Book Review
The Community Development Profession: Issues, Concepts and Approaches

By Frik de Beer and Hennie Swanepoel
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De Beer and Swanepoel’s book, The Community Development Profession: Issues, Concepts and Approaches, is truly a reflection of the authors’ two decades of experience in the field of development studies. The book draws on their experiences as well as on the academic aspects of community development. The authors talk about the issues, concepts, and approaches from two different angles: real world experiences and classroom-based experiences. The message of the book is summarised in the opening pages where the authors state that “genuine development work is that which empowers people; which enables them to build organisations that, like a hydro-electric dam, pool their resources and generate power where previously there was none” (p. 8).

Community development is about working with people, and the authors argue strongly for the need to remember that community is made up of people—with their own ideas, experience, and knowledge. They offer evidence to show how many community developers forget this and try to impose their own ideas and policy onto communities rather than working in partnership to help find ways to initiate meaningful and sustainable change. Indeed, many organisations impose change that is “inconsistent with their objectives” and implement policies that “do not correspond with their principles and aims” (p. 65).

In their book, de Beer and Swanepoel discuss the key themes of “participation, institutions, project management, training, community, coordination, funding and the influence of politics on community development” (p. 1). They describe attempts to design human-centred development approaches that they position as best practices in community development. The authors emphasise the need for a participatory approach where the community is actively involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating change so that they will be able to sustain projects to improve their quality of life. Concepts such as human orientation, sustainability, participation, empowerment, total transformation, and compassion underpin their argument for authentic collaboration with community—and are positioned as requirements for success.

South Africa is a global leader in terms of policy making as far as community development is concerned. However, the translation of these very appropriate policies into practice is often problematic. The authors decry the, often paternalistic, approaches to development visible in many government and not-for-profit interventions. Such resource-based approaches provide “disadvantaged communities with goods in the belief that having goods that were in short supply is equal to being empowered—and that includes being
provided with skills” (p. 41). What is needed, is help to build up human capacity within communities to give them a sense of ownership and commitment to working towards the best interests of their society.

The book is well structured with clear and concise headings that allow the reader to follow the argument, which is well supported by relevant literature on the contemporary debates in the field. This allows the reader to view the issue from different angles and to see the bigger picture of development studies. A powerful feature of the book is the use of a strong case study to summarise their arguments and illustrate their point that what is recommended in policy is not always implemented faithfully on the ground. Democratic, inclusive, and collaborative ideas are more usually supplanted by authoritarian, Western-based, one-sided interventions that are not helping people to develop capacity for true and lasting change. Hopefully, this book will make the reader take a step back, reflect on their own practice, and begin to align it with the democratic and participatory principles that should underline community development.

A helpful feature of the book is the glossary of definitions at the end of each chapter. Discussion questions provoke the reader to self-reflect on own practice in light of the chapter content. Another helpful tool is the addendum, which comprises of a bank of questions, designed to make community development practitioners self-reflect as an aid to ongoing evaluation of their own projects. This book is well suited to postgraduate or final year students in the field of community development or community-based research. It is also relevant for practitioners already in the profession of community development as well as for community development workers.