to kill them.

They went to show the development worker where the 'monster' was. They left him to face the beast alone. After crossing the valley he discovered that the 'monster' was nothing but an overgrown watermelon. Nevertheless, to satisfy the villagers, he acted 'brave' by drawing out his sword and dramatically cutting the watermelon into pieces as the villagers watched from a 'safe' distance.

To his great dismay, the villagers would not welcome him back despite what he had done for them! They requested him to leave the village in peace, fearing that he was yet another monster. They wondered how he could overcome the 'monster' all alone if he was not one himself. Later there was again another watermelon. Another development worker came to the village, and learning of their fear he asked them to join in with their traditional weapons and 'face' the 'monster'. On reaching the place they all set on the 'monster' with their traditional weapons until they had shattered it to pieces. They proudly walked back to the village, singing and dancing, celebrating their great achievement".

What is Community Development then?

Burkey (1993:48) describes development as social transformation that involves changes in the awareness, motivation and behaviour of individuals and in the relations between individuals as well as between groups within the society. These changes must come from within the individuals and groups and cannot be imposed from the outside.

It means that the development worker **facilitates** the **process of learning, growth and development** of the people **themselves.** Without including these components we cannot refer to development and transformation. The building of a creche, clinic, or the establishing of a luncheon club isn't development if the people didn't do it themselves and didn't learn and grow in the process. The focus is therefore on facilitating the development of the **people** and not of **things.**

Another very important aspect about people-centred development is the fact that it is essentially **evolutionary** and slow, but the change and improvements may have more impact and be more sustainable than technologically sophisticated 'fast track' development that cannot be sustained (compare Okpala, 1992:iv)

The main concepts of development/transformation can be described as follows:

Empowerment

Empowerment does not mean that power is handed down or given to people. People have power. To empower means to **enable** people to elicit and increase the power they have by joining hands. It is an act of **skill and confidence-building,** and developing through **cooperation, sharing and mutual learning** (also compare Vogt & Murrell, 1990:8). In the example of the watermelon, the community have the means (weapons) and the power to slay the watermelon/monster. It was a matter of encouragement of the community to do it with the support **(alongside)** the community in order for them to be able to do it on their own.

Sharing/working together (Participation)

The concept of participation must not be confused with involvement. It is not about involving the community in what we think they should get involved in, or how and who should get involved into the programme we offer.

For the community to be able to develop themselves, **they** (the community), with the opportunity created by and with the support of the development worker, are responsible for all decisions from the word 'go'. This includes assessment, planning, implementation of their plans and evaluation.

If we want to enable the community to develop themselves, the focus of development must be on the people's capabilities, potential, power, resources, knowledge, and skills. Because the community also understands their situation better than anyone else, they must participate in assessing their own needs. To exclude the community is to deny their human dignity and expertise regarding their experience.

If we look at the process in this way it also means that **everybody** in the community is potentially part of, and has the right to make decisions and share in the process of its growth and development. This opportunity is facilitated through using small groups.

The concept of participation refers to both means and end in community development. It is **sharing** or **working together** to get things done, but it is also a goal that ultimately all in the community would have an equal opportunity to have a part in the process of making decisions that affect community life.

In the last instance, Burkey's (1993:56) comment is fundamental:

> *" Participation is an essential part of human growth, that is the development of self-confidence, pride, initiative, creativity, responsibility, cooperation. Without such development within the people themselves, all efforts to alleviate their poverty will be immensely difficult, if not impossible. This process, whereby people learn to take charge of their own lives and solve their own problems, is the essence of development".*

This can only happen if the development worker **starts** with the priorities of the community, rather than their own, and builds on local knowledge (see Chambers, 1983:141).

Sustainability

Sustainability often refers to development that does not exploit but sustains the environment so that it can continue to sustain life. We agree with this view of development, but there are also two other perspectives:

- Korten (1990:218) says that authentic development enhances the sustainability of the community and this can only be achieved through a peoplecentred development.
- Sustainable development also refers to efforts and projects that will keep going when the developer withdraws. It means, therefore, that the process of development is facilitated in such a way that the community can experience that *"we have started it ourselves and are able to continue with it"*.

A Peoplecentred Perception of People: Individuals and Communities

The perception of the development worker of the individual and the community is determined by the values and attitudes held by the worker towards the worth and significance of people. In this paradigm we do not refer to "we develop or uplift them, or provide for them", but we enable the people to develop themselves by creating a context in which this kind of development is possible. Therefore the perception of people is that they are capable and have the potential to develop, grow, learn, make their own decisions. We do not develop **things** but enable **people** to develop themselves. To build a creche, school or clinic, etc, is not development if the people don't **learn** and **grow** in the process of doing it. That means they have to do it themselves.

The answers to the questions put by Rogers (1987:20) will help to indicate the attitude and approach of the worker:

"How do we look upon others? Do we see each person as having worth and dignity in his own right? If we do hold this point of view at the verbal level, to what extent is it operationally evident at the behavioural level? Do we tend to treat individuals as persons of worth or do we subtly devaluate them by our attitudes and behaviour? Is our philosophy one in which respect for the individual is uppermost? Do we respect this capacity in his right to self-direction, or do we basically think that his life would best be guided by us? To what extent do we have a need and desire to control others? Can we accept and respect that the individual has his own values, or are our actions guided by the conviction (usually unspoken) that he would be happiest if he permitted us to select his values and standards and goals?"

A peoplecentred perception of community emphasises the **people**, their qualities, bondedness and interaction – though not ignoring their physical community. Each community is therefore unique.

The people in the community must be trusted and respected and their skills, abilities, potential and values appreciated. They should therefore not be labelled any more. Often when the community is labelled as "unmotivated" or "apathetic" it might be that our programmes do not 'fit' them or that we do not understand the community well enough. But people who are close to the survival line cannot afford to take risks (Cormack, 1993:6).

Menike (1993:177) explains that often the so-called "poor" are considered slow and unmotivated:

"...when a badly strategised empowerment effort fails, as often happens when it is done under pressure for accelerated action, the repercussions are severe. The 'poor' do not want to fall from the frying pan into the fire, because they cannot afford to do so". She continues: *"What seems to you to be our silence, our reticence, our ignorance, and our lack of purpose, is really in fact our strength, wisdom, and our knowledge"*.

In a certain rural village a group of women decided to establish a creche for the children of the working mothers. After many efforts of getting the permission of the *Induna*, conducting a needs assessment among the rest of the village, raising funds, getting donations, negotiations with the minister of the local church to use the church as the venue to start the creche, they came to the point where they wanted to give feedback on the progress they had made at the monthly meeting of the community with the *Induna* where they discuss village matters. This particular village also had a community forum which was responsible for the coordination of the different projects in the community. During the meeting the development worker refused to allow the women the opportunity to tell the community about their progress with the creche. He said in front of the community that the forum had not yet met and discussed the intentions of women and therefore they could not talk to the community! The women were dumbfounded, the *Induna* felt undermined and the community wondered what was going on and became suspicious. The community developer told the *Induna* that he wanted to take over the project because he wondered how *"women of low class could run such a complicated project"*.

Problems the community might experience, from this paradigm, are not seen as deviant or labelled or diagnosed, but are seen as attempts of the community to grow or change, eg, street children are usually seen as a problematic phenomena, but looking from another perspective these children are in fact trying to survive and better their own circumstances.

A Peoplecentred Perception of the Development Worker

"Change agents must listen more than talk, learn more than teach and facilitate more than lead" (Bhasin as cited by Burkey, 1993).

In the literature numerous roles of the development worker are indicated. In the peoplecentred paradigm we view the development worker as the facilitator of the development process that helps to create the context which enables the community to change and develop. The worker is also viewed as an enabler of the community to *"do it themselves"*. Enabling them to mediate for themselves, to make decisions for themselves, to learn the skills they feel they need, to define their needs, manage the projects, evaluate what they do. The position of the worker we see thus as **alongside** the community, irrespective of whether from inside or outside. This will involve sharing, learning, facilitating, mediating, or whatever way of working the community decide on (compare Burkey, 1993:82) .

In the 'old' paradigms and models projects are often pre-planned from outside the community in the offices of the developer/agency/donors/politicians, with their own values and agendas as the focus point, and deciding how the community or the things in the community should be developed (see Chambers' six biases, 1983) .

Within the people-centred paradigm the worker allows the community to guide him/her into the community's values, knowledge, skills; to get to know the people and environment, establish with them the needs of the community and decide with them the ways to deal with these needs/issues. Through sharing and mutual learning with the community, goals and ideas evolve and change and might even change direction totally. The community also conducts its own evaluation on their own projects. Feuerstein (1986) suggests useful ideas how evaluations could be undertaken by a community in a creative way that fits with the community.

Ways of Working in the Peoplecentred Paradigm

In the peoplecentred paradigm we move away from fixed plan-focused and goal-directed models and strategies towards process-directed ways of going about development, or ways of working to facilitate the development process.

The three ways of working consistent with a peoplecentred approach, we have identified, are as follows:

Grouping
Most community development projects are done through the small group in the community (see Swanepoel, 1992; Cnaan & Adar, 1987; Nturibi, 1984; Hender-

son & Thomas, 1989; Cox, 1991 for good examples). Through individuals and groups of people the worker learns about the community (Chambers, 1992; Kenyon & Warnock 1983; Cormack, 1993), the community participates in their needs' assessments; they plan, implement, manage and evaluate their projects. (Hope & Timmel, 1984; Henderson & Thomas, 1989; Korten & Klaus, 1984; Korten, 1991). For example, if a group of elderly persons experience certain needs, they have to plan how these needs should be addressed. This cannot always be done with the total community participating, but through a representative group or interested group from the community. Self-help and support groups are other forms of grouping in this paradigm. This therefore means that through the interdependence and collective action the group members develop independence.

Networking

Networking is the process of communication that threads across interests, problems and solutions to offer support in the execution of tasks. This could include developing skills, provision of goods or services, emotional support, guidance and financial assistance. It is a person-to-person process where the development worker facilitates the making of connections with gentle skill and great caring. It may mean gathering (grouping) people at occasions, eg, symposia, workshops, and so on, but is characterised more by connecting people as equals in order to bring about cooperation and support.

In some communities we find different agencies, individuals, groups of people, churches, etc, who are rendering the same type of service or who are all involved in some kind of development work. The worker then brings these people into contact with each other in order to form a network, for possible working together, sharing and learning from each other. Note that we refer to **networking** instead of **coordination**. Networking implies the respect for individualism, autonomy and independence and is in no way prescriptive or restrictive of the aims of the agency or person. At Unisa we have our own development worker networks, development agencies and feeding schemes and operate by means of workshops, newsletters, consultations, information services, etc (see Lipnack & Stamps, 1984; Maguire, 1984).

Learning together

A third way of working in community development is to learn together from each other instead of being taught/trained through 'adult/community education programmes' by 'experts'. Learning together is the facilitation of the sharing of existing knowledge and skill, or acquisition of knowledge and skill as decided on

by the community. What the community want to learn and how they want to learn are decided by them. The media through which the community will learn most should be applied, eg workshopping, brainstorming, drama, song, dance, drawing (see **Together**, Jan-March, 1994). A mother told us the other day that when she attended the clinic with her baby, the nurses taught her a little song which is about how to treat your child when it has diarrhoea. Everytime when the child has some form of diarrhoea she started singing the song and then exactly knew what mixture to make with salt water and sugar for the child not to dehydrate.

It is also a challenge to us to facilitate peoplecentred development through teaching/training of development workers, in a peoplecentred way and not in a curriculum-centred teacher/student-centred manner. This implies that trainers, as the facilitators of the learning process, also learn from the group, bring out the creative and innovative qualities of the group members and give them maximum responsibility, so that they can experience that the trainer practices what is preached (Burkey, 1993; Pastoll, 1992; Pitt & Michell; Shrivastava, 1989).

Conclusion

The following quote from Menike (1993) – community leader from Sri Lanka – illustrates in a nutshell what community development is about:

> *"The only way that real change can take place is when agencies (NGOs, government, welfare agencies, etc) provide the services that the people want, and not the services that the donors and other agencies choose to deliver to the people. The poor do not want you to impose your programmes to empower us. We know how to empower ourselves. **We want your support for our decisions**. This is the message from the poor to the NGOs, governments, and the donor agencies".*

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