COMMUNITY WORK

Term "Community" and Community Development

What is "Communty" and what is "Community development"?

Term Community might denote a unified body of individuals, (a social, religious, occupational, or other group) sharing common characteristics or interests and perceived or perceiving itself as distinct in some respect from the larger society within which it exists, such as: social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government, and often have a common characteristics or interest living together within a larger society (e.g. a *community* of retired persons); an interacting population of various kinds of individuals (as species) in a common location; a body of persons or nations having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests (the international *community*); a body of persons of common and especially professional interests scattered through a larger society (the academic *community)* etc. It is also generally accepted, that each individual might belong to one or several communities at a time, and some specific communities might not fit strictly into any of the above categories.

One of the most widespread forms of the communities is the community/unity of individuals united by the common place of habitation - neighborhood or geographical communities. The place of habitation is an important factor from political, as well as social perspective. People living in near to each other (in one village, in one district etc.) are united and linked to each other in many ways: they often share feasts, mourning and troubles, labor, problems linked to natural catastrophes and are similarly influenced by the results of the major social, economic and political changes. Their unity is based on a simple fact that these people meet each other every day at the school entrance, in the café or shop, i.e. they share common locality in their everyday life. In most cases neighbors, members of the geographic communities also share more or less similar economic conditions. Thus, the community represents the complex network of personal relations, traditions, modes and standards of behavior, which exists in the particular geographic location and socio-economic and cultural environment. Community development aims at strengthening and enriching these connections, increasing quality of the social networks existing in the communities, development of particular knowledge and capacities of the community members, strengthening their self-esteem and self-reliance, which, in the long run leads to improvement of the common living environment.

Main aims of the community developement could be gouped under two general topics/headings:
- ✓ Improving quality of social links and networks;
- ✓ Promoting creation of various community groups and unions (informal, social and other community groups), which serve for the solution of local problems and implementing social monitoring.

In order to achieve these aims, following specific objectives should be accomplished:

1. Implementing joint actions / promoting creation and functioning of the community groups
2. Improving accesibility of information and knowledge; assisitng community members in increasing their skills
3. Search and development of new material resources in the community
4. Ensuring active participation of the local population in decision-making.

Let's briefly discus these objectives:

Creating opportunities for people to unite and work/act together is one of the fundamental preconditions of community development.

Social relations are essential for improving and strengthening human connections; they serve as a basis for mutual respect, exchanging knowledge and experience, facilitate identification of common problems and provide inspiration and strength for their solution.

Public spaces, which are places of gathering, play vital role in social relations. Such spaces/buildings should be easily accessible physically and socially. Often public buildings deserve mistrust or even fear of local population, due to their connection with "authorities". That is why it is important that they are possessed and managed by community, in order to create easy and pleasant atmosphere there.

If we see relations as a power and community development - as a fuel for a change, information and skills could be viewed as tools and resources for implementing this change. In this context it is evident that there is a strong interrelation between community development and community education.

Often community development activities are educational in their essence and cover various forms of "teaching"/educating/providing knowledge.

One of the basic principles of community development is to involve local population in identifying its own problems and revealing means for their resolution; this ensures provision of adequate services and resources.

Thus, community development is important for all geographic regions, even those with relatively rich resources. But most of all community development is essential for isolated, poor regions with very restricted resources.

Poverty (economic underdevelopment) and isolation prevents many members of the society from realization of their potential and participating in social life. In its turn, this leads to lack of self-confidence, diffidence, waste of time and abilities.

Many people do not want to join any political party, and many of those, who did, often come to the conclusion that ordinary member, could scarcely influence general policy of the party. Volunteer groups, different social campaigns and neighborhood unions provide area for political and social activity for the wide range of individuals, who otherwise would have stayed "offside".

Community groups might have significant influence on democrtaic processes. In paticular, community group coud:

- ✓ Rapidly react on spontaneously created local needs, e.g. establish "group for parents' assistance" or "teenager assistance groups" etc.;
- ✓ Influence authorities in order to improve accesibility of child-care insfrustructure, accomodation, legal consultation etc.;
- ✓ Change to the better negative image of certain quarters (neighbourhoods);
- ✓ Promote establishment of new forms and moels of public participation.

One of the main aims of community development is empowering local leaders and strengthening civil control.

Volunteer organizations give chance to every individual to get involved in the civil development processes gradually and according to his/her interests and abilities.

It is evident from existing experience, that even those individuals, who have very little experience of civil activities, could rapidly acquire necessary skills and knowledge, if they are provided with adequate assistance and training.

Community work – what does this mean?

Community development considers community members as a major agents of the process, takes into account their experience and enables them to be full and impotrant participants of social change.

Due to this approach and proceeding from the goals and targets of community developemt, functions of community worker as well as his/her attitude to local population differs from those of representatives of other professions. Community worker considres every member of the community as partner and co-worker. Every individual could contribute to achievement of society's goals according to his/her abilities and potential; however, team work maximizes contribution of each individual. Community Workers are supposed to facilitate and foster this process.

Considering above said, team worker should possess following characteristics:

- ✓ Be experts of "not being expert";
- ✓ Control themselfes, not others;
- ✓ Be highly organized on a personal level, though be able to accept chaotic and confused situations, which are often characteristic of collective actions of many individuals;
- ✓ Be able to stimulate and activate others, without leading them

In the community work every individual member of the community is considered as having particular talants and abilities; thus, community work aims to reveal and further develop these talants and abilities. Special attention is paid to the vulnrelable and disadvantaged groups.

Now, lets' discuss more in detail functions and aims of a community worker as related to specific practical tasks.

Main function of a community worker is assisting local community membrs to get involved in joint actions targeted at achieving community goals. Based on the abovesaid, main functions of acommunity worker could be identified as assisitng community members in:

- ✓ Problem identification
- ✓ Involving various groups of the community in the process of problem identification
- ✓ Setting targets (defining what should be done to achieve positive change)
- ✓ Collecting relevant information and acquiring/strengthening necessary skills
- ✓ Strategic planning (planning how should the targets be achieved)
- ✓ Implementing the program (conducting planned activities)
- ✓ Assesing results / making conclusions/ analysing experience

Community Development – what is this?

Community development is a process of social change, which:

- ✓ proceeds from the needs and experience of the individuals residing in the particular place/particular geographic area
- ✓ aims at strengthening, mobilization and realization of capacities, skills and knowledge of each individual member of the community
- ✓ gives preference to the collective actions, as to the most dynamic way of social development and personal growth;
- ✓ ensures participation of the population in the decision-making concerning the issues, which have impact on its life

Community Development perceives "community members" as main players/main participants of the process, relies on the experience accumulated in the commuity and enables community to become main agnet of a change.

Stages of the Community Work

Collecting information from various sources

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Analyzing information and assessing situation

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Stimulating individuals to unite and identify most important problems for collective intervention

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Establishing the group, initiating project and promoting campaign

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Assisting in strategic planing and prioritization

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Empowering and sustaining community group from the initial stage of its activities

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Assisting community group by providing adequate knowledge, developing skills, facilitating accesibility of the resources and establishing connections with opinion-makers/authorities

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Revsion/assesment of activities and progress of community group

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Assisting in ongoing activities and/or initiating new projects

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- - - - and the whole process starts again