Local communities as a field of community social work

Nordic community work from the perspective of Finnish community-based social work

The central work principles of community social work include prevention of social problems, development of neighbourhood services, support for citizens’ initiatives and recognition of the importance of social networks. The coping skills and well-being of individuals, families and groups are promoted by making use of the possibilities provided by communities. The central task is to influence citizens’ living circumstances at the local level, to support their participation in different everyday networks and to strengthen their experience of empowered citizenship. Community work in the Nordic countries has been influenced by similar work in Britain and is focused on urban communities, mainly housing estates. Drawing on experiences in Sweden, community work in Finland was vigorously developed in the late 1970s and had become established by the mid-1980s. Some community work is area-based and involves structural social work and social planning, and has provided the basis for the eco-social work of the 1990s, area-based community social work and various development projects for housing estates. Besides urban localities, the challenge for the future is to develop community work in rural communities.

Key words:
community
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social work in urban and rural communities
Background of Nordic community work

It has been contended that the predecessors of community work in the Nordic countries include the settlements founded on an English influence, translated into Swedish as hemgård by Gunnel and Harald Swedner. The communality of the settlements has been characterised by a neighbourhood philosophy, whose keystone is the workers’ personal contact with local residents as well as an attempt to build a bridge between different social groups (see, e.g. Soydan 1993). In addition, the people’s movements and organisations emerging in the late 19th – early 20th centuries – temperance movement, youth associations, co-operative movement, labour unions and the first women’s rights movement – have been considered seminal for the action policies of subsequent community work. The communality of people’s movements has been characterised by equality, self-education and getting collectively organised. (See Lindholm 1995, 21; Ronnby 1995, 162-167).

The legacy of the settlements and people’s movements did not, however, have an impact on the boom of Nordic community work in the late 1960s and early 1970s; instead, it was imported from abroad based on British and Dutch examples. These trends from the rest of Europe influenced social work, where community work represented a structural alternative to an individual-centred work approach. In Freirean social pedagogics, interpretation and focus on action research emphasised comprehensiveness and a grass-roots viewpoint. Prominent figures in Nordic community work included the Swedes Harald and Gunnel Swedner as well as Kerstin Lindholm and the Dane Ole Hermansen. Despite the radical starting points, practical implementation represented the official policy of social administration and an interpretation of community work as one method of professional social work. (See Koskinen 2003, 217-218; Lindholm 1995, 20-34; Wahlberg 1995, 35-47).

As far as Finland is concerned, community-based social work did not emerge as a concept until the late 1990s. The backdrop of this conceptual change was the early-1990s recession and the related reinforcement of community strategies, coupled with the emergence of the third sector to complement and partner with the public sector. The novelty of this concept is reflected in the fact that the Finnish Federation of Settlements introduced the term into its development project New Community Work in 1998–2000 (see Roivainen 2001).

In this article, I shall examine the long line of Nordic community-based social work development on a general level. I will start with the traditional community work implemented by the modern welfare state in the 1960s and 1970s, move on to discuss its disintegration into different variants in the 1980s and conclude with the communitarian strategies of post-modern society in the 1990s (see Roivainen 2002). My interpretation originates from the context of Finnish social work. A doctoral dissertation by Päivi Turunen on the overall development of Nordic community work, discussing national trends and special traits in greater detail, will be forthcoming.
Nordic community work – action in the local communities

In the Nordic countries, ‘community work’ has its conceptual equivalents, such as the Finnish yhdyskuntatyö, whose communal interpretation stresses the local community – Swedish lokalsamhälle, Norwegian samfunn, Finnish yhdyskunta (Ronnby 1995, 86-97). Local communities were of central importance in pre-modern communities, especially in the countryside. In the cities, the formation of communality has primarily been determined by the workplace and professional group, not so much by the residential area (e.g. Jaakkola 1991, 19-21). Nevertheless, it was the residential area that formed the basis for organisation upon which community work in the Nordic countries was built under the circumstances of the structural change of commercial and industrial life and the concomitant urbanisation and migration of the 1970s. Community work was first and foremost targeted at housing estates predominated by blocks of flats, where people had migrated.

The development of local communities in apartment house neighbourhoods stemmed from two interpretative frameworks. One starting point was an idea of unfinished suburbs as a kind of noncommunities, devoid of both rural and urban characteristics. The categorical notion of anomalous housing estates, where people find it difficult to put down roots, pervaded the 1970s Nordic criticism of housing estates, crystallising the negative image of these areas into two key words: ‘passivity’ and ‘isolation’. The sterility and isolated location of suburbs in the urban structure did not seem conducive to the fulfilment of the central ideals of the era, namely activity and community. (Franzén & Sandstedt 1981, 23-30). Another point of departure comprised the assumed special needs and challenges of those having migrated to housing estates, predicted to result from cultural and lifestyle clashes in the new residential areas. Lack of roots, substance abuse, domestic disputes and tensions among youth groups were questions often encountered by social work, but what was expected now was an intervention in response through community work (see Ronnby 1995, 170-171). Questions specific to immigrants were commonplace mainly in Sweden, while, for example, in Finland, the main concern was with the situation of rural people torn away from their roots. (Roivainen 1999; also 2004).

The debate over urban planning and community work highlighted an attempt to create ‘living communities’ out of residential areas (e.g. Sipilä 1979; see Kortteinen 1982a&b). As local communities, neighbourhoods were perceived as providing a social network and giving individuals and families an opportunity for a more profound sense of community. It was taken for granted that ‘communality’ and ‘neighbourhood’ meant ‘wellbeing’ and ‘pleasantness’ and that the yard represented its physical form. The normative linking of social interaction to neighbour relations, however, constituted an element that was alien to an urban community and lifestyle. The fact that
the ideal and practices of neighbourhood were derived from temporally and locally pre-modern communities – peasant communities, old working class residential areas or medieval cities – was not much reflected upon (ibid.; see also Daun 1974; Roivainen 1999). Nevertheless, some researchers, such as the Swede Åke Daun (1974) and the Finn Matti Kortteinen (1982 a&b), in their own suburban descriptions tried to open an alternative viewpoint on suburbs and their residents.

Neighbourhood work (Swedish grannskapsarbete) became a professional and official strategy and method for social workers to develop neighbourhood and the local communities. The activities based on the Community Development model aimed to activate residents in grass-roots self-help and peer support to improve their living conditions. Relatively homogenous in their demographic structure, housing estates indeed provided a fertile ground for such an endeavour. (See Ronnby 1995, 185-189).

Community work as a welfare policy strategy

Nordic community work has markedly represented a welfare state intervention at the local community level. In charge of community work have been the welfare state professionals, social workers and youth workers. In addition to neighbourhood work, the term samhällsarbete, “societal work”, was used to refer to community work. There were those who thought that there was little sense in talking about neighbourhood work as a form of community work without a societally critical dimension and an attempt to influence social conditions at large. In the Nordic context, community work became societal work in the sense that, as one method of official social work, it represented society’s intervention in the local community. Unlike social work in general, community work was perceived to approximate a kind of “welfare state hardware” (Karisto 1997, 133), whereby it was considered possible to have an impact on the interconnections between people’s problems and local structures. The goal was to prevent social problems in residential areas and to introduce ‘normal’ social services close to the residents by tailoring the services to their needs. The structural and societally critical nature of community work is evidenced by an effort to build interaction between authorities, decision-makers and residents. Instead of adaptation, social work aimed at effecting changes. Thereafter in the 1980s, people started talking about structural social work as part of municipal social policy (see Koskinen 1977; Satka 1994, 326-327; Satka 1995; Ronnby 1995, 185-198).

Along with neighbourhood work, community work became part of the practices in planning, administration and local authority co-operation. Charting local problems, intensifying welfare services and improving information flow required of community workers co-operation with various actors, in practice often with different administrative segments of the public sector. This work approach known as community organisation (Swedish organisationsarbete) reinforced expert and professional orientation as well as co-operation between the authorities. Community work also became part
of the social planning (social planering) implemented by the public sector, mapping out social problems and making community interventions in, for example, substance abuse, housing and the prevention of mental health problems. Within the ‘system’, the community worker was an expert on his or her field, whose challenge it was to supervise and promote citizens’ interests in community planning and organising social services. (See Hermansen 1975).

Views on how community work was positioned in relation to residents and civil society on the one hand and the system and authorities on the other are reflected in a tendency typical of the era to present various strategies through dualistic opposites. Community development type of activities, community organisation and influencing planning and decision-making (social planning) were generally considered a consensus type of influencing and part of an authority-centred strategy of social administration. Conversely, its opposite, the conflict viewpoint and the related organisation of community action pressure groups were shut out of official community work. This radical interpretation underlined commitment to the interests of the underprivileged and poor, anticipating a possibility to take a conflicting and critical stance on the powers that be, the authorities – and, possibly, ‘official’ community work as well. (Hermansen 1975; Ronnby 1995, 73-74; Koskinen 2003, 221).

Derivatives of community work
It has been argued that interest in community work in the Nordic countries began to wane as social workers in the 1980s grew more interested in psychosocial casework and psychotherapy (Lindholm 1995, 32). It can also be estimated that as a method of social work, community work became officialised, bureaucratised and more broadly integrated into local strategies in social work and urban and municipal planning alike (Koskinen 2003, 221; Roivainen 2002, 224). Due to the emergence of alternative lifestyle and environmental movements, the viewpoint has shifted from small local communities to the entire living environment and meanwhile the social question has expanded into an ecosocial one. Exerting political influence or influencing at a personal action level are not viewed as opposites but parallel modes of action. For example, ecosocial social work aims to affect society’s ecological structures and environmental factors by socio-political solutions as well as by individual life-policy choices. (See, e.g. Matthies 1990; Matthies et al. 2001).

For instance, the early 1980s area work (områdesarbete) aimed to provide the most common municipal social and health services as area-specific local services. The agencies’ organisation and officials’ duties were targeted at the areas by establishing small local units. In addition, plans were made to organise elected officials’ administration regionally. The aim was to implement these measures to the degree possible in co-operation between social and health services and, consequently, legislative amendments were made enabling the integrated regional organisation. (Kuikka 1988, 36).
Linked to the decentralisation was also the development of working methods so as to take better account of the problems faced by the client, families and residential areas (ibid., 36). Service accessibility was believed to improve by bringing the services physically close to the residents and clients and by publicising them. It was thought that at the same time the workers could become better acquainted with their area and be able to deliver more comprehensive social work than was the case under a sector-specific division of labour. The client or family could seek help for a variety of problems from the same worker. The social worker would be an expert on many sectors, a consultant and work supervisor for other workers in the area. (Kuikka 1988, 36; Koskinen 2003, 221-222).

At least at the experimental stages of decentralisation, the small scale, familiarity and accessibility of the service system increased service demand. Clients’ experiences of service use were positive: treatment was considered better at the local office and the threshold to access social services had lowered. The workers, for their part, perceived to be better equipped to understand client problems more comprehensively and offer many-sided help. The work was also regarded as heavier due to the more demanding job description and working hours. (Kuikka 1988, 36-37).

After the area-based experiment, many municipalities nevertheless returned to centralised and specialised work. The follow-ups conducted have shown that the regionalisation of social services has had many organisational and working method related benefits compared to the traditional approach. As far as implementation of client and user democracy is concerned, however, the experiences are more ambiguous (see Niemelä & Salo 1993, 56-57).

Second coming of community social work

Localised communality

In post-modern society, the local community has been assessed to lose some of its significance; on the other hand, it has been estimated that, in the wake of globalisation, the importance of local bonds grows, especially among those outside working life. As the accelerating economic growth fuels exclusion in entire city districts and population groups, demands for closer integration in residential areas will become louder. The mission of social work is to develop community-based work approaches further in local communities to consolidate social equilibrium. (See Matthies 2002). In post-modern society, the community is no longer distinguishable as a regionally clear-cut entity – city district, block or a communal yard (see Karjalainen et al. 2002), and hence community work must detach itself from village communality and address various urban ‘subaudiences’ in residential areas as well (Turtiainen 2000, 127-128).

While community work in the 1970s may be considered an attempt to respond to adaptation problems of those having migrated to large cities, the communal strategy in the 2000s is characterised by urban communality. The special traits of an urban
lifestyle and questions of involvement and exclusion in post-modern society have inspired debate about the necessity of specific urban social work. Underlying urban social work is an observation that many societal problems exacerbate in urban environments. (See, e.g. Karjalainen et al. 2002). Urban areas have undergone differentiation in a new way, with disparities between city districts apparently growing so that people with different social standings more clearly than before seem to be concentrated in respective residential areas (Kortteinen, Lankinen & Vaattovaara 1999). Observations have also been made of the rising proportion of immigrants among the unemployed, a fact that will further widen regional differences in income and unemployment rates. (Lankinen 2002). This means that also insecurity will be concentrated in certain areas already predominated by poverty, easily resulting in a situation where those who can will leave the area, while the lesser fortunate have to stay and are forced to withdraw from social interaction with their immediate surroundings. (Kääriäinen 2002).

In addition to problems typical of urban life, urban social work also emphasises the resources and empowerment of the city environment and community (see, e.g. Karjalainen et al. 2002, 261). Unlike in the 1970s radical interpretations of community work, where power and powerlessness were understood as a division policy question associated with societal structures, the emphasis now is on residents’ personal empowerment and the structural impacts of life-policy decisions on the community.

Traditional community work paid less attention to the effects of rural structural change on local communities. However, in Finland village action movement started in the 1970s as a reaction to rural decline and the increased centralisation of society. Solutions to rural problems were sought from local networks and village activities. These activities encouraged independent initiative, co-operation and attitudinal changes in villages, and the planning and administrative systems were developed as well. In terms of activation, village activities have also been compared to community work and in this respect, the experiences have been considered positive. (See, e.g. Hautamäki 1989; Lehtola 2003a). In the 1990s, the challenge faced by depopulated rural municipalities was how to ensure public services and adapt the rural service and production system to the prerequisites of the market economy (see Lehtola 2003b). Also in Sweden, an effort has been made to create socially sustainable development in the countryside by village activities, co-operatives and local economy projects. (See Ronnby 1995, 273-365).

Networking partnerships in communities
While modern community work was typically a public-sector activity, post-modern co-operation is characterised by a wide range of actors. In addition to Germany relying on a tradition of subsidiarity or Great Britain, a welfare mix economy, community strategies have reinforced throughout Europe, including the Nordic countries, where NGOs have traditionally complemented societal services, but not replaced them (e.g.
Helander 1999 & 2000). Now, some welfare state and municipal duties have been communalised to organisations and the private sector. At practical level, the strengthening of communitarian strategies since the early 1990s has been reflected in the profiling of the activities of social networks, volunteer work and self-help groups as part of third-sector activities. As a result of these developments, a large number of various regional projects on social work have sprung up in co-operation between public administrations and the third sector (see, e.g. Karjalainen et al. 2002).

The role of community social work is changing in local communities. Social workers active in the areas are responsible for case management of social and welfare services as well as guidance for, and partnerships with, other authorities and the third sector (see Koskinen 2003). The partnership orientation of post-modern co-operation presents a challenge to traditional and categorical top down – bottom up strategies within the framework of modern community work to engage in networking in communities. Various locally adapted ‘both-and’ solutions following fuzzy logic and transcending territorial boundaries in co-operation between sectors and administrations are examples of a new community-based work approach. For instance, the experiences gleaned by suburban projects concerning the welfare mix between public-sector employees, third-sector actors and residents have been encouraging exemplars of co-operation and building resource networks. (See Karjalainen et al. 2002).

In the context of traditional community work, there was a clear discourse to adapt welfare services to citizens’ needs. Today, there are implications that the new public management (NPM) aims to colonise civil society to serve its needs more effectively. For instance, in community social work (CSW) done in the UK, an effort is made to intensify local services by developing unofficial networks among local people in order to enable early intervention. The task of the social worker is to advance partnerships between public service providers, volunteers and unofficial care. A ‘proactive’ work approach anticipates (cost)effectively the emergence of service need and strives to network with public service providers, volunteers and unofficial care. Close interaction with the local community is justified by becoming aware of service users’ unofficial networks and by an attempt at cost-effectiveness. From the community worker’s position, the situation is problematic: to what degree can he or she orientate depending on the users’ life situation and living conditions? (See Stepney & Evans 2000, 105-115).

The approach of modern community work was characterised by profiling social work as a profession of its own. Instead of traditional problem-centred and remedial social work, new community projects are in pursuit of a more ‘implicit’ and ‘invisible’ social work approach (Karisto et al. 1996), where an effort is made to promote the quality of life in local communities through small-step welfare policy, such as organising physical exercise or handicrafts in the locality. Walking a tightrope interfacing professional social work and other fields of activity has meant that a clearly delineated profession has crumbled away. The emergence of new, more vaguely delineated pro-
Professional expertise is reflected in titles such as family worker, community architect, community physical exercise instructor and community artist (see Karjalainen et al. 2002, 260-265). Not only the titles but the job descriptions as well have changed. For example, community family workers’ job description has facets of the work done by a child welfare officer, social worker, home help and community worker. In liaison with authorities, organisations and parishes, they have set up residents’ café activities, meeting places for single parents, afternoon clubs for schoolchildren, etc. Family work is done close to the families in their own environment, meetings with the family are frequent and expert help in problems is forthcoming at an early stage. (Turtianen 1999).

Empowerment or policy on the margin?

In parallel with the dwindling state or municipal responsibility for welfare policy, increasing local inequality and the rapid expansion of area centres have led to a situation where also social welfare services have been harnessed to boost economic growth. Urban policy is a new type of division policy, putting services for marginal population groups – the elderly, long-term unemployed, living-allowance recipients and mental health rehabilitees – in jeopardy.

In recent years, suburban projects have focused on those excluded or the so-called people at risk of exclusion – the long-term jobless, potential child welfare families or mental health rehabilitees – and their relations with the rest of the population (e.g. Karjalainen 2000; Karisto & Karjalainen 2000, 185). In localities plagued by perennial unemployment, the necessity to provide services for people with substance abuse problems, young people or immigrants have been realised from the viewpoint of the entire community. (Karisto & Karjalainen 2000, 184).

Many-sidedness and innovation are expected of future co-operation. Preventive work models, for example, sociocultural work ‘in the third area’ (see Karisto 1994), are required to complement problem-centred, heavyweight professional social work. However, there has been a shift of focus in the allocation of social work resources: development work in particular has been outsourced from public to third-sector projects. There is a risk that official social work becomes marginalised, officialised and bureaucratised, eventually reduced to categorising and assessing the clients’ risks, needs and potentialities. Social work would be left with the task to supervise citizens’ ‘participation’, in this case, the involvement, accountability and active citizenship, i.e. salaried employment and integration into the community, of poor and other marginal groups. (See Jordan & Jordan 2000; also Juhila 2001).
Conclusions

At its best, community work means multi-actor reinforcement of action models established at grass-roots level. Basic social work done in agencies needs fieldworkers acting as a backup and professional street-level buffer. This requires the integration of the official line organisation and project work so that civil society’s needs are genuinely conveyed to administration and the decision-making process (Karisto & Karjalainen 2000; Karjalainen 2000; Roivainen 2001). Like in many suburban projects, which have successfully implemented the welfare mix (see, e.g. Karisto & Karjalainen 2000, 185), a multi-actor network is at its best built through synergistic co-operation. In a networking society, the public sector must continue to act as an umbrella, enabling bottom-up activities of the third sector and local communities. Networks and trust built ‘below’ and the right institutions ‘above’ presuppose and need each other. To make all this a reality, the third sector must have openness and freedom from prejudice and the public sector must have guidelines and an operating culture geared towards citizens and the community. (See Kajanoja 2000).

From the viewpoint of social work as a profession, the change in the operating environment is challenging. As the public sector in its orderer-provider models out-sources community social work to be implemented by the third sector, new work opportunities will emerge for social workers on other playing fields. Know-how on these new fields, however, calls for a new practical relationship between research, education and professional social work in practice. Commenced in Finland at the beginning of 2004, the professional licentiate programme on community social work is one milestone along that road. Community-based and ecosocial know-how is also needed in co-operation between various authorities and administrative bodies (see Närhi 2003), where dialogue presupposes new expertise and transcending language barriers (Besthorn 2003).

A special challenge for community social work is still to enter into solidarity and partnership with the communities of those living on society’s margin. Instead of control, social work should recognise and support the cultural coping resources and networks of these people – the unemployed, young people, people with mental health problems and residents of housing estates. (Juhila et al. 2004).
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Summaries

Paikalliset yhteisöt yhteisö sosiaalityön kenttänä

Pohjoismaisen yhdyskuntatyö suomalaisen yhteisö sosiaalityön näkökulmasta