

Community Profiling

Definitions

Community

A common bond by which people choose to associate around. It is a very slippery idea. Sociologically it is almost meaningless. It can be based, for example, on: place, ethnicity, religious affiliation, leisure interests, work, traditions, politics, class, age. The list is almost endless.

Neighbourhood

A residential area where those who live there consider it to be their locality.

Key Concepts

- A community profile is an **attempt to describe** a particular community or neighbourhood.
- It uses a **variety of different techniques to build up a picture of the community** from a number of perspectives.
- The **purpose** for doing a community profile can vary enormously but is normally orientated towards **preparing the ground for an effective piece of community action**.
- By **listening** to a community through doing a community profile any subsequent action is likely to be more **rooted, more productive and more sympathetic** to what is already going on. This depends on how the community profile is done, who owns it and how it is followed up.

Some Forms of Community Profiling

- **Individual action research**
This is most likely done by an individual minister or community worker who is new to the neighbourhood. The profile will enable the worker to orientate themselves and begin to identify what might be fruitful avenues in which to put their effort. There may be support from a “site team” but the initiative is essentially down to the individual worker.
- **Corporate action research**
Here action is initiated by a group. A multi-agency group of professionals would be an example or a group of tenants facilitated by a community worker. It is more likely to be focused on a particular problem which the individuals are all concerned about. When successful it can be more effective in promoting action than individual action research but it is more difficult to actually get together.
- **A professional profile**
The professional profile is where someone is brought in to do the profile for a group. CANDL sometimes finds itself in this position. It tends to have problems when it comes to developing action out of the research and sometimes is done just because the money is available for it to be done! Nonetheless, it can be useful when there is no other way of finding out what is going on in the community and initiating interest in community issues.
- **A focused profile**
All of the above might be focused profiles. Here there is a very clear idea of what the community profile should be addressing – it might be the ethnic profile of an area and issues for minority groups or the needs of young people. This kind of profile is obviously more likely to initiate action but sometimes it can miss out on wider issues and be a justification for a predetermined course of action.
- **Church based profiling**
Here a local community within the neighbourhood commits itself to a process of listening to its community. This will generally be taken forward by an individual or a group but (at least in theory!) the community has committed to an ongoing involvement and, perhaps, subsequent action. It should also be linked in to prayer and a process of spiritual discernment.

Basic Tools and Methods

■ **Census information**

Census information normally provides the basic skeleton for any community profile. Information is available on a wide range of key statistics, e.g. age, ethnicity and employment. These are often collated to provide a figure for other key figures such as a number of single parent households and a number of pensioners living alone.

Census figures are available from a government website – www.statistics.gov.uk and local authorities often do useful work on them, which is posted on their websites.

Data is available at various levels: national, regional, local authority and ward. It is also available at the smaller scale of so-called output areas. This can be very useful for identifying, for example, the nature of a particular estate, but it is less readily available and requires considerably more work.

■ **Other official statistics**

The government collects a wide range of statistics and is increasingly making this available at the neighbourhood level. The most useful are the deprivation statistics which are available down to super output areas. A super output area is a group of output areas covering a few thousand people. These figures are available from a government website – www.statistics.gov.uk but it is more difficult to get hold of the maps which show where the super output areas are, although the website does tell you which super output areas are in which wards. Maps may be available from CANDL or from the local authority.

Other sources for useful statistics are the police, housing offices and the Health Authority (public health).

■ **Using maps**

Drawing up a map of your neighbourhood is generally an indispensable part of doing a community profile. These can be produced in a variety of ways – hand drawn, traced from large-scale maps available in libraries, and now it is possible to get unique ordnance survey maps printed off to order with, for instance, your church at the centre.

Maps can then be annotated with relevant local information such as key buildings, demographic concentrations and anything else which seems significant. A good map makes an excellent display, especially when used together with photographs.

■ **Mapping techniques**

Mapping in this sense is drawing together a list of the institutions and groups which serve an area – from council offices to community groups. This can provide a useful starting point for the interviewing discussed below.

■ **Documentary research**

It is always worth trying to find out what has been written about the area previously. The local library is generally the best place to start. The council and other organisations may also have various reports and profiles.

■ **Observation**

It is always worth walking the streets of your neighbourhood at different times of the day and making a note of what you see. Use can also be made of photographs.

■ **Surveys**

Surveys are perhaps what people first think of when wanting to understand the community. They can have value, but are very labour-intensive, often requiring a team of volunteers or students. Some limited door knocking can be a useful way of getting a flavour of an area.

■ **Snowball interviewing**

A more useful way of talking to people face-to-face and putting some flesh on your statistical bones can be to identify key people in the community – the local policeman, local councillors, head teachers and health visitors, for example. These professions should also be balanced with local residents such as chairs of tenants associations and other locally active people. As you talk to people they will often suggest others that it might be worth talking to – hence the term snowball

interview. You should check with your statistics, however, that you are meeting a cross-section of the whole community and not missing out, for example, a significant ethnic minority.

■ **Other ways of talking to people**

A forum open to local people can be a useful way of engaging with people about their area. Otherwise you can go to where people are already meeting – public meetings, clubs and other places where people just hang out. What works often depends on what you feel comfortable with.

■ **Making sense of the data**

Although it might at first seem daunting, it is not that difficult to get together a lot of data about an area. What really counts, however, is making sense of this data – comparing different bits of data and seeing how they support or contradict each other, trying to discern what God is saying to you through what you have been learning, learning to read the patterns in the chaos of neighbourhood life. Getting a group together to pray and reflect on the data is a good idea.

Writing a Profile

It is important to consider who is the audience for any written profile. A profile to be sent to the council to justify a funding application would be very different from a profile designed to inspire a group of people who aren't used to reading books.

Nonetheless, it is always worthwhile putting effort into presenting the profile in whatever way is appropriate. Generally you will need to cut down on the data, otherwise people may get overwhelmed. Different reports for different audiences is not a bad idea.

Making the Most of a Profile

Doing a community profile is a lot of work, so it is worth thinking hard about how to make the most of it. Below are a few pointers:-

- Be very clear about who the report is being done for and why. Have they seriously committed to the process – if not, what is the point in doing it?
- Don't do more work than you need to. A community profile is as long as a piece of string – what really *needs* to be done?
- Make sure you leave enough time to present it in an appropriate and appealing way
- Distribute any report widely. A well-presented report can have surprising consequences as it draws attention to your area
- Make the most of contacts gained through doing the profile – and send a copy to anyone you talked to, or invite them to a follow up forum
- The best profiles are participatory, where people get involved in the process and this follows through into greater understanding of the area and the potential for taking action

Key Agencies/Resources:

The following agency is worth checking out:-

- ARVAC, 2d Aberdeen Studios, 22-24 Highbury Grove, London N5 2EA, UK. Tel: 020 7704 2315. E-mail arvac@arvac.freeserve.co.uk

Useful Websites:

- www.statistics.gov.uk – useful for census information and other government statistics
- www.arvav.org.uk

Books/Journals/Papers:

- Community Auditing as Community Development – Carol Packham <pp.249-50 in Community Development Journal July 1998> (OUP 1998)
- Community Profiling: auditing social needs – Hawtin, et al (OUP 1994, 194pp)
- Community Work Skills Manual, Sections 7 and 8 – Gilchrist, Green and Smith (ACW 1994, 14pp and 13pp)
- Finding Out About Your Neighbourhood (paper 4pp)
- Neighbourhood Profiles: Survey and the Census – Greg Smith (paper 1993, 16pp) also in CCWA newsletter format

Resources with a Christian Context:

- Church/Community Audits: A Tool for Community Development – CANA (CANA 1990, 8pp)
- Community Ministry: A Kit for Churches, Section 4 – Goold and Stricklen (paper, c30pp)
- Listening to your Community (CANDL 1999, c.30pp). The ideas in these guide notes are much more fully developed and put in a wider context. It also contains worksheets to guide you through the process
- Mission Audit (Gen. Synod Board for Mission and Unity 1984, 58pp)
- Parish Profile Pack (Southwark Diocese 1995, 34pp)
- Research in the Community: The 10 Commandments – Greg Smith (paper 1994, 5pp)
- The Purple Pack for Planning Projects – Part 1 “Finding Out” (Diocese of Southwark 1996, 128pp)