

A Discussion Paper from Barnardo's CANDL Project

This is one of a series of discussion papers dealing with current and controversial questions for the church in modern society, and primarily distributed with our quarterly newsletter. Our aim in these papers is to provoke debate and action. As such, the views and questions expressed herein are sometimes quite deliberately blunt and to the point, but do not necessarily represent the policy of Barnardo's.

Jargon busting -- a sideways look at outcomes and empowerment

In this discussion paper we look at two terms that we come across all too often when engaged in community work. The first is a satirical look at outcomes and funding, the second looks at whether community development workers really are able to empower people. Both pieces point towards a more humble approach to community work which recognises how difficult it is to control the impact our work has.

A guide to outcomes and funding applications

Successful funding applications are increasingly dependent on the ability to demonstrate the outcomes of your work. But what does this actually mean in practice? Below I go on to outline what the implications of this for your work and funding applications will be.

The first mistake which many people make is doing the wrong kind of work. In order to be successful in an outcome orientated funding application it is important to choose the right kind of work to do. This is the key to successfully funding your work. You need to be driven not by what is needed in your community but what you can get money for.

Secondly we need to think about outcomes. Of course everyone wants their work to have a good outcome but that is not what is being talked about in this instance. You can have the best outcomes in the world but this is irrelevant if those outcomes are not predictable. You need to choose a piece of work which has outcomes which can be predicted in advance.

The third point is a necessary corollary of the previous. Your outcomes need to be short-term. It is a waste of time doing a piece of work which is only going to have outcomes years in the future no matter how impressive they may be. These long term outcomes are irrelevant not least because they are highly unpredictable. Funders are only interested in short-term gains even if the short term gains turn out to have disappointing long-term outcomes. You need to learn to think no more than a year ahead.

The fourth point is perhaps the most important. We can often be deceived into thinking that it is what we achieve that is important -- this is dangerous thinking which can all too easily mislead us. What is important is what we are *seen* to achieve. In our postmodern world we have been liberated from a concern with the real and need to learn to focus on the surface of things. You're not going to be a successful fund raiser if you keep going on about your achievements which can't be clearly and

simply demonstrated. Preferably all your achievements should be able to be turned easily into numbers.

Finally there is a special skill which will almost guarantee our success as an outcome orientated fund-raiser. This is the ability to piggyback on hidden inputs. An example will make this clearer. Schools are a good example.

A successful school is often one which makes use of these hidden inputs ie the support committed parents give to their children. This may just be a home environment which is conducive to learning or it may even involve direct input by well educated parents into assessed coursework. The more that a school can make use of these hidden inputs the more successful it will be. Governments have, of course, got wise to some of these hidden inputs and have started to factor them in to the way they judge the outcomes of different schools.

This demonstrates that we need to be creative with hidden inputs. To be truly successful they need to remain hidden to funders but successful use of them will enable you to appear to be much more successful than you actually are. And this is the key to successful outcome orientated fundraising.

Empowerment -- a problematic word for Christian community development

I want to begin by making what might seem like a rather pedantic distinction between enabling and empowering for I believe that Christian community development is best seen as enabling rather than empowering social change.

Empowerment is a dynamic and potent force but it is claiming too much for community development to think that it is able to actively empower people. Empowerment comes from within the individual or group and through the Spirit of God, it is not something that you can do for someone else -- in fact the very act of trying to empower seems to me by its very nature disempowering and paternalistic. People must find their own power, their own way to nurture it and their own way to express it. As Christians we believe this power comes from God through the Holy Spirit, sometimes as a dramatic power from above, sometimes emerging out of life itself and always being an expression of the love of the Father and the Son. The Christian community development worker is therefore in the business of enabling rather than empowering. By this I mean working within the flow and complexity of life to enable the development of patterns and shapes of activity which in turn enable people to achieve their own goals. This can take many different forms:

- Providing people with access to information such as fund-raising opportunities and networks of useful people
- Supporting individuals as they seek to develop their skills, build their confidence and work with other people
- Enabling people to work together in a group -- resolving tensions and celebrating their achievements
- Fostering networks and interactions between people committed to seeing their community flourishing

The concern of the community development worker is always with process -- how things are done rather than simply what is done. Within the complexity and sometimes meaningless chaos of life the community worker seeks to create a space where meaningful action can be undertaken and to support people as they struggle with their weaknesses and hopes, doubts and ambitions. The community worker does not so much suppress her own desire to achieve certain things in the community but rather sees her achievement as enabling people to empower themselves and discover a new spirit within themselves. The community worker is intent on providing people with the means to achieve their goals and in this often becomes aware of the Spirit of life emerging from unlikely situations. Because of this experience of the emerging Spirit community development does not seek to control but rather to accept reality as it is and to seek to enable it in the positive ways which are inherent within it.

This is why I believe it is better to talk about enabling than it is to talk about empowering people. The enabler is patient and willing to wait for people to find things out for themselves, in their own time. The person intent on empowerment seeks to inspire and energise people but it is very easy for this to slipover into imposing an agenda on people who look at things very differently. By recognising that the Spirit is the agent of empowerment rather than human action we are protected from being overbearing and able to take a humbler approach which can wait patiently for results rather than push relentlessly for outcomes (which have often been prescribed by outside forces). The enabler seems to me above all a person of humility whilst the so-called 'empowerer' speaks to me of human self-aggrandisement.

There is, nonetheless, nothing disorderly or simply 'going with the flow' about being an enabler. It would be naive to believe that an enabling community development worker simply enables people to do whatever they want. The community development worker brings his own agenda and values to the table -- he is part of the context but he also believes that the Spirit is active within that context before, during and after his intervention. If there is something going on which the community development worker is uncomfortable with -- racism would be the classic example, but concerns about child protection issues might be more common -- then it is incumbent on the worker to take a stand. Again a Spirit-based perspective makes this easier. We know that the Spirit works against anything which is racist or threatens the safety of children and will not be empowering people to act in such ways. The worker is as much an agent of the Spirit as anyone else -- I just don't believe he has a privileged access to the Spirit. The Spirit of life blows where it will. By thinking of ourselves as enablers rather than 'empowerers' I believe we are on a sounder footing both theologically and practically to engage in effective community development.

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If you want to respond to any of the above points, or follow-up any of the ideas, please do get in touch with us at CANDL.

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