

Empowered Communities in the 2020s: A first look at the literature

Empowered Communities in the 2020s is about 'What needs to happen for communities to become more empowered in the future?' and aims to gather a wide range of views about communities. Through this research project we're asking, 'How can communities become more empowered and vibrant in the next ten years?'

We wanted to get the conversation started as quickly as possible. We knew that other people were carrying out bigger studies than ours with weighty literature reviews attached to them that would cover the same ground as us and more comprehensively too. But we still wanted to use what has already been learned and written. So we have chosen to review a very small number of books and reports that draw together learning from across the field and that we think are important for our research. These are listed at the end of the article. As our research progresses, we will continue our review and use it to inform some of the key topics that are emerging from the research.

We are midway through this initial review process but wanted to highlight some of the themes that are emerging as we go along and the implications for our research. Here we highlight two themes that struck us as important for our research and the questions we might want to ask next.

What motivates people to take part?

For many this may seem like stating the obvious, but the literature reminds us that what community development 'looks like' is heavily influenced by what motivates people to participate and get involved in their community in the first place. This includes individual characteristics, e.g. race, class, gender; individual motivations, e.g. a desire to make new friends, to feel more connected to the area where you live, to gain experience through volunteering; and external factors, e.g. local elections, consultations on public funding cuts and expenditure or a threat to the community. For us it is a reminder that in order to capture the diversity of community development – the different individuals that get involved and the different forms of community development that evolve – a good place to start is to understand the different motivating factors at play in an area. It means we should not confine the research to looking at community development as a 'profession' or 'practice' but rather look beyond that to what makes communities more powerful, in other words the things or conditions that empower communities. It also means we need to be alert to the potential barriers to participation and to forms of community approaches that risk closing spaces for participation down rather than opening them up.

What we want to do next: We want to explore this further, particularly in thinking about diversity and community development, and the barriers to empowerment and efficacy for different population groups/identities.

Community development and poverty alleviation

We were specifically asked to look at this theme as part of the research. As an approach to reducing poverty in communities, community development is certainly not new and past community programmes have often been set up to tackle poverty and deprivation. Nowadays, this – reducing poverty through community development - might be done through community organising and social action, e.g. The Living Wage Campaign. Or community economic development may be used to create more social assets, e.g. local jobs, and physical assets, e.g. improved access to services. We're interested in whether and how these approaches have been able to reach the populations that they were set up to help; for example, have jobs schemes been able to meet the needs of the most marginalised residents and if not, why not?

In exploring the links between community development and poverty, we also want to consider whether community development can have unintended negative impacts on communities. Formalising community development can unintentionally set up boundaries, e.g. through use of jargon or acronyms, requiring written or spoken knowledge of a specific language or dialect, that exclude others.

What we want to do next: The literature draws attention to the potential for doing harm as well as good when attempting to tackle poverty by working with communities. Our next step is to explore this in more detail and identify the range of evidence and experience.

We'd like to hear from you

These are just a few of the things that struck us as important at this very early stage in our review. As we continue our review, more themes will emerge but meanwhile we'd be interested in your thoughts on the issues we've highlighted.

To contact the research team email enquiries@ivar.org.uk using 'EC2020s' in the subject of your email.

Literature reviewed to date:

When reviewing these sources, we were looking for insights that related to the following four categories:

1. **People and place**
2. **Policy** discourses
3. **Practice:** community development as a 'thing'
4. **Infrastructure:** programmes, funding and organisations.

Brodie, E., et al (2009) *Understanding participation: a literature review*. IVR, Involve, NCVO, Big Lottery

DCLG (2006) *The Community Development Challenge*

Gilchrist, A. (2016) *Blending, braiding, balancing: Strategies for managing the interplay between formal and informal ways of working with communities*. TSRC

JRF & Sheffield Hallam (2016) *Community-led approaches to reducing poverty in neighbourhoods: A review of evidence and practice*

Matthews, P., Besemer, K. (2016) *Poverty and social networks evidence review*

Taylor, M., Gilchrist, A. (2016) *The short guide to community development*. Policy Press, University of Bristol

TSRC (2016) *Looking to the Future: Community Work in England*