

Misnomer or MacGuffin – Does Community Development Develop Community?

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ABSTRACT

Community development is a label that can be applied to an eclectic range of projects. Often it is described as uncritically positive, due in part to a romanticisation of the term. This is highlighted by the associated key terms such as capacity building and empowerment that are frequently used. Not all outcomes of community development are positive, however. In addition, some people get involved in projects simply to accumulate social capital rather than achieve a specific outcome.

By its nature community development is a process that involves a variety of stakeholders who may participate for a variety of reasons and, therefore, it could be argued that the term is on occasion actually a misnomer. Community development is not necessarily facilitated by an altruistic belief in the common good; it can also be shaped by self-interest, insularity or prejudice. Consequently, community development can sometimes in practice contribute to the fragmentation of communities. Conversely, a somewhat bittersweet alternative effect is that the specific purpose of projects can in reality become secondary to participation itself.

This paper examines the positive and negative impacts of the community development process and considers whether or not purpose can become secondary to participation, with reference to case studies.

Key Words: community development, social capital, participation