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INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Reframing Community Support and Care through Community Development

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN A CHAOTIC WORLD: CHALLENGE, CHANGE AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

IACD, with the **University of Glasgow, is delighted to announce that the 2026 World Community Development Conference will be held in Glasgow, Scotland 29th June – 2nd July 2026.**

We are living in a world where the international political and policy landscape is undergoing rapid and unprecedented change. Despite restricted resources, community development yields critical, responsive, and impactful work. This conference will provide a critical space to share best practice and learn from local and global community development work to create a stronger collective voice for positive social change.

Please save these dates and look out for further details coming in the next few weeks

Dates: International Reception Monday 29th June 2026 **Conference:** Tuesday 30th June – Thursday 2nd July **Practice Exchanges:** Friday 3rd July – Sunday 5th July **Venue:** The James McCune Smith Learning Hub, University of Glasgow

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Foreword

Reframing Community Support and Care through Community Development

Community support is the fabric that holds societies together. It includes acts of solidarity, mutual aid, neighbourhood organising, and shared responsibility. It enables people not only to survive, but to belong, participate, thrive and shape their own futures. Alongside support, community care brings a vital human dimension, attending to the emotional, relational, and often invisible labour of compassion and co-responsibility.

Yet despite its central role, community support and care remains under-theorised in the field of community development. It is often treated as informal, incidental, or something that simply happens, rather than as a core domain of practice that deserves deeper conceptual grounding. This special edition of Practice Insights is a response to that gap. It aims to make community support and care more visible, more valued, and more clearly understood as part of the infrastructure of inclusive, just, and resilient societies.

We invited contributors to share their reflections and practices on how community development approaches shape and strengthen systems of support and care. We were particularly interested in contributions that consider the roles of participation, equity, co-creation, gender dynamics, and cultural context. The response was rich and diverse, with submissions spanning geographies, methods, and experiences – all grounded in a shared belief in the power of communities to support one another meaningfully and with dignity.

This issue starts with a group of conceptual and methodological contributions that lay the groundwork for what follows. Susan Matloff-Nieves offers a compelling reflection on the legacy and contemporary relevance of the U.S. Settlement House movement as a model of democratic, community-based support. Paul Stepczak introduces the idea of a "social hackathon," a participatory method for co-creating solutions with communities, while Denise Farrugia explores how collaborative leadership and co-design can shift service delivery from top-down provision to something genuinely owned and shaped by communities themselves.

From this foundation, we move into a section that foregrounds questions of gender and justice. Anna Clarke and colleagues from NIACRO examine how community-based approaches in Northern Ireland can better support women with lived experience of the justice system. This work brings attention to the intersectional barriers many women face, and to the need for gender-responsive support systems that honour experience and enable agency. . Alongside this, Maria Svavovska offers a creative contribution that illustrates the spirit of the women's movement and makes visible the often-overlooked role of women in building and sustaining community support structures.

The next group of articles turns our attention to cultural contexts and critical reflections. Frank George Mgungwe writes on the social complexities surrounding witchcraft accusations in Sub-Saharan Africa and how communities navigate care and protection in the face of stigma and fear. Cissy Rocks, from Aotearoa New Zealand, challenges ingrained habits of "helping" and calls for a deeper unlearning of power-laden support practices. Cheung Yu and Suet Lin Hung share a case from Hong Kong, where a health literacy project for families living in subdivided flats shows how knowledge-sharing can become a powerful and locally embedded form of community support.

In our final section, we highlight grounded practices of support from diverse settings. Marlou De Rouw presents an inspiring example from Europe, where community members collectively design living solutions that restore dignity and agency. Orlando Bustamante draws on traditions of community psychology in Latin America to show how support can emerge from collective empowerment and shared cultural values. Finally, Dhiraj Lepcha and colleagues close the issue with a youth-led initiative from the tea garden communities of India, where young people mobilise to support children's education from within—demonstrating that age is no barrier to leadership when it comes to care and community solidarity.

Taken together, these contributions remind us that community support is not a fallback—it is a foundation. It is not soft or secondary work; it is the infrastructure of care, inclusion, and justice. It is not something communities simply "have" or "lack," but something they actively co-create, shape, and sustain.

We are deeply grateful to all those who contributed to this special issue. It is our hope that these voices, insights, and practices will inspire renewed commitment to placing community support – and its care dimensions – at the heart of community development thinking and action. This is not only a task for practitioners and policymakers; it is a challenge and invitation to the field as a whole: to name, value, and invest in support as a cornerstone of a just and sustainable future.

Editorial Team

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Democratizing Community Support and Care through the Settlement Houses of USA: Community development approaches to community support and community care

Susan Matloff-Nieves

In the United States, provision of community care and social services by community based organizations is generally provided through their role as contractors for hire by government. However, this limits the voice of community members in co-creating solutions to their self-identified issues[1]. Settlement houses are place-based organizations with a long history of working in partnership with communities from a strength-based approach, aligned with community development. Incorporating and strengthening community voice and co-creation into the development of community care is a salient best practice[2].

This article identifies promising examples from five settlement houses. All are leaders of the International Federation of Settlement Houses and Neighborhood Centers, IFS[3].

Engaging Community Voice, Enabling Community Supports

Pillsbury United Communities (PUC) is a settlement house with a social justice mission in Minneapolis, Minnesota. PUC launched Justice Built Communities (JBC) to leverage land, labor, entrepreneurship and capital to build equitable economic development for Black residents. The initiative is co-designed in partnership with local neighborhood associations. PUC engaged community residents to provide feedback on needs assessment data which indicated childcare as a need. However, residents provided the key insight that their priority was access to good food; they could make their own arrangements for childcare but there was no affordable grocery store. The trauma and response to the murder of George Floyd, a Black man murdered by police, focused attention on the need for just solutions to racial inequities. PUC created JBC and initiated a responsive solution by developing a supermarket in a deteriorated area. North Market became a hub of community activities. Two community rooms are used for free wellness classes, vaccination drives and classes for caretakers. Discount days draw customers for affordable food. Grocery deliveries were combined with wellness checks and triage by Emergency Medical Technicians. A Black entrepreneur opened a barber shop and cafe. Listening to the community led to the creation of a true community hub for residents of all ages that stabilized the surrounding neighborhood. The investment addressed basic needs while making space for community care[4].

Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement (Riis) strengthens underserved communities in western Queens, New York City. Riis created an intergenerational Community Advisory Board that informs their work to make it more responsive to community needs. The Board provides feedback on what they want for their community, how services should be delivered and improved, based on their lived experiences and that of their neighbors. Prior to applying for government funding, Riis brings ideas to the council for their guidance to align with lived experiences. Town Halls and community meetings bring a wide range of voices into community planning. The Council, while new, has already begun to build bridges among residents of diverse ages while strengthening their capacity for leadership[5].

University Settlement (US), the first settlement house in the United States, serves the Lower East Side and Brooklyn in New York City with a vision for stronger communities and a more equal and sustainable society. US formed an Intergenerational Community Arts Council (ICAC) about 10 years ago. The ICAC is a network of public housing and residents of color who come together to create values-driven arts programming by, with and for community residents in collaboration with an arts partner, BRIC Media Arts. Each year, the council selects an artist in residence and produces a project (murals, performances and videos). The council brings together residents who are otherwise disconnected to build unity and foster leadership skills. Projects foster wellbeing through positive experiences in uplifting arts activities and neighborhood beautification. The ICAC sponsors food drives, health screenings and movement workshops[6].

Goddard Riverside (GR) has been serving Upper Manhattan in New York City since 1853 with a mission of striving towards a fair and just society. GR engages community voice through several initiatives. One is #DegreesNYC which convenes stakeholders from various sectors to promote educational equity. The effort is co-led by young people. #DegreesNYC's impact on educational policy has been considerable and young people gain skills and knowledge by engaging in research, advocacy and leadership. Recently, Goddard began to convene public housing leaders to work collectively on issues. With a focus on safety and community wellbeing, local elected officials bring city agencies to listen to residents and address their concerns. The collective power of community voice is amplified by Goddard.

The Greater Cleveland Neighborhood Centers Association (NCA) serves Cleveland, Ohio. Leveraging its 3-year AmeriCorps grant[7], NCA engages 29 community members to serve in educational projects for all ages. Members choose their area of interest by age cohort (youth, adults, older adults). With support and training from NCA, AmeriCorps members create community-responsive solutions such as digital tech, tutoring and health education projects while developing their own skills for future opportunities[8].

The Challenge of Sustainable Funding

A key challenge to successful co-creation models identified by interviewees and my own experience is top-down funding. Because most programs and services are funded by government, additional resources must be secured for the

work of developing and providing programs that are beyond the scope of contracts and responsive to, and inclusive of, resident voice and leadership.

All five organizations engage in fundraising from private sources that are interested in innovative models and typically less restrictive in their funding mandates. However, generally foundations fund projects in short cycles (1 to 3 years). Some organizations raise targeted funds (e.g. for research, community engagement or arts) and all designate staff time towards the initiative. NCA's AmeriCorps grant is the most robust public funding.

One approach to this challenge has been undertaken by Cinnamon Pelly, CEO of PUC who takes a proactive approach in her communications with banks and other private funders. She informs them of the realities of inclusive community development, serving as an intermediary between funders and community. In anticipation of funding cycles, she creates informal white papers to educate on best practices. The temptation for funders is to disburse large grants with tight deadlines. However, a robust and inclusive process requires more time for planning, communication and capacity development on both sides. Her process educates funders and builds THEIR capacity to be responsive to community development. This changes the conversation and manages expectations in advance of funding decisions[9].

University Settlement employs a strategy for the ICAC usable by other settlement houses. As community centers, they have space that may be available for community usage when programs are not in session. Renting out these spaces for events and activities provides a flexible funding stream. US allows the ICAC to manage spaces and utilize the funds for projects. The Riis CAB engages in community fundraisers (raffles, dances, sales).

Towards Measuring Impact

The impact of co-creating with the community makes the extra effort worthwhile. There is a positive multiplier effect of engaging community residents in solutions. Community leadership enhances program design and meaningful reciprocal engagement. During the COVID crisis community members organized by GR created a mutual support model of ambassadors who regularly checked on neighbors, thus enhancing community support[10]. Participants in a program supporting economic advancement gave regular feedback on which strategies were most impactful, thus steering the investment of limited resources. The skills that leaders gain through training and activities foster community strength[11]. Increased visibility and trust in the community leads to community members assuming staff positions at these supportive organizations[12].

All of the organizations utilize qualitative measures[13], observing visible evidence of wellbeing, connections among diverse participants, and a growth of leadership skills. US is seeking research funding specifically to document impact. Riis is looking at internal measures. #Degrees uses policy successes. More research is needed to formally explore and document impact.

As noted by Dr. Rod Jones, CEO of Goddard, "the question is as important as the answer". Our ability to ask the right questions and effectively strengthen community support is only possible when we co-create with community members.

Thank you to the following people for sharing their expertise and experiences: Allison Wallace (NCA), Chris Hanway (Riis), Cinnamon Pelly (PUC), Rod Jones (GR), and Jen Vallone (US).

About the author:

Susan Matloff-Nieves is Vice President for Innovation and Justice at Goddard Riverside. For over 40 years, Susan held leadership positions within settlement houses and government with particular expertise in community and youth development. She is a board member of the International Federation of Settlement Houses and Neighborhood Centers. A published author on youth work and social justice, Susan taught at the university level, designed innovative programs and supported capacity building for the field at the state and city level.

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13. A formal quantitative evaluation would be more expensive than program implementation.

02

Starting Something Good: Co-creating fresh ideas for social change

Paul Stepczak and Martin Downes

It takes a village to fix a problem. For too long communities in Wales have been consulted but have not been treated as the experts in fixing problems[1]. The Start Something Good social hackathon model changes that. It is a co-operative model that brings people together to co-design ideas to address social challenges. As a result, public bodies and communities work together in designing new initiatives and strategies, ultimately creating social returns of investment. The approach begins with shared assets and strengths, works democratically through combining the skills, insights, knowledge and passions of the participants, and moves toward a common goal of social change[2].

Our social hackathon model began in 2019 with an idea to bring the community together in Wrexham, Wales, to address local challenges. The Start Something Good team at Cwmpas[3] worked with community members, local organisations active in education, local businesses, and local government to identify the most prominent social challenges in the town. We settled on the six biggest challenges and invited people in the community to join together to address them. We called the first event the "Hack of Kindness." In early 2020, 42 people from the community gathered over 12 hours, working in small diverse teams. They took part in short workshops to progressively build ideas, before pitching them in front of everyone. People joined the event because it was an opportunity to do something good in the community, and strengthen community support networks. The event felt like a celebration with lots of new projects and community business ideas, contributing to building social cohesion.

Our hackathon model is built on equality, participation and inclusion. Everyone has unique experiences, knowledge, and insights for social change. Good ideas can come from anyone and not just people in power. The model works by giving a space for diverse teams to work collaboratively. Around a table you will find residents, business owners, civil servants, young people, charity workers, and educators.

At a typical event, multiple diverse teams work on a shared challenge question. This might be about tackling poverty, sustainable food strategies, community transport, support services for older people, climate action, or placemaking plans. The aim of the events is to co-design fresh solutions to these challenges. The events are inclusive and welcoming, built on co-operation instead of competition. Teams are guided by skilled facilitators with long term backgrounds in community development, enterprise and innovation through the following progressive steps:

1. Identify shared strengths and stories from all stakeholders
2. Understand the different perspectives of the challenge
3. Develop multiple innovative ideas to address the challenge
4. Categorise, select, prototype and refine ideas
5. Present their chosen idea for feedback

By working in this way, participants better understand the perspectives and experiences of others. With this growing understanding connections, relationships and trust begin to form.

The events are not competitive and there is no prize money. Instead, we look for as many good ideas as we can get: we believe that the real competition is the social problem, and the event is about being one big team working together. This approach helps teams to see how their ideas fit together to create bigger solutions for shared ownership. A foundation for community support activities and structures is built.

After the event, participants work on the next steps to test their ideas, access resources and secure support to implement them. The events utilise community development tools[4] at a foundational phase and are delivered by facilitators with community development and social enterprise backgrounds. Examples include collective asset mapping, the Three Horizons Toolkit, Theories of Change, and the 5 W and 1 H Framework.

At its core, the Start Something Good model is democratic, co-operative, asset based and is about working together for the common good. The first exercise we do is identifying what we have. We never start with a deficit, but with existing strengths, social networks, physical and human assets (knowledge, experience, skills, and passion). And it is not just about what we have if we want to fix a problem, but also who we are, our shared stories, and our values. This social capital can be invested to address identified challenges and generate social returns, taking the community forward.

We have now delivered 70 social hackathons to address a wide range of challenges. Over 2,700 people (including over 1000 young people) have taken part, from over 600 organisations. The events have helped people to work together as equals for the first time, (re)gaining agency, connection and respect, in identifying new solutions for commonly identified challenges. This has also helped public bodies to better work with communities by authentically collaborating with them. As a result, new initiatives have started: projects, partnerships, working groups, networks, and community businesses. People have accessed support and over £800,000 in funding.

Specific examples include:

- New community projects were established and funded through local government (Shared Prosperity Funding through UK Government), to resolve local/social issues.
- Community groups, private suppliers, and public bodies co-designed food poverty strategies for three local government areas.
- Farmers, community organisations, academics, government, and regulators were brought together to resolve local river pollution where the ideas generated were later presented to the Welsh Parliament.
- At one event focused on social enterprise creation, three individuals collaborated to create a men's mental health support provision, took ownership of a community, building and generated £18,000 in funding within 6 months.

We have made design tools and innovation methods more inclusive and accessible in a learning environment that is high on impact and low on threat. We took methodologies from design thinking (such as the "Double Diamond" Agile technique), and have transformed the stages into games, artwork activities, and practical tasks to move through the stages of innovation and design thinking without participants being unnecessarily bogged down with learning theory and unfamiliar terminology. The latter can be alienating and perceived to belong to the "experts."

We have experienced two big challenges. The first has been with language. We reframed the hackathon concept from tech and used it for social challenges in a community development setting. But most people don't know what "Hackathons" are. Language needed to be made more accessible. We now talk about "Community Ideas Events."

The second challenge has been encouraging public bodies to try this new way of working with communities. It feels riskier for them than traditional (often top-down) ways of engaging.

The impact of the events and word of mouth from participants has led to more public bodies asking if this new way of working would work for them. We find that one can only truly grasp an understanding and value of such an event until they experience it for themselves.

People who have experienced these events have advocated for others to use them. We therefore welcome people of influence from different sectors to attend our events to experience them for themselves. This has included trusted coproduction practitioners, local government managers, and even the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales.

This is helping to overcome a culture of "doing to" rather than "doing with." Building trust between public bodies and communities has led to more rewarding and honourable ways of collaboration, moving communities from being passengers of social change to sitting in the driving seat.

The Start Something Good model is a proven approach to co-design and co-creation. We have taken the best from the hackathon model, removed the competitive element to make it consistent with inclusive social impact, and applied it to multiple social challenges.

The past five years have been extremely rewarding: relationships have been formed, insights have been shared, and ideas have been implemented. Future plans include testing the model further with more community challenges and in new geographical areas.

About the Authors

Paul Stepczak is a TEDx speaker and community development practitioner with over 20 years' experience. He specialises in co-design, co-production, and social innovation, empowering communities through projects like Cwmpas's Start Something Good® service. Paul champions collaborative solutions, helping public services and communities work together for lasting, people-led change.

Martin Downes is Lead Consultant for Learning and Development at Cwmpas and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA). He created the Hack of Kindness and Start Something Good, managed the Social Enterprise Academy Wales, oversees the Social Leaders Cymru programme, and works with universities on social entrepreneurship and democratic innovation. With over 20 years in Third Sector leadership, Martin is also a creative agency founder, author, and public speaker.

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When Communities Lead, Malta Grows

Denise Mariella Farrugia

In Mosta, it began with a question quietly asked by a retired teacher: "How can I give back?" In Qormi, it started with a knock on the door and a listening ear. In Valletta, it was the collective effort of the residents who during the mapping process highlighted their concerns and tried to find a solution. Three different towns in Malta – three different stories, all are formed from the same principle that when people are supported to care for one another, communities will act, and society will gain.

The Telephone Buddies initiative began from a simple act of presence and a deliberate commitment to community engagement. The community services team in Qormi, in the central of Malta, went door to door and through the process they found elderly residents who were feeling isolated and unseen. Weekly phone calls, initially organised by the team to offer companionship, gradually evolved into peer connections among the elderly, who began calling each other without the need for external coordination. What began as outreach transformed into ownership. One year in, Telephone Buddies no longer belongs to any agency but belongs to the community. What was once a one-way service has transformed into a self-sustaining circle of friendship. The elderly residents, once isolated, now stand as a powerful testimony to what is possible when we put trust in the process and direct the service to allow the time and space for people to care for each other.

In Mosta, a busy commercial town in the north of Malta, a retired teacher saw neighbours and local service providers – mostly employing third country nationals (economic migrants) struggling with speaking English. Mosta is also known for its vibrant community life. Some of these people were cut off from job opportunities, others from services, and social connection. With encouragement and support, she launched free, practical English lessons in a space provided by the local council. As community development workers, our role was not to lead, but to walk alongside and help create the conditions for her initiative to start. This meant listening to her, supporting her, and connecting her with small but important resources to bring the idea to life. The sessions quickly became more than language lessons—they were a space where trust, connection, and belonging could grow. For participants, it also became an opportunity to build confidence in their own capacities. In line with the IACD's values to build people power, the initiative helped spark a deeper sense of agency and belief that change is something we can shape together, not something done for us. The initiative reflects the IACD Practice Standards' focus on building local capacity, enabling inclusive participation, and supporting people to influence change in their lives and communities.

In Valletta, Malta's capital city, which has undergone significant regeneration in recent years, a participatory mapping session revealed growing concerns among parents about the lack of affordable extracurricular activities for their children. Valletta's community, once stable and close-knit for generations, now faces new challenges it was not fully prepared for. As is often the case when

'Whilst mapping the Qormi community, we met with many elderly residents facing loneliness and isolation. The Community Services team took the initiative starting a befriending call system, after which the elderly got to know each other and became each other's telephone buddies.

urban areas, especially those traditionally home to low or middle income communities undergo investment and infrastructural improvements, they begin attracting wealthier individuals and businesses. This leads to rising property prices, rents, and service costs, often beyond what original residents can afford. Consequently, many families have been forced to leave Valletta, a reality echoed in heartfelt conversations with the remaining residents, who feel the original character of their community is shifting or being lost, with the population aging and younger generations moving away. In response to these dynamics, the community mapping process became a foundational step to explore the community's readiness for social mobility and to uncover insights related to education, employment, housing, financial literacy, and parenting. Residents and key community members co-designed the questions, and every household received a hand-delivered invitation to participate. This participatory approach extended beyond individual sessions. It included community

walks, street conversations, and storytelling with residents, helping to reveal both visible and hidden strengths within the neighbourhood. These interactions not only surfaced concerns but also sparked meaningful discoveries about the community's aspirations. Large, printed maps were used to identify neighbourhood assets and opportunities. Participants used colour-coded stickers to mark places of significance, formal spaces such as libraries, health centres, schools, and institutions, as well as informal ones like doorsteps used as meeting points and third spaces such as local band clubs where community life naturally happens.

The process fostered genuine connections, strengthened collaboration between professionals and residents, and laid a strong foundation for grassroots mobilisation. Building on the earlier concern about the lack of affordable extracurricular activities for children, the community took action. Inspired by the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, residents began to act on the strengths identified through the process. Parents proposed tapping into local talent and soon discovered a retired artist willing to share his skills. Our organisation supported this initiative by providing access to a local community space where the sessions could take place. This gave rise to Tikka Żebgħa ma' Paul (A Splash of Paint with Paul), a vibrant intergenerational project where creativity meets community. Blending inspiration from science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics (STEAM) with a spirit of giving back, the initiative now fosters connection, lifelong learning, and a renewed sense of care among Valletta's residents.

These stories are not just heartwarming but convincing evidence that community-led care is a strategic investment. When agencies create the space, trust, and support for people to take initiative, the returns are encouraging, contributing to a steady local social infrastructure that increases in value over time.

Community development within Malta's national social welfare service is nearing its 30th anniversary. Launched in 1995 through the Social Welfare Development Programme, now the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, and the first community centre in Bormla, it responded to the economic and social challenges in Cottonera. This marked a shift away from the traditional charity model, historically influenced by the strong presence of the Catholic Church, which has long played a central role in supporting vulnerable communities with sympathy and empathy, towards a practice rooted in empowerment and social justice. Since then, community development has grown into a core

pillar of social welfare in Malta. In 2019, this commitment deepened with the creation of the Agency for Community and Therapeutic Services, embedding a community development perspective in care and support. Grounded in the asset-based community development approach, this work honours community strengths, nurtures local connections, and fosters resilience through collaboration and shared purpose. This contributes to reframing care as an investment, not just a service, we open the door to more sustainable, inclusive, and human-centred approaches to social welfare, where people are not just recipients of support, but contributors to collective wellbeing.

Yet, this shift is not without challenges, including those we must reflect on as professionals, as well as the feelings held by stakeholders. Born out from a history of colonisation, there is a prevailing expectation on institutions and helping professionals, such as social workers and community development workers, to provide immediate and direct interventions. This pressure risks reinforcing a problem-solving mindset—one in which both service providers and decision-makers are generally expected to fix issues, rather than facilitate community-driven change. As a result, the focus on co-empowering communities to take the initiative and develop their own solutions is often overshadowed. Overcoming this requires reframing our roles, revisiting our practice, and committing to approaches that cultivate long-term resilience rather than short-term relief.

The shift from a narrative of dependency to one of contribution, and from traditional service delivery to a sustainable model of social infrastructure is not only philosophical, but also practical, enduring, and measurable in both social and economic terms. The peer-led model developed through Telephone Buddies in Qormi and the community-led English lessons in Mosta

demonstrate this transformation. By evolving into a low-cost, community-driven support system, the initiatives significantly reduced the need for ongoing external coordination. More importantly, they hold the potential to prevent mental health issues related to chronic loneliness and social isolation.

The intergenerational painting initiative in Valletta drew on existing community assets to address a critical service gap. It created meaningful opportunities for engagement between children and older residents, without relying on costly programmes or institutional frameworks that are not accessible to everyone and tend to displace the local potential. The initiative not only provided a renewed sense of purpose, particularly for the retired artist who still has so much to offer but also fostered informal learning and strengthened cross-generational relationships. As a community-led response, it stands as a valuable investment in social capital, offering long-term benefits that are especially meaningful in Valletta, where the resident population is rapidly declining due to gentrification. In this context, such initiatives play a vital role in sustaining community cohesion, preserving the skills, stories, and passions that define the neighbourhood's identity, and ensuring they are passed onto future generations. The work reflects IACD's emphasis on participatory processes, valuing local knowledge, and supporting communities to act on their priorities through shared leadership.

Over the years, care has been professionalised in every aspect from cradle to grave, turning supporting each other into service provision, programmes, and systems which might not remain sustainable for a long-time. While we value the importance of providing publicly funded essential services, it is becoming increasingly challenging for social welfare services to have the necessary resources to address today's social challenges, therefore we need to re-position ourselves and ask how community support and care can become more effective and sustainable, not only from an economic and resource perspective, but also in terms of our well-being and connection to each other.

As we look ahead, our approach to community services is contributing to the ongoing evolution of social welfare. We are actively listening, discovering, connecting, and mobilising residents to come together as a community. By understanding what truly matters to them, we support residents in shaping their own collective journey. This is leading to the adoption of more co-designed and community-led approaches, embedding a community development perspective that values process over outcome. Transformation appears through engagement, reflection, and shared action, rather than through pre-defined solutions to pre-set agendas.

Such an approach requires a shift from top-down decision-making to participatory structures, where professionals, residents, and local stakeholders work as equal partners. By valuing the journey of collaboration, we promote community intelligence, shared agency, and long-term sustainability—ensuring that development is not only for the community but shaped by the community itself.

These stories from Malta demonstrate that meaningful community development can only take place when grounded in trust, equity, and participation. They reflect the IACD Practice Standards of empowerment, engaging with communities, putting values into practice, ensuring participatory planning, organising and learning for change, promoting diversity and inclusion, and developing and improving policy and practice.

As practitioners, we are called not just to serve, but to co-create with communities, enabling them to lead their own transformation. By remaining rooted in our shared ethics and practice standards, we can collectively shape a future where care is not simply delivered but lived, and where development is not done to people, but with people and by people.

About the Author:

Denise Mariella Farrugia draws on 25 years in the social sector, living the values she writes about through deep ties to her hometown. Working across micro to macro levels, she sees community development as essential across all disciplines. Passionate about belonging, strengths-based practice, and real participation, she brings people together—engaging diverse voices in shaping sustainable futures through dialogue, connection, and grounded, hands-on work that grows from the community up.

Strengthening Collaborative and Gender-Responsive Approaches to Supporting Women with Lived Experience of the Justice System in Northern Ireland

Cathy Clayton, Yasmin Doyle, Mollie Haddock, Bronagh McErlean, Ciara Corrigan and Anna Clarke

NIACRO[1], is a civil society organisation which for over 50 years has been working across Northern Ireland, to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities. We provide a comprehensive range of services to support people involved in or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system, and their families, supporting them to move forward. This includes vital work within prisons and in the community.

Facilitators with Participants from Supporting Women through the CJS course

This article presents a case study of NIACRO's Connections programme[2], for and developed in partnership with women with lived experience of the justice system. The Connections programme is informed by Community Development values, strengthens community support networks, and provides essential community-based support and care for women who experience high levels of disadvantage and marginalisation.

Context: Women and the Justice System in Northern Ireland

The increasing number of women in prison in Northern Ireland[3], particularly the high proportion held on remand (prior to conviction and/or sentencing) and the prevalence of short custodial sentences for non-violent offences, raises serious concerns. Evidence indicates these sentences are ineffective in reducing reoffending[4] and inflict significant harm on women and their children, often leading to long-term or permanent family separation. Furthermore, these short sentences often exacerbate the very issues that led to the offence in the first instance. Critically, with such short custodial periods, women are frequently unable to access the counselling, courses, and educational opportunities available within Hydebank Wood Women's prison.

Many women involved in the criminal justice system often experience complex, interconnected issues, including mental ill-health, adverse childhood experiences, intergenerational trauma, and systemic poverty, frequently compounded by abuse, coercion, and domestic and sexual violence. Many women involved in the justice system are victims themselves.

Addressing these multifaceted issues is crucial for breaking cycles of disadvantage, facilitating effective resettlement, and promoting positive change. Among others, a 2021 report by the Chief Inspector for Criminal Justice in NI[5] and the 2022 Strategy for Women and Girls in or At Risk of Contact with the Justice System[6], highlight the need for meaningful and effective, gender-responsive, multi-agency approaches. A gender responsive approach is about how criminal justice organisations (and other public sector and non-profit organisations) take account of, include specific actions, and deliver services to women and girls to provide equitable outcomes which reduce gender inequality. Genuinely effective responses require collaboration between statutory and community-based organisations supporting women across all aspects of their lives.

Overview of NIACRO's Connections Programme

The Connections programme adopts a gender-responsive approach to support women with lived experience of the justice system. It operates through a multi-skilled team

Connections Team at Crumlin Road Gaol

with expertise in social work, community development, criminology, law, and psychology, ensuring a holistic approach. The programme's participatory design and its intended impact on individual and community well-being are key to its success. This investment, supporting each woman as an individual with their own circumstances and needs, and women collectively with shared experience of the justice system yields benefits for them, their children, and the wider society, aligning with the core purpose of Community Development.

Direct one-to-one and group support creates a safe space for confidence building, personal development, peer support, and strengthening positive connections. From April 2024 to January 2025, the Connections team supported 83 women through referrals from Hydebank Wood Women's Prison, probation services and community organisations. While a waiting list exists, proactive engagement is maintained through check-in calls and problem-solving. The weekly Women's Group and the 12-week Excell Programme ('ex-cell' as in leaving prison) offer additional peer support and development opportunities. The Excell programme explores a range of topics such as self-reflection & awareness, understanding experiences, healthy boundaries & relationships, confidence & assertiveness, addictions, wellness & recovery, benefits of exercise, healthy eating, goal setting, CV of personal achievements . Women can also choose to work towards completion of an accredited Award in Healthy Living.

In addition, the Connections team **advocates** for greater understanding of the nature and circumstances of women's offending, recognising the gendered impact of imprisonment on their roles as mothers and caregivers, and the impacts on their children, seeking a more compassionate justice system and community response that is gender aware, and which supports human rights and social justice. Through policy work and dialogue, NIACRO challenges harmful stereotypes that marginalise women. This includes responding to public consultations on issues such as domestic violence, children's social care, community support and strategies to end violence against women and girls.

Recognising that sustainable change requires a broader shift in practice, NIACRO's Centre for Development actively invests in building the capacity of professionals across the sector to adopt gender-responsive approaches. Through its CPD certified training NIACRO encourages community service providers and allied professionals to move beyond awareness and to **work collaboratively together** around key resettlement pathways. This provides joined-up support for women's long-term reintegration and stability.

Supporting Women Through and Beyond the Criminal Justice System is a 40-hour CPD training course for professionals in the justice sector and allied fields. This training enhances understanding of gender-responsive approaches and aims to influence wider service practices by addressing the complex issues faced by women in the justice system, including

mental health impacts recognized in the Northern Ireland Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031[7]. The training raises awareness of the collateral impacts of custodial sentences, supports gender-responsive consideration of women's needs, encourages greater collaboration, and promotes non-judgmental approaches. The group also attend a sitting at the Belfast Magistrates Court and visit Hydebank Wood Women's Prison to meet prison staff and the visitors' centre staff who provide weekly support to families with a family member in prison. Through 2024 the course was delivered 3 times with participants drawn from Justice agencies such as Northern Ireland Prison Service, Youth Justice Agency, Housing Associations, non-profit organisations addressing issues of homelessness, drug/alcohol addictions, mental health, advice and support services, women's support organisations, adult education providers, social workers and other health and social care providers, and youth workers.

The Importance of Resettlement Pathways

Reducing crime levels, reoffending and the costs of crime are key government objectives. Research has shown that there are a number of social factors that contribute to offending and re-offending. However, breaking this cycle is complex and this is where resettlement pathways come into play. Resettlement pathways encompass the interconnected services and supports women need for successful community reintegration post-justice system contact.

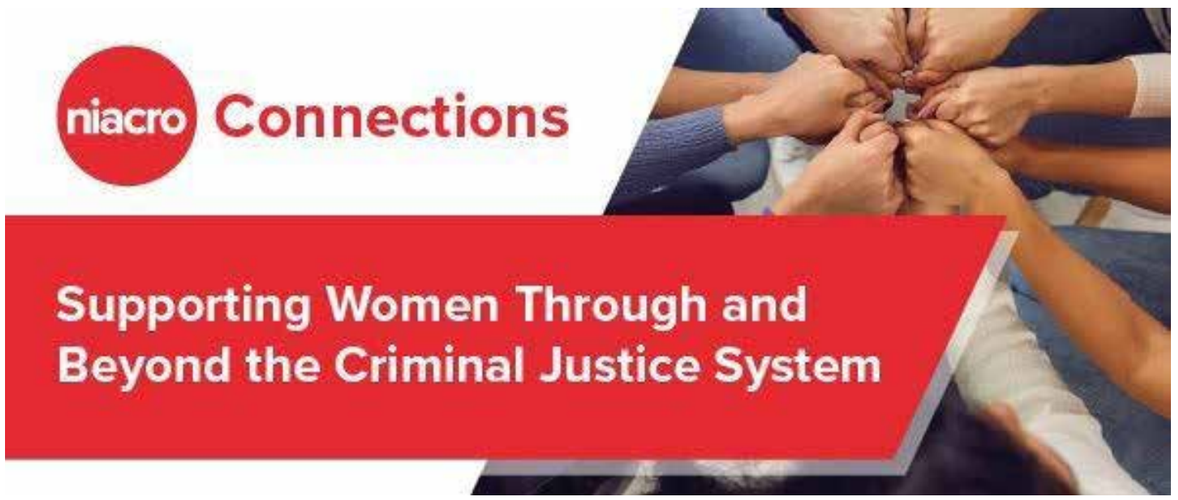
The nine Resettlement Pathways[8] cover;

1. Accommodation
2. Education, Training and Employment
3. Health – both Mental and Physical
4. Drugs and Alcohol
5. Finance, Benefits and Debt
6. Children, Families and Communities
7. Attitudes, Thinking and Behaviours
8. Support for people who have been abused, raped, or experienced domestic violence
9. Support for people who have been involved in prostitution and the Sex Industry.

Demonstrating Impact: Positive Outcomes and Women's Voices

NIACRO uses the Justice Star[9] as a baseline and end point to help women focus on relevant issues, set goals, and celebrate achievement in relation to key areas of their lives such as; Accommodation, Living Skills & Self Care, Mental Health & Wellbeing, Friends & Community, Family & Relationships, Parenting & Caring, Drugs & Alcohol, Positive Use of Time, Managing Strong Feelings and a Crime Free Life.

The data captured is also used to measure and demonstrate programme impact. Figure 1 shows data from one-to-one support with 83 women from the 1st of April 2024 to 30th January 2025 demonstrates good progress in all areas and significant progress in mental health and well-being. While accommodation remains a challenge, the programme actively addresses it. Overall, 94% of women receiving one-to-one support maintained or improved progress. 93% had their goals met on their journey through the Connections programme. While 6% (of the 83 women) returned to custody before completion, these figures are well below the general reoffending statistics. Reporting on the proven



reoffending rate for 2021/22, the Northern Ireland Department of Justice noted that 13.4% of females (18.7% of males) had reoffended. While long-term indicators are challenging to capture, Connections demonstrates value through a low rate of return to custody and re-referrals.

The Excell Programme further demonstrates impact, with 67% completing the first round, gaining valuable skills, and six women achieving the accredited Award in Healthy Living. Feedback (below) from women such as Nikita and Ella, powerfully illustrates the transformative impact of feeling valued and supported within a caring community-based service.

'I cannot express how much this programme has impacted my life; you have lifted me in so many ways. A feeling of belonging when you spend the day with really lovely people that have a positive influence and make you feel that you can be and do more with your life really makes me feel that my life is worth so much more.' Nikita

'I want to thank you that you were there for me when I needed support. I learn from you that I can be patient again because I lost that in past year, that I am strong, value to other people … with you I felt safe, happy, loved for the first time after jail. I was lost but with you I found myself that I can do a lot of things in my life to live better. That I can chose and decide how I want to spend my time, that making mistakes its ok, I don't have to be perfect… Thanks to the Women's Group and you I am back to one piece again.' Ella

Data[10] from three runs of the Supporting Women Through and Beyond the Criminal Justice System course in 2024 evidenced significant positive outcomes. Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate clear shifts in learners' knowledge and understanding of a gender responsive approach and increased confidence in supporting women and girls through their journey of the justice system.

Participant feedback highlights the value of the training and its impact on practice.

'Throughout my work this training is incredibly useful to improve my understanding of meaningful support for women within the justice system.' Learner A

'This training has been so eye opening to the life of women who enter the CJS, I feel like it will forever influence my practice going forward. It is essential learning for any new recruitment into any agency (working) with women who are in contact with the CJS.' Participant B

Furthermore 95% of evaluation responses confirmed the training course had positively contributed to their professional development and planned to use the learning to raise awareness and enhance support for women with lived experience of the justice system.

The development of blended learning options and a one-day introductory course will further enhance accessibility, contributing to sustainable learning and development, a key aspect of community development.

Conclusion

NIACRO's Connections programme reflects Community Development values in its approach to community support and community care. It prioritises empowerment, social justice, and addresses systemic barriers through direct one-one, group and peer support, multi-agency collaboration and policy influencing, reflecting a critical gender perspective. Aligning with Community Development standards, Connections empowers women, challenges inequalities, fosters partnerships, and promotes learning. This gender-responsive, community-based approach yields social and economic returns by reducing reoffending and strengthening families, demonstrating the investment value of community support and community care. Connections offers a compelling model for supporting women through and beyond the justice system towards a more just, safe and resilient future, demonstrating the importance of investing in such initiatives.

About the Authors

All the authors of this article work for NIACRO.

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Mollie Haddock is a Project Worker with the Connections Project. She has a Degree in Law with Criminology and an MSc in Psychological Science. She is committed to advocating for women's rights, especially in protecting women from violence and ensuring equal access to justice.

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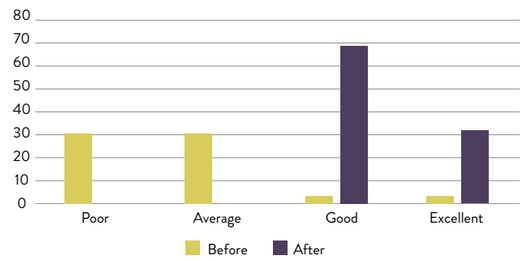
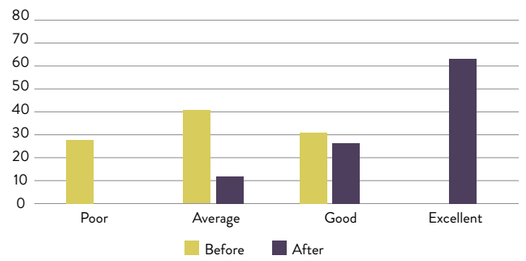
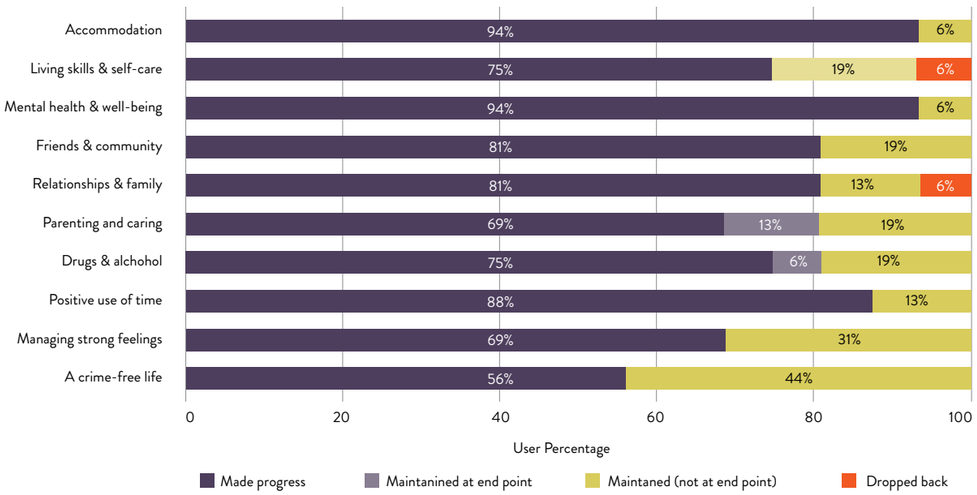
% change in learners' confidence in supporting women and girls as they journey through the CJS



% change in learners' knowledge and understanding of the rationale for gender responsive approaches to supporting women and girls involved in the CJS



Star Online Distance-travelled Report
How much progress are people making in each outcome area?



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Supporting Women's Empowerment: Akcija Zdruzhenska's Commitment to Gender Equality

Maria Savovska

The Association for Advancement of Gender Equality –Akcija Zdruzhenska- is a national NGO based in North Macedonia, dedicated to empowering women and strengthening grassroots organizations. It plays an important role in shaping gender equality policies and laws at both national and local levels. What sets Akcija Zdruzhenska apart is its close connection with local women's organizations. This trust is built through years of work in the field and ongoing support to women at the grassroots level.

In 2017, Akcija Zdruzhenska noticed a major gap: many women, especially in rural areas, didn't see themselves as civic actors. This lack of participation weakened local democracy and accountability. In these communities, traditional norms expected women to focus on caregiving and home life, keeping them out of public decision-making.

After two decades of advocacy, Akcija Zdruzhenska saw that real change wouldn't come without demand from women themselves. So Akcija Zdruzhenska shifted its focus: empower women to raise their voices, ask for better services, and shape decisions that affect their lives. This approach was especially powerful for women who had never seen themselves as part of public life.

Working Together: Building Women's Confidence and Leadership

Akcija Zdruzhenska began partnering with local women's groups to challenge power imbalances in communities. Women were encouraged to step into public debates, take part in local decision-making, and join community planning.

The approach was based on social accountability, the idea that citizens have the right and responsibility to hold governments accountable. Akcija Zdruzhenska linked gender inequality to larger issues of democracy and governance. The goal was to make local decision-making more open, inclusive, and fair and to recognize the value of care work and women's roles in society.

From Exclusion to Participation

"I discovered a rebellious nature within myself... I realized that what is collective is also mine."

Empowerment starts with helping women find their voice. Many believed their opinions didn't matter. Akcija Zdruzhenska helped organize small group conversations where women shared daily challenges, explored their community roles, and gathered information about local budgets and services.

Informal learning spaces like social gatherings and kitchen table talks helped women learn about local government and how public decisions affect them. These spaces allowed them to reflect, support each other, and start imagining their roles as active citizens.

Learning by Doing: Building a Collective Voice

"We gather for coffee and talk about how to solve our problems without waiting for others."

Once women grew in confidence, Akcija Zdruzhenska helped them develop their collective voice. Women began practicing leadership through small projects and group discussions.

A major step was learning to prioritize what mattered most to their wider community. This was new for many, and it took time and support to learn how to negotiate, take risks, and share responsibility.

Akcija Zdruzhenska supported community workshops where women self-organized into small teams. Each team focused on a specific area of local government. After consulting with other women in their communities, the teams submitted formal proposals to local authorities.

Turning Voices into Action

"We're glad we shook up the village; now everyone is talking about what the women are doing."

Empowerment means using your voice to create change. Many women entered local government buildings for the first time, engaging directly with officials and taking part in council meetings and public forums.

The impact was clear:

- Better transport: Subsidized public buses made it easier for women to get around.
- Less domestic pressure: Childcare centers and better access to clean water helped lighten daily burdens.
- Improved safety: New lighting and pedestrian zones made streets safer.
- Stronger infrastructure: Villages got organized waste collection, better sewage systems, and upgraded public spaces and schools.
- Women also created their own spaces to meet, learn, and plan community advocacy together.

Women Supporting Women: A Growing Network

One of the most powerful parts of Akcija Zdruzhenska's work is the network it helped build. Women from different regions and backgrounds came together to share experiences and support each other. Today, the Local Women Circles network spans 65 villages in 21 municipalities.

This solidarity has helped shift traditional power roles. Women are now more visible and skilled at negotiation. Local governments are listening more to women and responding better to community needs.

Lessons for the Future

Akcija Zdruzhenska's work shows that empowering women creates stronger, more inclusive communities. One key lesson is that community-based, informal learning is more effective than formal trainings held far from home.

Ongoing communication and a regular presence in the field are essential. It's also important to create safe spaces where women can question norms, build trust, and support each other.

The lessons from Akcija Zdruzhenska's work in North Macedonia offer a guide for anyone seeking to strengthen community care and support from a gender perspective. These experiences not only address inequalities in access and voice, but demonstrate how a gender-focused approach can contribute to the broader goals of inclusive governance, social cohesion, and community resilience. As more organizations and practitioners reflect on the role of caregiving, participation, and collective empowerment, Akcija Zdruzhenska's work stands as a reminder that sustainable change begins at the community level and that when women rise, communities thrive.

About the Author

Ms. Marija Savovska brings 30 years of civil society experience, dedicated to gender equality, women's empowerment, and policy reform. Since 2005, she has served as Executive Director of Akcija Zdruzhenska in Skopje, a leading advocacy group in North Macedonia. Under her leadership, the organization has shaped legal and policy frameworks and empowered local women's activists to organize and hold governments accountable.

Navigating Hard Times: Community Care for Vulnerable Elders and Children Facing Witchcraft Accusations in Malawi

Frank George Mgungwe and Custom Kapombe Mwale

Witchcraft Accusations and the Decline of Traditional Support

In Malawi, accusations of witchcraft are often triggered by unexplained misfortunes such as illness, death, or drought. When these events occur, communities sometimes target elderly individuals – especially women – as scapegoats. This has led to social exclusion, physical violence, and even mob killings. For example, in January 2025, following a prolonged dry spell in Mulanje District, 87-year-old Mary Laini Kaude was brutally assaulted by a mob who accused her of causing the drought through witchcraft (Kapitao, 2025).

Incidents like this are becoming alarmingly common and severely disrupt community care mechanisms. Accusations are not solely rooted in belief systems. Poverty, jealousy, and competition over resources often fuel suspicion. A relatively prosperous individual in a struggling village may be accused of using witchcraft to achieve their success. Similarly, family tensions and economic strain can lead to elders being blamed for misfortune and subsequently denied care.

Gender Dimensions of Accusations

Women bear the brunt of witchcraft accusations in Malawi and across Sub-Saharan Africa. Cultural narratives and patriarchal structures often associate older women with supernatural practices, making them particularly vulnerable. These dynamics intersect with broader issues of gender inequality, further marginalizing women and reinforcing their exclusion from systems of support. Children, too, can be targets – especially orphans or those with disabilities – further complicating community responsibilities for care and protection.

Community-Based Approaches to Support and Protection

Despite these challenges, community-based strategies offer hope. In Malawi, grassroots initiatives and participatory development methods are working to rebuild trust and reframe caregiving through education, dialogue, and collective action. Mother Groups, comprised of 6–12 women, provide one such example. These groups meet regularly to discuss household issues, including the care of elders and the welfare of vulnerable children. They play an essential role in raising awareness, identifying at-risk individuals, and supporting decision-making at the community level. Other initiatives focus on participatory conflict resolution. In Karonga District though, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), for instance, local stakeholders – including traditional leaders, religious figures, and human rights advocates – have facilitated community dialogues to address the root causes of witchcraft accusations and prevent vigilante justice. Thus, participatory approaches are vital to effective community development. When communities are included in designing and implementing interventions, they are more likely to take ownership of solutions because the issue at hand graduates from being a personal issue to a collective issue or responsibility in the villages. New thinking and ehaviours initiated by these significant others sink in all contribute to reducing stigma against the elderly and about witchcraft in general. This not only improves outcomes but also strengthens the social fabric that holds communities together. Village heads, church leaders, women leaders and significant others in rural villages are seen as trusted stakeholders. Thus, their involvement in coming up with solutions to social justice issues is also viewed as a legitimate way of ending violence. Their discussions and solutions shape the "public opinion" of the rural village which by and large diffuse the way people view the elderly and those accused of witchcraft. For example: If a well-respected man in the community strongly and fearlessly speaks against vigilante justice in witchcraft accusations, perpetrators of such vices are likely to rethink their actions and stop.

Reframing Support Through a Community Development Lens

Addressing the issue of elder abuse linked to witchcraft requires more than reactive measures. It demands a reframing of community support and care as both a human rights imperative and a social investment. Educational initiatives can help dispel myths about witchcraft and build understanding of natural causes of misfortune. Legal protections must be enforced to hold perpetrators of violence accountable and provide justice for victims. And above all, communities must be supported to rebuild traditional support systems in ways that reflect contemporary realities, while honoring the values of dignity, inclusion, and interdependence.

Conclusion

In Malawi, elders are seen as vital members of society – holders of knowledge, wisdom, and tradition. Yet harmful beliefs and socio-economic stressors are eroding this respect, replacing care with suspicion, exclusion, and violence. Community development approaches – particularly those grounded in participation, cultural understanding, and rights-based frameworks – can help restore balance. By supporting locally driven strategies that protect the vulnerable and promote collective responsibility, communities can rebuild systems of care that are resilient, inclusive, and just.

About the Authors

Frank George Mgungwe is a rural development practitioner and a lecturer in human rights and international law at the University of Livingstonia in Mzuzu, Malawi. As a change maker, his work focuses on human rights and transformative rural development, with a commitment to research and empower marginalized communities. Frank is also a doctoral research candidate in Transformative Community Development at Mzuzu University, Malawi.

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07

Breaking the Habit of Helping: Unlearning What Holds Us Back

Cissy Rock and Duncan Matthews

Across Aotearoa New Zealand, community development practitioners are wrestling with how to build inclusion, self-determination, and collective resilience amid growing socio-economic inequality, environmental precarity, and political fragmentation. Over the past year, pilot projects run by Community Think[1] and Neighbours Aotearoa[2] have tested a different approach. Drawing from the UK's Participatory City framework[3] and grounded in Aotearoa's bicultural commitment, we've trialled what we call participation culture – a counter-practice that humanises systems, centres collective action, and reclaims power from top-down helping models. This article shares what we're learning – and calls for a fundamental unlearning of the ingrained habit of helping in favour of community-led action.

When Helping Holds Us Back

We use the term service-based to describe approaches delivered by community organisations and developers where the primary orientation is toward providing something to people – a workshop, a programme, a solution – rather than building with them. These practices are often rooted in a culture of benevolence, where the worth of an activity is judged by how directly it helps someone. In this model, belonging could be seen as transactional – and practitioners may feel they're not doing the 'right' thing unless they are solving, supporting, or delivering. While these intentions are sincere, they reinforce a dynamic where power remains with the helper, and the helped remain recipients rather than co-creators.

Service-based models, shaped by decades of neoliberal policy, reduce community well-being to a series of outputs, targets, and transactions. While these systems are designed for efficiency and are essential in sectors like healthcare or infrastructure, they have infiltrated community work – imposing a mindset that values deliverables over the group having a say. In this model, communities are passive recipients of external support, and practitioners deliver programmes that have been shaped elsewhere. Plans are written before relationships exist. Resources are tied to pre-approved outcomes. Over time, this reinforces dependency and obscures deeper structural drivers – poverty, racism, colonisation – behind a veil of well-meaning service.

When helping becomes habitual, it becomes a barrier. It disables, crowding out local initiative, creativity, and leadership. It plays directly into a broader neoliberal narrative that shifts responsibility for systemic failures onto individuals and communities while masking structural inequality with well-meaning support.

The Magnet Effect

We've seen how seductive this way of working is – for funders, practitioners, and residents alike. We call this pull the Magnet Effect: the gravitational force that draws practice back into transactional, measurable, delivery-focused models – even when framed as relational approaches. It is underpinned by an audit culture of performance over process, prizing visible action and short-term results over long-term, relational change. Outputs define success: how many workshops, how many flyers, and how many people showed up. It rewards doing for rather than being with.

Participation culture offers a different model of community support – one that challenges this paradigm by centring being with as the foundation for sustainable change. It slows the pace. It values showing up, listening, and building relationships over running programmes. It holds space for ambiguity, hard in systems hungry for evidence, efficiency, and scale. It requires practitioners to resist the urge to fix and instead sit with discomfort, complexity, and slow change.

Conditions for Participation to Take Root

Like sourdough, participation culture needs the right conditions to grow. Not perfection – but enough warmth and nourishment to ferment.

Is there local appetite for connection? Are community influencers open to a different way of working? Is there enough time and stability for trust to form? And crucially – are people's basic needs being met? Housing, income, food, water, and safety are foundational for community

development – without them, participation becomes a privilege rather than something for all communities.

Our pilots revealed that readiness isn't a checklist – it's historical, contextual, and often shaped by colonial dynamics. How settlers arrived and imposed systems in the 19th century still shapes the resourcing of communities today, influencing who is thriving and who is surviving.

Participation Culture in Action

Participation culture is not a model – it's a way of working. Weavers, our name for community workers in place, worked in groups to build relationships that can disrupt and reshape systems. Over time, five guiding principles emerged:

1. Binocular Vision

This principle reflects our commitment Te Tiriti o Waitangi[4] and to holding both te ao Māori and Western worldviews. In one pilot, this meant shifting boundaries from a government-defined suburb to a catchment defined by a stream – following the lead with Māori ways of understanding place and connection. Binocular Vision challenges us to hold two perspectives at once – to see through both Māori and non-Māori lenses. The concept emerged from Johnnie Freeland's work on regenerative practice, inviting us to re-centre Indigenous knowledge in a system shaped by colonisation[5,6].

2. Getting Alongside People

Rather than stepping in as experts, weavers take up a peer role – listening, noticing, and being present. This orientation decentralises power. In one pilot, our weavers simply listened to residents around the block, building rapport. Over time, they gained insight into the phenomena of side hustles in their community, sparking ideas for a local market. Weavers ran the first one – and then community members took over, running further market-inspired events. The practitioner's role was catalytic rather than directive.

3. Relationships Before Ideas

Resist the urge to start with a plan. Instead, build relationships first. This principle recognises that without relationships, ideas themselves rarely gain long-term traction. In another location, a softball team formed because someone suggested it, and the existing relationships made it possible. Even when the practitioner stepped away, the group kept playing.

4. Little, Often, Varied, and Rhythmic

Instead of relying on big, one-off events, focus on small, consistent interactions – cups of tea, shared walks, and low-key workshops. These activities don't always have to be the same, and a consistent rhythm lowers the threshold for participation – people know what to expect and when to show up.

As one weaver noted, it can take being seen out and about four or more times before someone feels ready to join in. A weekly walking group (hikoi) began drawing regulars in one location. Over time, this evolved into a stop for coffee and cake afterwards, which attracted others more informally. Workshops also became a central feature – including skillshares, a cooking club, and a crop swap – offering people lo-fi entry points to participate, learn something useful, and often return, sometimes stepping into the role of sharing their own skills. This steady, rhythmic interaction pattern invites trust, belonging, and the organic spread of participation.

5. Everything Happens in Context

Every community has its own history, power dynamics, and rhythms. Participation culture doesn't ignore these – it works with them. In a specific community, people had experienced multiple traumatic events over the past two decades with fresh memories of how people had come together during those times. This collective experience helped lay the groundwork for participation culture to take hold. In another example, our weavers noticed that school holiday activities for children were particularly well received – they gave families a reason to get outside, offered children something engaging to do, and created space for parents to connect. These same activities wouldn't have made sense at another time. This responsiveness – noticing the timing, mood, and community needs – is core to participation culture. It's not about fixed plans but about reading the room and working with the rhythm of people and place.

Investing in Social Infrastructure

What impact does participation culture have? Our pilot is still in its early stages – a year into what we anticipate to be at least a five-year journey. But change is visible in small, relational shifts.

People know more neighbours. They wave hello. They borrow tools. They share kai (food). This kind of connection can't be easily captured in spreadsheets – but it builds the social fabric that holds communities in crisis and is felt in everyday life. One resident, who had recently moved into the area, shared how it felt more friendly than anywhere she had lived before.

One way to observe the impact of participation culture is through its ripples left behind. The community market continues without external funding or support. A community centre manager says informal groups now lean on each other instead of her. These are signs of systems change – not flashy, but real.

These examples are modest but reveal the power of participation culture. When people feel connected, they begin to organise, create, and care for one another – not because they've been helped, but because they belong. This is social infrastructure: informal, relational, and resistant to collapse. It doesn't rely on endless external support. It grows from within.

Conclusion: A Slow Burn Worth Backing

Participation culture doesn't fix people. It resists the idea that communities are broken and need saving. It challenges the dominance of neoliberal logic in community work – the pressure to quantify, to perform, to deliver.

Participation culture doesn't ask us to do more – it asks us to do differently, it asks us to slow down. To build relationships and trust that local people can – and will – care for each other when the conditions are right.

But this shift won't happen without believing that connection is enough to start with. Funders need to value small, slow, and social – even when it's hard to measure. Practitioners must unlearn the reflex to help and instead make space for participation to emerge.

Participation culture is not an add-on. It's the main event. And if we're serious about resilient, just communities, it's time we invested in it for the long haul.

Want to understand more about the pilot and Participation Culture? Hear authors Cissy and Duncan on their podcast covering insights and observations on the pilot to date:

In The Middle Of It. A podcast about participation culture in Aotearoa. Community Think, 2024. https://www.communitythink.nz/in-the-middle-of-it

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Innovative Community Development Approach to Community Health Support and Care: A Community Health Literacy Education Project for Households Living in Subdivided Units (SDUs) in Hong Kong

Yu-cheung Chan, Siu-wai Wong, Suet-lin Hung and Kwok-kin Fung

Introduction

Health inequalities among disadvantaged groups are significant social issues worldwide. Health inequalities refer to the systematic, avoidable, and unfair differences in health outcomes between different socioeconomic groups (McCartney et al., 2019). It is recognised that substandard housing and living conditions are one of the sources of poor health outcomes (Bonnefoy, 2007). In this way, individuals living in deprived housing are at a higher risk of poor health. This concern is addressed in the current article. Subdivided units (SDUs) with inferior and overcrowded living environments pose not only housing but also health issues; therefore, the health status of community members living in SDUs is a concern.

Community Development Service, Caritas Hong Kong, is organising a community health literacy education project that aims to enhance health literacy among community members living in SDUs and develop community capacities for building community health support and care, thereby reducing health inequalities.

Substantial housing issue in Hong Kong: Subdivided units (SDUs)

SDUs are the most typical type of substandard housing and have become a critical social issue in Hong Kong. The causes of this housing issue are attributed to the shortage of public housing and the growing population who do not qualify for public housing and cannot afford to own private property in the city. According to the official definition by the Hong Kong government's Census and Statistics Department (2023), SDUs are formed by splitting a unit of quarters into two or more internally connected and externally accessible units for rental purposes. There were approximately 110,400 SDUs, and about 108,400 households or 220,000 persons (2.9% of the total population) were living in SDUs as of 2024 (Housing Bureau, 2024). SDUs primarily provide informal housing accommodations for low-income households. The median floor area of the units was 11 square metres, while the median per capita floor area was 6 square metres. SDUs are often regarded as an inferior and overcrowded living environment, as the units commonly involve illegal subdivisions and unauthorised building work. Nearly 90% of the units are located in buildings ged 50 years or older in old urban neighbourhoods. Some of the units do not even have windows, an independent toilet, or a kitchen.

Health and environmental issues in SDUs

The substandard housing and living conditions of SDUs lead to environmental hygiene issues and health risks that can impact the health of residents living in these units. In the past few years, a community-university partnership formed between the Caritas Community Development Service and the research team at Hong Kong Baptist University, adopting the Working from the Ground Up (WFGU) approach, had built up different community development initiatives with community members to improve the outdoor neighbourhood conditions in Kim Shin Lane, a small old urban neighbourhood housed around 1300 SDUs (Fung et al., 2023). However, the indoor air quality in SDUs is another significant health concern. Especially those tiny units without a separate cooking space but with poor ventilation can increase indoor air pollution exposure and health risks for households (Cheung & Jim, 2019). For example, SDUs with high levels of air pollutant concentrations, such as PM2.5, may impair the lung function of the residents (Brunekreef & Holgate, 2002; Cincinelli & Martellini, 2017).

A community health literacy education project for households living in SDUs

Community Development Service, Caritas Hong Kong, has been a pioneer in supporting the needs of disadvantaged groups and enhancing community participation at the grassroots level since the 1960s. The Service has provided a range of community development services targeting the unemployed, single-parent families, low-income workers and households living in SDUs, with financial support from government subsidies and non-government funding. The community social workers of the Service have employed various community development approaches to address community needs and problems, responding to the changing context of the city.

Caritas initiated a community health literacy education project to enhance health literacy among residents living in SDUs about their health and to develop community capacities in four old urban neighbourhoods, including Shum Shui Po and Kwai Chung, two districts with higher proportions of low-income households. Health literacy with a critical perspective refers to the health-related skills and knowledge to understand and change the factors that influence health (Nutbeam, 2000). By building health literacy, individuals and communities can become informed about health issues and critically understand the causes of these issues, empowering them to act collectively for change and thereby reduce health inequalities (Skyes et al., 2018). The starting point for this is through an innovative community health support service.

The innovative approach to health support

Caritas operates this innovative community education project in collaboration with the Lingnan University (LU) Service-Learning Office, which has expertise in Humanitarian Technology, applying technology and design methods to solving social problems. The LU team designs and produces PureAura, a portable air purifier with low production costs and high efficiency, specifically designed to improve air quality in SDUs. Firstly, the project team uses the handy air purifiers to engage residents living in SDUs and conducts home visits to measure and document PM2.5 levels in the units. This step aims to raise awareness among residents about indoor air quality in their units and the health of themselves and their family members. The team has so far visited around 300 families and found that 20% of the visited units had very high levels of PM2.5, exceeding 80 μg/m^3, which can seriously affect the residents' health.

Building community health literacy

After that, residents are invited to attend workshops conducted by the LU team, where they learn about the impacts of continuous PM2.5 exposure and health and housing issues related to indoor air quality. It is a crucial strategy to let the residents become aware of health risks and their causal relationships with the poor living conditions of SDUs, as well as the right to have better health and housing conditions (Whitehead, 2007). More importantly, this step also enables the residents to co-learn and, thereby, co-work to tackle the health and housing issues, which

echoes the core values of IACD to work with communities to achieve human rights and social justice. In fact, most residents and even community social workers at Caritas lack knowledge relevant to indoor air quality and the potential impacts of indoor air pollution. It is a co-learning and capacity-building process for the residents and community social workers to enhance awareness of and co-identify the critical causes of the related health and housing issues. So far, the residents and the project team have co-identified some causes of indoor air pollution in those units that exceed the 80 μg/m³ level of PM2.5. The causes include individual behaviours, such as the smoking habits of residents themselves or their family members. However, there are causes related to housing issues of SDUs, such as poor ventilation or the absence of windows in the units. Additionally, some of the units experienced high levels of indoor air pollution simply because a restaurant was located directly below them.

Moreover, the residents learned how to make a portable air purifier themselves, including assembling its various parts, using it daily, and maintaining it regularly by replacing the filters. Thus, they can use the self-assembling air purifier to improve the indoor air quality of their units. It is part of the community capacity-building strategy that enables residents to get more control over their health at the individual level and also at the collective level (Wallerstein, 2002). To do so, a community health support and care network needs to be developed as a development pathway for organising for change and sustainable development (Liberato et al., 2011), reflecting the practice areas and values of IACD.

Developing a Community Health Support and Care Network

A small-scale community health support and care network has been developed by inviting residents to serve as health ambassadors, initially focusing on supporting the health of others. The community social workers at Caritas have just started this stage of the project and have recruited ten health ambassadors. All of them are women and caregivers living in SDUs in Shum Shui Po, as they are particularly vulnerable to this health issue, spending more time in the units. The ambassadors assist with home visits to other residents living in SDUs, checking and recording the levels of PM2.5 within the units and helping others assemble and use air purifiers to improve indoor air quality. Hopefully, the next step of the project can be achieved: to extend the community help support and care network by inviting more caregivers living in SDUs to join and then co-identify other critical causes of health and housing issues and co-design collective actions for change.

Conclusion

Health inequalities among residents living in SDUs are a critical social concern. However, in conventional community social work practice, at least in the context of social services in Hong Kong, we lack expertise in health issues compared to other health professionals. To build a community health support and care system for deprived communities, we may need to be open to cooperating with other professionals and adopting innovative methods in our practice. Nevertheless, the most critical thing is that we need to uphold the core principles of community development and then co-learn and co-work with community members for community change.

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Caring Communities for Common Ground in Neighbourhoods

Marlou de Rouw, Birgitta Schomaker, Yazeed Said and Isiz Özden

Current narratives often frame refugees and migrants as the cause of societal issues. This perspective places individuals and their rich life histories into a single mold while it dismisses core needs and concerns of both people with a refugee background and host communities. Moreover, it is overlooking the potential to find common ground, enable community support and increase community resilience for the benefit of all.

Trained SALT Facilitators - Amsterdam East

"This week, for the first time, a Dutch child came over to our house to play with my children (...) This is my dream: that the house will often be filled with the voices of neighbourhood children playing together," shared a Syrian mother in Zeeburgereiland, Amsterdam, in 2018[1].

What if we approach everyone based on their personal strengths, hopes and concerns, and then invite groups to explore shared dreams and address community issues together? In our experience, such an appreciative approach restores dignity, fosters trust and builds a shared sense of ownership across different community stakeholder groups. Ultimately, a systematic investment in social cohesion can lead to neighbourhoods where newcomers and their host community flourish and actively participate in activities which in turn lead to positive social effects.

Strength-Based Community Engagement: The SALT Approach

From 2017 to 2021, the authors of this article formed a team[2] which trained community facilitators, who accompanied a series of strengths-based participatory processes within groups of the Dutch Refugee Council[3] and neighbourhoods in the East of Amsterdam[4]. Through this upfront investment, communities adopted the SALT approach: Support, Appreciate, Learn, and Transfer. This method combines an appreciative way of relating to one another with an intuitive, yet rigorous learning and action process called the Community Life Competence Process (CLCP)[5].

The Constellation has found that SALT and CLCP form a strong combination as together they contribute to establishing community support mechanisms, where

Community Control →	**We own: we decide the action and we take it**
Delegated power →	**We have some authority**
Partnership →	**We share ownership**
Consultation →	**We are consulted**
Informing →	**We are informed**
Manipulation →	**We are maniuplated**

Home visit to family Badawi – 2018

solutions emerge by those directly affected. Unlike many other community-based approaches, SALT-CLCP fosters full ownership of improvements and failures, contributing to long-term resilience, well-being, and shared responsibility within groups. This model aligns with the highest levels of Arnstein's Ladder which shows how action by the power holder (left) impacts citizens (right). When full ownership is reached, communities move beyond token participation to empowerment and control over their collective future.

Impact of the SALT Approach in the Netherlands

To systematise community support, The Constellation team transferred the SALT-CLCP approach to 30 staff members and volunteers of the Dutch Refugee Council. Several projects and initiatives led by SALT-trained participants have directly engaged over 300 refugees in pursuing their dreams and building successful futures in the Netherlands. These initiatives include the self-organisation of youth groups, various neighbourhood initiatives, a fashion show, refugee-led courses for newcomers, and a Syrian and Eritrean Women's groups. In a small town near Amsterdam, a group of young male refugees has been working with the municipality to improve housing conditions.

Common Ground: A Case Study in Amsterdam-East

Following the success of the participatory process with the Dutch Refugee Council, The Constellation was commissioned by the Municipality of Amsterdam-East to support relationship-building in a newly built neighbourhood with a relatively high number of 'new Amsterdammers'/refugees who had been offered social housing. The project began by mapping the concerns and aspirations of refugees and host community members. This involved several service providers such as Stadsdeel Oost, the Dutch Refugee Council, the housing corporation De Alliantie and the social work organisation Dynamo. Staff from these organisations, together with a small group of inhabitants were trained in SALT-CLCP. The goal was to foster a sustainable core of engaged residents who would facilitate activities and initiate community-led projects, thereby contributing to a socially cohesive and welcoming neighbourhood.

Thematic High Tea afternoons

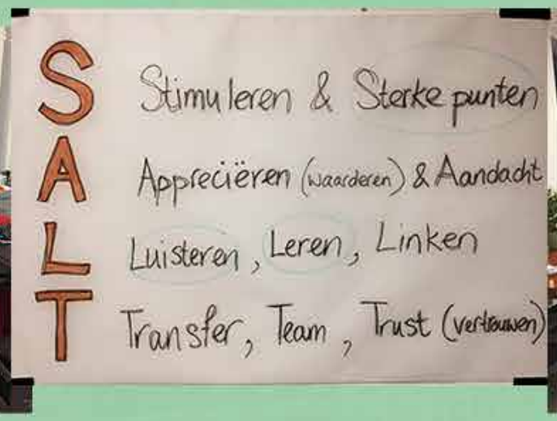
Key Learnings

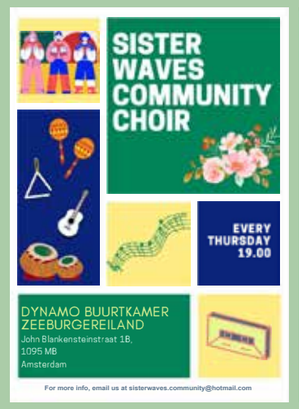
As facilitators we learned that community inclusion has multiple layers. On the surface, it involves employment and education, but at a deeper level, it is about a sense of belonging—having friends, neighbours, and local community support networks. Community inclusion happens where daily life unfolds, making it more accessible, personal, and equitable. This is a process that can be strengthened through careful facilitation, for example through offering communication in different languages, forming diverse facilitator teams, creating an atmosphere of familiarity and bridging cultural gaps through formulation of a shared vision with all stakeholders.

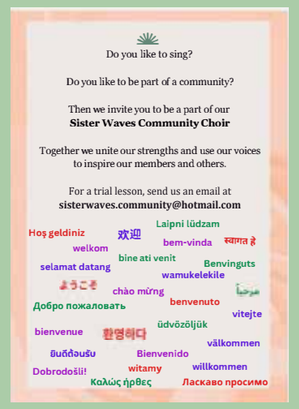
The true measure of ownership in these processes was seen when narratives shifted from "us" and "them" to "all of us, together." As community members reflected on their experiences, a key realization emerged: "No labeling, please. We are human first and are seeking to live together as neighbours, regardless of our legal status or our paperwork." Once this process of 'othering' was understood, and shared human needs were recognised, common ground was found, and even sensitive topics could be addressed, eventually leading to collective action and a sense of belonging. The degree of empathy we feel depends on the extent to which we perceive we belong to the same social group. The willingness of newcomers to point out the process of labeling by members of the host community made the difference. Thanks to the courage of the newcomers to speak up and speak personally, the eyes of the white Dutch community members were opened to their unconscious bias. Establishing common ground required a safe space to learn about unconscious 'othering'. Based on this foundation, systematic community support systems and activities emerged: home visits by diverse cultural groups to welcome new neighbours; a women's café providing a space for socialising; thematic movie nights fostering dialogue among neighbours in a co-housing project; and High Tea afternoons ensuring inclusivity for women from different identities. All activities contributed to weaving a tighter social fabric, some leading to local support structures.

Long-Term Social Sustainability

I met the Badawi family for the first time in February 2018. A very sweet family, consisting of Ahmed, Hoda and their 3 children (aged 16, 15 and 12 at the time). A







new country, language, culture and a new neighbourhood was a challenge. It was a relief for the family who fled from Syria, to get a chance to be welcomed through the SALT project immediately after their arrival. “It gave us the opportunity to connect with our neighbours and get acquainted with the neighbourhood”.

After 8 years, it is time for a reflection. The same warm welcome, hospitality and happy faces! The whole family now has Dutch nationality. The father and sons have fulltime jobs and the daughter is studying medicine.

The family regularly participates in activities in the neighbourhood. They still cherish their wonderful experience with the SALT facilitators, and use what they have learnt, as they now lend a helping hand to new residents in the neighbourhood.

Yazeed Said

Investments in community support and care while fostering collective responsibility and well-being, have a social return on individuals and communities and lead to long-term improvements.

Many of the younger former-refugees have continued their studies and found work. They have mentioned that organising these activities together has helped them in learning the Dutch language much faster. And, through local connections, they have found support in their journey of building a new life in a new country.

Moreover, the investments lead to structured support systems which benefit the entire community: For example, the ‘Sister Waves Community Choir’ is a social return from the Women’s Café initiative. They perform every year in the neighbourhood, recounting narratives from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Members of the choir have mentioned “feeling a strong sense of belonging” within the community.

Members of the Dutch hosting community were involved from the start of the process. Some reactions on what being a host has brought them and how the SALT methodology has contributed:

“I can now have better conversations with friends from different backgrounds about cultural differences.”

“I understand the power of listening and giving appreciation: Openly expressing appreciation adds value to the moment, to the other person and to yourself.”

The community process developed a sense of self-awareness to the host community: “As human beings, we sometimes take our privileges for granted and we don't always realise it.”

Conclusion

By taking responsibility for their own ‘making home process’, families have found belonging and purpose in their new environments. Members of hosting communities were willing to be taught lessons on their biases and privileges. SALT shows us that learning is a 2-way street with everyone being encouraged to take on the role of a learner. Taking into consideration the community as a whole rather than offering services exclusively to newcomers allows for avoiding a common dynamic of ‘othering’ that tends to happen in volunteer work and social work services. Investing in SALT and similar methodologies, supports building neighbourhoods where everyone, regardless of origin, religion and skin colour, feels at home, valued, and empowered to contribute to a shared future.

About the Authors

Marlou de Rouw – Marlou is co-founder and board member of the NGO The Constellation. She accompanied learning processes with groups in Asia, Africa and Europe such as on Ageing with Dignity, Living together and taking Ownership of Health Issues. Trained as a journalist and with a master in cultural anthropology, she is curious about the impact of global issues on local communities and individuals.

Birgitta Schomaker Throughout her varied career, Birgitta, – a social & organisational psychologist and Dutch national – has enjoyed working with a wide range of clients from various industries and sectors in varying roles such as educator, coach and facilitator. Her work is in the Netherlands as well as internationally. Birgitta is passionate about social justice, and she brings a lens of equity to her work.

Yazeed Said is a Native from Sudan, Yazeed built his new home in The Netherlands since 2001. He studied Information Technology at the Inholland University of applied sciences. Based on his lived experience, Yazeed accompanies newcomers and refugees from a strength based perspective, first with the Dutch Refugee Council (Vluchtelingen Werk) and currently as an officer for the municipality of Amsterdam.

Isiz Özden is an integrative coach with a background in Fine Arts. Based in Amsterdam, she has been at the heart of several community initiatives—mobilizing networks and empowering through a creative and people-centered approach. Rooted in both Dutch and Turkish heritage, Isiz knows firsthand what it means to navigate cultural perspectives. This experience fuels her ability to connect across differences and create spaces where people feel seen, heard and supported.

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Why Psychology Matters for Community Support and Care

Orlando Bustamante

Psychology and community service practices play a crucial role in promoting social well-being and strengthening communities. This article explores the intersections between psychology, community service, and community development approaches that strengthen care and support systems, along with the practical implementation of strategies that foster community-based support and care within communities. It examines how psychology can contribute to understanding and addressing the psychosocial needs of communities while strengthening their capacities as a long-term investment in community care for development and collective well-being. Additionally, community service practices implemented from a psychological perspective are discussed, including mental health promotion, violence prevention, support for vulnerable groups, and the promotion of community resilience.

The need to adapt interventions to the gendered, cultural, and contextual characteristics and needs of each community and to establish strategic alliances with other social actors is emphasized.

The article also focuses on different community development approaches that strengthen care and support systems and the community community-based support and care systems that enable the creation of networks within communities. Through analysis, it discusses how these approaches not only address immediate needs but also foster empowerment and long-term community resilience. Finally, it proposes closer collaboration between psychologists, social workers, volunteers, community members, and state actors to develop and implement strategies that effectively respond to diverse population needs, ensuring a holistic and sustainable promotion of community community-based support and care.

Psychology and community service practices contribute significantly to community development by providing theoretical and practical frameworks for action. Community social psychology emphasizes the importance of participatory processes, empowerment, and community capacity building. Social psychology offers a framework for understanding how group influences and dynamics affect individual behaviour. Developmental psychology adds a longitudinal perspective, showing how behaviour and attitudes can evolve through community participation and social interaction. This theoretical integration helps to better understand how community intervention programs can be designed to generate a lasting impact on social cohesion, health, and well-being.

Investment in community development focuses on the long-term return that effective interventions can achieve. Psychology plays a key role in this investment by providing evidence-based methodologies to design, implement, and evaluate interventions. For example, the implementation of mental health promotion programs at the community level has been shown to reduce the use of emergency health services and the incidence of chronic diseases, resulting in substantial savings for public health systems.

Community social psychology and community service practices that contribute to building inclusive care systems are intrinsically linked to the strengthening of community community-based support and care systems. This link stems from the recognition that individual well-being is deeply influenced by social structures and the availability of community support networks. Rather

Community Engagement Project: "United community, strengthened mental health", directed at families from the Puerto Hondo area (Km 17.5 on the Vía a la Costa). December 2023

than focusing exclusively on the individual, community-based interventions seek to strengthen the community environment itself, promoting collective resilience and ensuring that support structures are sustainable and effective over time.

The creation of community support networks is one of the most effective strategies for strengthening social cohesion. Community interventions that integrate psychological principles can foster the creation of support groups, mutual aid networks, and social organizations that provide emotional, practical, and informational support. For

Community Engagement Project: “United community, strengthened mental health”, directed at families from Puerto Hondo (Km 17.5 on the Vía a la Costa). Brisas del Manantial neighbourhood – photo 2; San Nicolás neighbourhood – photo 3. January 2024.

Community Engagement Project: “United community, strengthened mental health”, directed at families from Puerto Hondo (Km 17.5 on the Vía a la Costa). March 2024

United community, strengthened mental health", project directed at families from Puerto Hondo (Km 17.5 on the Vía a la Costa). February 2024

challenges not only offer direct support but also promote a sense of belonging and shared identity.

Training community leaders in skills such as mediation, conflict resolution, and leadership is another key element in strengthening support structures. These leaders can act as catalysts for social change, promoting dialogue, resolving conflicts, and mobilizing community resources to meet emerging needs.

Prevention and education programs focused on mental health, violence prevention, and the development of life skills also contribute significantly to strengthening community support structures. By educating community members about the importance of mental health and well-being, a cultural change is fostered that normalizes help-seeking and promotes proactive support.

Illustrative Case Examples from Practice

Concrete examples of the application of psychology to community service include community mental health programs and life skills training programs in educational settings. In a rural community in the United States, the implementation of a mental health program that combined group therapy with the development of a community garden resulted in a 50% increase in participant resilience, a 40% increase in attendance at community events, and the generation of income through the sale of agricultural products. In an urban school district, a life skills program that included components of stress management, conflict resolution, and teamwork led to a 30% increase in student collaboration, a 25% reduction in peer conflicts, and a 20% improvement in graduation rates.

Adopting a long-term investment perspective in the development of community community-based support and care systems allows for greater alignment between interventions and the evolving needs of communities. Instead of focusing on isolated and short-term interventions, long-term investment focuses on strengthening social infrastructure, building community leadership, and creating sustainable systems of feedback and adaptation.

Institutional collaboration and the formation of strategic alliances between different sectors — such as education, health, and community organizations — are essential to maximize the impact of community interventions. For example, initiatives to prevent school bullying that

Community Engagement Project: "United community, strengthened mental health", directed at families from Puerto Hondo (Km 17.5 on the Vía a la Costa). February 2024.

involve collaboration between schools, health services, and community organizations have proven to be more effective than isolated efforts.

Community empowerment is a fundamental dimension of community development approaches that strengthen care and support systems. Empowering community members to actively participate in decision-making processes and the design of interventions not only strengthens the legitimacy of programs but also promotes a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. Mechanisms such as community councils, participatory budgeting, and leadership training programs are examples of practices that foster empowerment and sustainable collective agency.

Conclusion: Toward Sustainable and Inclusive Systems

The intersection between community psychology and community development offers a strategic and sustainable path for improving the quality of life in communities. By integrating psychological principles into community service practices, the development of change agents capable of promoting social transformation is fostered. In turn, resilient, equitable, and sustainable communities are created, capable of facing present and future challenges through collective action and the strengthening of their community-based support and care systems.

About the Author

Orlando Bustamante is currently the Director of the Psychology and Clinical Psychology Programmes at the Salesian Polytechnic University of Guayaquil, Ecuador. He has 20 years of experience in mental health, psycho-social intervention, and community psychology. His focal areas are mental health, protection of rights, community service practices, and participatory approaches. Orlando is a university professor, former coordinator of outreach to society for the psychology programme, and coordinator of the master's degree in Psychology. He is a PhD candidate in Psychology, with a master's degree in psychoanalysis with a major in psychoanalytic clinic, with a specialization in Social Sciences with a major in Psychoanalysis and Socio-Educational Practices.

Por qué la Psicología es Importante para el Apoyo y Cuidado Comunitario

Orlando Bustamante

La psicología y las prácticas de servicio comunitario desempeñan un papel crucial en la promoción del bienestar social y el fortalecimiento de las comunidades. Este artículo explora las intersecciones entre la psicología, el servicio comunitario y los enfoques de desarrollo comunitario que fortalecen los sistemas de cuidado y apoyo, junto con la implementación práctica de estrategias que fomentan el apoyo y el cuidado comunitario basados en la comunidad. Examina cómo la psicología puede contribuir a comprender y abordar las necesidades psicosociales de las comunidades, al tiempo que fortalece sus capacidades como una inversión a largo plazo en el cuidado comunitario para el desarrollo y el bienestar colectivo.

Además, analiza prácticas de servicio comunitario implementadas desde una perspectiva psicológica, incluyendo la promoción de la salud mental, la prevención de la violencia, el apoyo a grupos vulnerables y el fomento de la resiliencia comunitaria. Hace énfasis en la necesidad de adaptar las intervenciones a las características y necesidades de género, culturales y contextuales de cada comunidad, así como en la importancia de establecer alianzas estratégicas con otros actores sociales.

El artículo también se centra en diferentes enfoques de desarrollo comunitario que fortalecen los sistemas de cuidado y apoyo, y en los sistemas de apoyo y cuidado basados en la comunidad que permiten la creación de redes dentro de las comunidades. A través del análisis, discute cómo estos enfoques no solo abordan necesidades inmediatas, sino que también fomentan el empoderamiento y la resiliencia comunitaria a largo plazo. Finalmente, propone una colaboración más estrecha entre psicólogos, trabajadores sociales, voluntarios, miembros de la comunidad y actores estatales para desarrollar e implementar estrategias que respondan eficazmente a las diversas necesidades de la población, asegurando una promoción holística y sostenible del apoyo y cuidado comunitario basado en la comunidad.

La Psicología y su Contribución al Desarrollo Comunitario

La psicología y las prácticas de servicio comunitario contribuyen significativamente al desarrollo comunitario al proporcionar marcos teóricos y prácticos para la acción. La psicología social comunitaria destaca la importancia de los procesos participativos, el empoderamiento y la construcción de capacidades comunitarias. La psicología social proporciona un marco para comprender cómo las influencias y dinámicas grupales afectan el comportamiento individual. La psicología del desarrollo aporta una perspectiva longitudinal, mostrando cómo el comportamiento y las actitudes pueden evolucionar mediante la participación comunitaria y la interacción social.

Esta integración teórica ayuda a comprender mejor cómo los programas de intervención comunitaria pueden ser diseñados para generar un impacto duradero en la cohesión social, la salud y el bienestar.

Proyecto de Vinculación con la Sociedad: "Comunidad unida, salud mental fortalecida", proyecto de vinculación dirigido a las Familias del recinto Puerto Hondo (Km 17,5 de Vía a la Costa). Diciembre 2023

Inversión a Largo Plazo en el Desarrollo Comunitario

La inversión en el desarrollo comunitario se centra en el rendimiento a largo plazo que pueden generar las intervenciones efectivas. La psicología desempeña un papel clave en esta inversión al proporcionar metodologías basadas en evidencia para diseñar, implementar y evaluar intervenciones. Por ejemplo, se ha demostrado que la implementación de programas de promoción de la salud mental a nivel comunitario reduce el uso de servicios de salud de emergencia y la incidencia de enfermedades crónicas, lo que resulta en ahorros sustanciales para los sistemas de salud pública.

Proyecto de Vinculación con la Sociedad: "Comunidad unida, salud mental fortalecida", proyecto de vinculación dirigido a las Familias del recinto Puerto Hondo (Km 17,5 de Vía a la Costa). Barrios Brisas del Manantial foto 2 y Barrio san Nicolás foto 3. Enero 2024

Proyecto de Vinculación con la Sociedad: "Comunidad unida, salud mental fortalecida", proyecto de vinculación dirigido a las Familias del recinto Puerto Hondo (Km 17,5 de Vía a la Costa). Marzo 2024

"Comunidad unida, salud mental fortalecida", proyecto de vinculación dirigido a las Familias del recinto Puerto Hondo (Km 17,5 de Vía a la Costa). Febrero 2024

La psicología social comunitaria y las prácticas de servicio comunitario que contribuyen a construir sistemas de cuidado inclusivos están intrínsecamente vinculadas al fortalecimiento de los sistemas de apoyo y cuidado basados en la comunidad. Este vínculo proviene del reconocimiento de que el bienestar individual está profundamente influenciado por las estructuras sociales y la disponibilidad de redes de apoyo comunitario. En lugar de centrarse exclusivamente en el individuo, las intervenciones comunitarias buscan fortalecer el entorno comunitario en sí mismo, promoviendo la resiliencia colectiva y asegurando que las estructuras de apoyo sean sostenibles y eficaces a lo largo del tiempo.

Redes de Apoyo Comunitario y Prevención

La creación de redes de apoyo comunitario es una de las estrategias más eficaces para fortalecer la cohesión social. Las intervenciones comunitarias que integran principios psicológicos pueden fomentar la creación de grupos de apoyo, redes de ayuda mutua y organizaciones sociales que brinden apoyo emocional, práctico e informativo. Por ejemplo, los grupos de apoyo para personas que enfrentan desafíos de salud mental no solo ofrecen apoyo directo, sino que también promueven un sentido de pertenencia e identidad compartida.

La capacitación de líderes comunitarios en habilidades como la mediación, la resolución de conflictos y el liderazgo es otro elemento clave en el fortalecimiento de las estructuras de apoyo. Estos líderes pueden actuar como catalizadores del cambio social, promoviendo el diálogo, resolviendo conflictos y movilizando recursos comunitarios para atender necesidades emergentes.

Los programas de prevención y educación centrados en la salud mental, la prevención de la violencia y el desarrollo de habilidades para la vida también contribuyen significativamente al fortalecimiento de las estructuras de apoyo comunitario. Al educar a los miembros de la comunidad sobre la importancia de la salud mental y el bienestar, se fomenta un cambio cultural que normaliza la búsqueda de ayuda y promueve el apoyo proactivo.

Ejemplos Ilustrativos de Casos Tomados de la Práctica

Ejemplos concretos de la aplicación de la psicología al servicio comunitario incluyen programas de salud mental comunitaria y programas de habilidades para la vida en entornos educativos. En una comunidad rural de Estados Unidos, la implementación de un programa de salud mental que combinaba terapia grupal con el desarrollo de un huerto comunitario resultó en un aumento del 50 % en la resiliencia de los participantes, un aumento del 40 % en la asistencia a eventos comunitarios y la generación de ingresos a través de la venta de productos agrícolas. En un distrito escolar urbano, un programa de habilidades para la vida que incluía componentes de manejo del estrés, resolución de conflictos y trabajo en equipo llevó a un aumento del 30 % en la colaboración estudiantil, una reducción del 25 % en los conflictos entre compañeros y una mejora del 20 % en las tasas de graduación.

Proyecto de Vinculación con la Sociedad: "Comunidad unida, salud mental fortalecida", proyecto de vinculación dirigido a las Familias del recinto Puerto Hondo (Km 17,5 de Vía a la Costa). Febrero 2024.

Perspectiva de Inversión a Largo Plazo

Adoptar una perspectiva de inversión a largo plazo en el desarrollo de sistemas de apoyo y cuidado comunitarios basados en la comunidad permite una mayor alineación entre las intervenciones y las necesidades evolutivas de las comunidades. En lugar de centrarse en intervenciones aisladas y a corto plazo, la inversión a largo plazo se enfoca en fortalecer la infraestructura social, construir liderazgo comunitario y crear sistemas sostenibles de retroalimentación y adaptación.

La colaboración institucional y la formación de alianzas estratégicas entre diferentes sectores —como la educación, la salud y las organizaciones comunitarias— son esenciales para maximizar el impacto de las intervenciones comunitarias. Por ejemplo, las iniciativas para prevenir el acoso escolar que implican la colaboración entre escuelas, servicios de salud y organizaciones comunitarias han demostrado ser más eficaces que los esfuerzos aislados.

Empoderamiento y Participación Comunitaria

El empoderamiento comunitario es una dimensión fundamental de los enfoques de desarrollo comunitario que fortalecen los sistemas de cuidado y apoyo. Empoderar a los miembros de la comunidad para que participen activamente en los procesos de toma de decisiones y en el diseño de intervenciones no solo fortalece la legitimidad de los programas, sino que también promueve un sentido de pertenencia y responsabilidad compartida. Mecanismos como los consejos comunitarios, los presupuestos participativos y los programas de formación en liderazgo son ejemplos de prácticas que fomentan el empoderamiento y la agencia colectiva sostenible.

Conclusión: Hacia Sistemas Sostenibles e Inclusivos

La intersección entre la psicología comunitaria y el desarrollo comunitario ofrece un camino estratégico y sostenible para mejorar la calidad de vida en las comunidades. Al integrar principios psicológicos en las prácticas de servicio comunitario, se fomenta el desarrollo de agentes de cambio capaces de promover la transformación social. A su vez, se crean comunidades resilientes, equitativas y sostenibles, capaces de enfrentar los desafíos presentes y futuros mediante la acción colectiva y el fortalecimiento de sus sistemas de apoyo y cuidado basados en la comunidad.

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Youth and Grandparents Care for Children in the Community

Firoja Khatun, Gulnaaz Hussain, Dhiraj Lepcha, Rati Lama, Sadia Jafrin, Adila Karim, Rituu B. Nanda, and Samuel Phillips-Corwin (reviewer)

Strengthening Community Care Through Youth and Elders

This article explores an innovative approach to community-based care for children in India and Bangladesh, where youth and grandparents have taken on active roles in education and cultural preservation. Two NGOs- Rural Aid (India) and Grow Your Reader Foundation (Bangladesh) – applied the SALT methodology (Stimulate, Appreciate, Listen, Learn, Link, and Transfer) and the Community Life Competence Process (CLCP) as part of the Global Fund for Children's Addressing Root Causes (ARC) initiative[1]. This strength-based approach empowers communities to identify their own solutions and build local ownership.

Firoja Khatun and Gulnaaz Hussain teaching children. Youth-led response to educating children in the tea garden community

Understanding SALT: A Pathway to Community Empowerment

SALT is an acronym for Stimulate, Appreciate, Listen, Learn, Link, and Transfe[2]. This participatory approach encourages community members to reflect on their own strengths, share experiences, and develop solutions together. By fostering active listening, mutual appreciation, and collaborative learning, SALT promotes local leadership and sustainable action. It is not a top-down approach but rather one that emerges from within the community itself, recognizing that local people hold the knowledge, skills, and insights needed to solve their own challenges.

Youth-Led Tuition in Gangutia Tea Garden, India

In Gangutia Tea Garden, India, youth identified a pressing need for educational support for children whose parents work long hours in the tea gardens. These parents, often engaged in labor-intensive tasks, struggle to provide consistent educational guidance at home. Guided by SALT conversations, the community recognized its own capacity to take action. Two young women launched a free tuition center, using a government-provided space and supported by local stakeholders, including self-help groups, government officers, parents, and other youth. Today, they teach 36 children, balancing academic instruction with personal care.

The impact has been significant. Children who once wandered the tea gardens without purpose now attend regular classes. Parents report improved school performance and stronger family bonds, and the youth teachers, though not Indigenous, have built trust with the community, providing consistent and empathetic support. Their dedication has not only improved educational outcomes but also strengthened social ties across different cultural groups.

Intergenerational Learning in Byaspur, Bangladesh

In Byaspur, Bangladesh, another group of youth volunteers established tuition classes following SALT sessions. Alongside their efforts, a group of grandparents began storytelling sessions, reviving cultural traditions and bridging generational gaps. These gatherings have not only enriched children's learning but have also provided elders with a renewed sense of purpose. Stories once passed down orally are now shared with a new generation, preserving cultural heritage while promoting values such as respect, empathy, and communal care.

Firoja Khatun and Gulnaaz Hussain teaching children

The storytelling sessions have created a safe and welcoming space where children and elders can connect, reducing social isolation among seniors and fostering mutual appreciation. Mothers have also started joining these sessions, further strengthening family and community bonds.

Challenging Gender Norms and Building Inclusion

Both initiatives have also challenged and transformed gender norms. In Gangutia, girls gained greater access to education and recreational activities, a shift from their traditional roles confined to domestic chores. Boys participated in facilitated discussions about masculinity, exploring themes of empathy, respect, and shared responsibility. In Byaspur, grandparents – both grandmothers and one grandfather – took on active community roles, showcasing the value of inclusive leadership.

The involvement of both young men and women, alongside elders, demonstrates a model of intergenerational cooperation and gender inclusivity. These initiatives highlight how community-driven education can become a platform for social transformation, promoting equity and mutual support.

Rana and his team were preparing the posters for the campaign

Community Ownership at the Heart of Change

These stories highlight the transformative power of community-led care. When local youth and elders take ownership of educational and cultural initiatives, they strengthen social cohesion and create lasting impacts. Local leadership ensures sustainability and fosters a sense of collective responsibility. Beyond improving educational outcomes, these initiatives have strengthened social ties, enhanced cultural appreciation, and empowered marginalized groups, creating a more resilient and supportive community environment.

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About the Authors

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