Doing it Differently
Networks of Community Development Agents

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Preface

"We live in stirring times. An irresistible wave of freedom is sweeping across many lands. Not only political systems but economic structures are beginning to change in countries where democratic forces had been long suppressed. People are beginning to take charge of their own destiny in these countries. Unnecessary state interventions are on the wane. These are all reminders of the triumph of the human spirit.

In the midst of these events, we are rediscovering the essential truth that people must be at the centre of all development. The purpose of development is to offer people more options. One of these options is access to income - not as an end in itself but as a means to acquiring human well-being. But there are other options as well, including long life, knowledge, political freedom, personal security, community participation and guaranteed human rights. People cannot be reduced to a single dimension as economic creatures. What makes them and the study of the development process fascinating is the entire spectrum through which human capabilities are expanded and utilised."

Source: United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report, New York, 1990*

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Introduction

This document is written for practitioners and professionals interested in the processes and methods of establishing and stimulating networks of Community Agents. Such networks are a potential mechanism for strengthening the participation of local people. However, their development within Scotland is relatively new. Like *community*, the terms *network* and *agents* are in danger of losing their meaning through becoming phrases used to cover any loose association of people. The value of defining and drawing the parameters of Community Agents and their networks is to give legitimacy in terms of their value in enhancing local involvement. These mechanisms need to be understood by people involved in the practice, training and funding of community development.

The starting point is the appreciation of people's participation, and the realisation that this rarely happens spontaneously. It is not brought about through theoretical and mechanical arguments about its usefulness. What it does involve is *social preparation*. This is a process of supporting people to:

- **gather information** about their circumstances and resources,
- **analyse** their situation,
- **prioritise** actions they wish to pursue,
- **join together** into a group or organisation, and
- **work-out the means to implement these actions**.

Social preparation necessitates a systematic pattern of **action-reflection-action** which is the fundamental core practice of participatory development.

"Actually doing this social organisational work is more difficult by far than waxing romantically or sloganeering rhetorically about the blessings of people's participation". (Cernea, 1992)

How does it all get started? This paper provides a discussion of the various ways of observing known *'good practices'*. Information is provided about *why* and *how* to support the development of local Agents, both *before* they start to *network* and during the early phases of growing into *a free-standing organisation*. Within any part of the process many location and issue-specific concerns will emerge. This is what makes each network and people's process both particular and unique. There is no single answer or model to promoting participation through networks, there are only frameworks and guiding principles.

The document begins by reviewing the general issues involved in networks and capacity building of local activists. It then looks in detail at *organisational issues, training, contracting and self-management*.

Finally, although this document portrays the process of establishing community networks as linear, in reality it is not. The reader should use it as a general framework and not a step-by-step guide.

Section 1: Networks, Agents and their Strategies

Networks as Development Mechanisms

All individuals have aspirations: things they want to achieve, to learn, to see and to do. When aspirations are focused on an issue beyond an individual's control the person often feels powerless to influence *the system or decision-takers*. In these circumstances, people frequently display an awareness of issues, but their behaviour is characterised by inaction. How can this be overcome? By forming a collective identity for taking action, or a *network*, people can better address these aspirations. This is the basis of organising and organisations, which can be defined as follows:

"In its broadest sense, the purpose of an organisation is to provide a continuing mechanism for the pursuit of interests of its members as collectively identified by them." (Tilakaratna, 1986)

Networks are one form of collective identity. They are a mechanism through which communications happens or can be enhanced. They also enable individuals to overcome isolation and begin the process of evolving joint actions. A clear distinction needs to be made between *networks* and *networking*. Networking is the process of developing relationships and contacts between people or organisations. It is now a key term in development jargon. Networks, are a distinct form of association.

Community **networks** are generally made-up of individuals, associations or organisations bound by a common commitment to working with local people and interest groups. They form in order to gain greater influence over the decisions which affect peoples' lives by devising solutions and taking action on common problems. Such specific purposes often begin the process of establishing a common bond and provide a framework to come together. The common bond enables people to share information, overcome isolation and create solidarity and trust. Well developed networks often increase access to relevant expertise for its members which enable them to take joint action. Community networks are not just another layer of bureaucracy that place a drain on constituent members, they are mechanisms which facilitates action for the benefit of local people.

Community networks differ widely but can be generally divided into two distinct types: **Community-focused** and **Community-based.** There is much confusion and lack of clarification about the difference between these two types of community networks.

Whereas *Community-focused networks* begin with, and set priority on, their commitment to a **common** issue of concern and this is their starting point, *Community-based networks* are composed of members who prioritise first their **local concern**, and then their common concern.

Community-focused networks involve individuals, associations or organisations. They are characterised by being one-step removed from the local level, and are concerned primarily with issues which are common across communities. Although they may include individuals from communities who share a common concern for an issue, Community-focused networks are not primarily concerned with a specific community.

Community-based networks differ from Community-focused networks. They are federations of individuals or local groups from a specifically defined area. By federations what is meant is associations or groups which democratically choose to unite for a common purpose or objective. They are primarily concerned with an issue in their own locality, but come together to gain strength, information, expertise and a broader perspective so they can address their particular issue more effectively. Frequently this is an informal process which is not highly visible to external organisations.

The geographic coverage is a secondary priority for both types of community networks, it can be as local as a crofting township, a housing estate or a village, or as broad as a European network or even a Global network. There are, however, few networks which function at the national and international levels which are community-based, most are community-focused. These are, for the most part, large networks of associations or organisations rather than individuals. It is more often the case that the geographic spread of a community-based network is limited to sub-regional or (at most) regional level, and involves individuals or small local groups.

Both types of community network gained legitimacy as forms of association in the early 1990s as a result of the growing fragmentation and competition for resources. They are the result of an effort to reduce the divisions, and the subsequent isolation of those who lost-out in the various scrambles for limited resources. Joint efforts were initially informal but by the mid-1990s some networks had defined themselves as distinct structures. The partnerships which have emerged have, in some cases, enabled isolated local groups to jointly achieve and sustain initiatives.

There are two important principles involved in both Community-focused and Community-based networks:

- **cooperation**
- **seeking new horizons**

Cooperation is the backbone of successful networks as it mitigates against the increasing tendency for individuals and organisations to compete for the scarce resources which exist. Networks can help each member by improving their performance through equal access to information and through encouraging collaborative efforts. Networks can also build awareness and knowledge of the issues which are otherwise seen as the concern of individuals.

The second principle, *to seek new horizons*, may sound grand but in reality it involves making a conscious decision to work with others from different backgrounds or locations. Networks most often involve diverse perspectives and *communities of interest*, this is what retains their dynamic nature and usefulness to its members. They are seldom homogeneous and stagnant because by their very nature they circulate information and generate ideas. For such new and useful ideas to emerge within a network, its members require regular reflection and analysis of their actions. This needs to be carried out in a thorough, systematic and self-reliant manner. Developing

the skills to do this within a network is an important aspect of stimulating local development.

Networks are structured in many ways, some as a scattering of individuals or groups connected by non-hierarchical lines of communication, while others are centralised in their communication and decision-making methods. A physical representation of these can look either like a badly knotted fishnet or like a more orderly pyramid, depending on the type of network. More details about **network types** can be found in *Section 1: Alternative Networking Strategies*.

Community Agents within the Spectrum of Community Work

Community Agents is a term used in an increasing number of ways to describe people who work part-time on a variety of tasks *within communities*. It is commonly used by external development agencies to describe individuals who perform the linking and communication functions for community-focused networks. Community Agents in these instances are the local *focal point* and messengers, distributing and disseminating information on behalf of organisations and agencies, and being the organisations and agencies' eyes and ears. In general they function in much the same manner as previous *extension officers*, but without the same level of job security or benefits.

There are, however, more innovative approaches to Community Agents. These are generally found within community-based networks where they undertake a more activist and dynamic role, beyond information dissemination. In these instances the Agents are *social mobiliser*, encouraging and inspiring people to become involved in local developments. Where they have been most successful is in networks with a specific sectoral focus such as childcare, and in networks which are task-orientated such as organising training events or documenting local perspectives on an issue.

Community Agents' potential as *facilitators and social mobilisers* is at an early stage of development. They could become pivotal in developing local capacity from within communities through the use of participatory methods and tools. This is particularly the case in those community-based networks governed by the Agents themselves, and within community-focused networks which function democratically. Agents present an opportunity for instilling the skills needed to stimulate local critical awareness and analysis and to facilitate local people to:

 "move from the status of objects manipulated by external forces and victims of social processes, to the status of subjects and active agents of change". (Tilakaratna, 1987)

Building community capacity requires Community Agents to become involved in three inter-related actions:
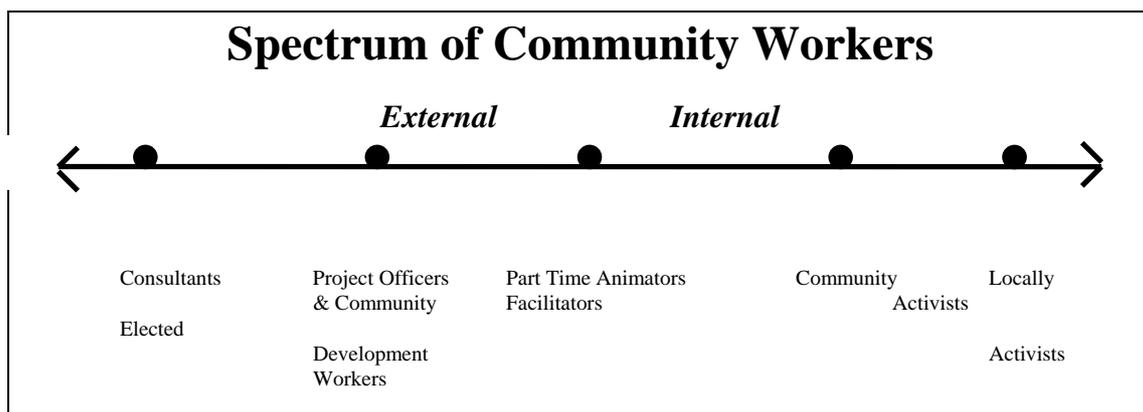
- The development of awareness and a knowledge base;
- The development of self-organisation and management for action; and
- Gaining access to resources for development.

How does this happen? Community capacity-building rarely takes place without some form of facilitation, and this is where the potential of Community Agents lies.

Because most facilitation is done by persons outwith the community itself, the risks and consequences of this have been experienced by millions of communities. They are simply and succinctly described by the Bhoomi Sena (*Land Army*) Movement in India:

"An outsider who comes with ready-made solutions is worse than useless. He must first understand from us what our questions are, and help us articulate the questions better, and then help us find solutions. Outsiders also have to change. He alone is a friend who helps us think about our problems on our own." (De Silva, 1979)

Developing a community's ability to think about their problems on their own and develop their own solutions requires skill and particular qualities which could be gained through the development of Community Agents. It cannot be done simply or quickly. ***Networks of Community Agents*** are showing potential in this type of work, but where do they fit amongst the various community workers already servicing the local level? Understanding the spectrum of community workers may clarify their role. There is a wide variety of community workers, and they each have varying degrees of commitment to and involvement in building capacity within communities. The different approaches can be understood by examining the following spectrum:

Spectrum of Community Workers

External   *Internal*

Consultants	Project Officers & Community	Part Time Animators Facilitators	Community Activists	Locally
Elected				
	Development Workers			Activists

On the extreme left of the spectrum are consultants, project officers, and community development workers who are generally persons who live outside the community in which they work and are considered *professionals*. Project officers and community development workers are usually expected to have organisational and group-work skills which can be used flexibly in a wide range of circumstances. They are generally employed on a full-time basis. Community development consultants are often considered *technical experts*. They generally provide short-term inputs and their outputs focus on the production of some form of document, presentation or report.

On the extreme right are locally elected representatives such as community councillors, school board members, crofting townshipgrazing clerks, residents association officebearers, etc. They play a representative role, as *messengers* conveying the concerns and aspirations of their community to the statutory bodies. Increasingly, they influence the essential services for their communities.

The wedge in the middle of the spectrum, from part-time animators and facilitators, through to Community Agents and activists, offers the greatest scope for community

development in the 1990s. This is in part due to the fact that *project officers* are increasingly unaffordable and elected activists are focused on representing their areas with regard to the provision of essential services.

These three types of workers (animators; facilitators and Community Agents) function on a part-time basis and encourage and support active local participation in the development initiatives of local residents. Indeed, their success depends on their belief in the abilities of local people and recognition of the knowledge and experience that people already have.

The degree to which they are *internal or external* to the community in which they work varies considerably. Many part-time Community Agents work on a paid basis outside their own communities but function as community activists in their home place. Community activists rarely function beyond their own locality. Animators and facilitators most often are from outwith the communities in which they work.

Experience has shown that where residents are trained and employed as local animators or facilitators for their own community difficulties and tensions can arise which significantly reduce their effectiveness. There is a trend in some locations for animators, facilitators and agents to work on a paid basis only outwith their own communities, although they may function as a community activist on a voluntary basis within their home areas.

What are the differences between animators, facilitators and Community Agents? The differences have to do with the **focus of their work**.

- **ANIMATORS** *assist people to build up their awareness and knowledge base to be able to think, reflect and act autonomously*. They are **highly skilled** in methods of social analysis based on the perspective of self-reliance and participation. They stimulate people to broaden their understanding of their own situation and to see their reality in the context of the wider external social processes. This understanding then forms the basis for initiating change. An animator's social and behavioural skills are the most important: they must not operate from an assumption that they know the answers. They ultimately must be committed to redundancy as self-fulfillment; their satisfaction must be gained from supporting others to build their capacities, rather than from gaining social power.
- **FACILITATORS** *assist people to acquire practical skills* (such as technical and managerial) which are used to overcome practical barriers. They support action which improves local people's access to material resources. They may also support local actions by playing a *guardian role*.
- **AGENTS** *are social mobilisers*. They begin as local community activists in their own area. They generally have practical leadership skills and experience in tackling local problems. With a limited amount of training they are then tapped as a resource to undertake practical community organising outside (and sometimes within) their own home area.

Experience has shown that most people begin as activists in their own community. It is these people who then may become involved as part-time Community Agents outwith their own area. Some may develop into facilitators if their particular strengths, interest and training include group dynamics, consensus building, mediation and workshop techniques. Few become animators as this requires years of community-based work and a strong ideological commitment and understanding of how to support individuals and groups to develop their capacity for intellectual self-reliance.

Distinguishing clearly between the roles of animators, facilitators and Community Agents often leads to confusion; in reality the dimensions of their work often overlap. The following synthesis of a considerable amount of project and other documentation adapted from the work of Oakley and others (1991) reflects these **major dimensions in promoting rural people's participation:**

Animation	A process of assisting rural people to develop their own intellectual capacities, that is, to stimulate their critical awareness; this critical awareness enables rural people to examine and explain issues in their own words and, as a result, to realise what they can do to bring about change.
Structuring	The development of internal cohesion and solidarity among rural people, and of some form of structure or organisation which can help bring the people together and serve as the forum for their continued involvement.
Facilitation	A service role which assists rural people to undertake specific actions designed to strengthen their participation; these actions can include the acquiring of particular technical skills, gaining access to available resources or translating their own ideas into feasible projects.
Intermediary	To serve, in the initial stages, as a go-between in relation to other external services or forces; to establish contacts with existing services and introduce rural people to the procedures and mechanisms for dealing with these services.
Linking	To help develop links between rural people in similar contexts and facing similar problems; this linking at district or regional level creates a wider base of support for participation.
Withdrawal	A progressive redundancy, whereby the worker consciously withdraws from a direct role with the people and increasingly encourages them to undertake and manage the projects in which they are involved.

Alternative Networking Strategies

Getting a network of Community Agents started requires clear conceptualisation of the purpose and vision of the network. Often gloriously called a *strategy*, it can be a useful starting point which helps avoid the old adage *'if you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there!'*

If you are an individual wanting to start a Community-based network you may be asking yourself:

Is the issue that I think we should focus on also important to others? Who else might join? How do I get started?

If you are an organisation or agency wanting to start a Community-focused network you may be asking:

How do I stimulate a network? What resources will be required? How will it meet my organisation's needs?

Often the process of conceptualising a new network involves linking an individual's desire to get started with an organisation's desire to stimulate a network. Reality shows that organisation's generally have the advantage over individuals. They tend to be the repository of the resources necessary to start a network, whereas individuals are not. Does this mean that the network belongs to those who have invested resources in its development? How independent will it be?

The question of ownership, membership, control, and autonomy of a network must be addressed at an early stage. It is necessary to be very clear about these issues *before* beginning down the path of implementation. If issues of ownership and decision-making are not clear from the beginning, network members may become disillusioned and frequent internal conflicts will occur. If there are no formal mechanisms for resolving disagreements or challenging inequalities then it is common, over time, for those who feel most confident and articulate to dominate decision-making. Clarification can come by looking carefully at the type of network you want to build.

Each type of network differs in its answers to the following questions:

- Where in the network are decisions taken?
- How does communications take place?
- Is power held equally by members?
- What is the projected scale of the network?

Deciding on the type of network involves understanding the options. The alternative can best be understood through diagrams, as illustrated below.

Hierarchy
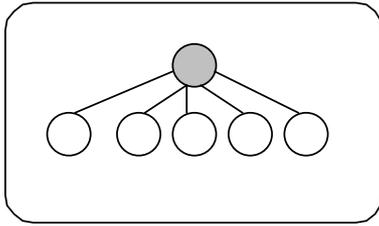
A network which takes a **'hierarchy'** approach functions as an organic whole in that its parts are designed to perform specialised tasks necessary to the functioning of the whole. If any part collapses, the network ceases to function effectively.

Hub or Central Node
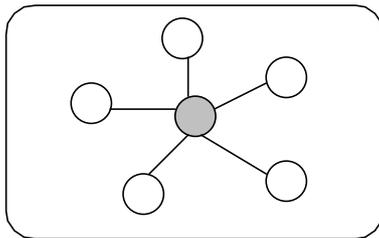
A network based on a **hub or central node** strategy is normally more decentralised than a hierarchy structure. The hub functions as a service centre for autonomous or semi-autonomous members or groups. It is likely to have some degree of centralised decision-making, though this is often an issue of tension between the hub and the members. Communications between the members is via the hub.

Autonomous and non-hierarchical
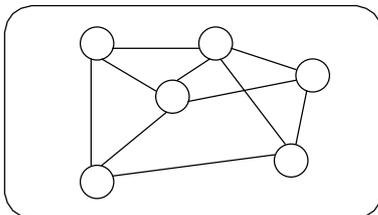
An **autonomous and non-hierarchical** approach is one in which each member or group is self-sufficient and chooses to join the network; dependency on the network is minimised. Any member could survive the elimination of others and their is a free-flow and unstructured pattern to communications. There is no single paramount leader; the leader is first amongst equals and speaks for the network only on certain occasions and can influence consensus decision-making rather than making decisions for the members. The nature of its unifying force is its common commitment, equality and democratic practices.

Federation
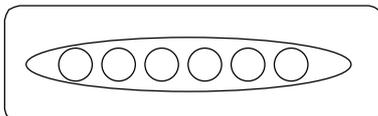
A **federation** is a network in which each member group elects a leader, or a number of delegates, who represents them on the network. Unlike other types of networks, federations are **representative** by nature. Federations have clearly defined rules based on democratic principles. Nonetheless, any group may function within itself by hierarchically or consensus decision-making.

It is possible to progress through different types of networks, and in reality for an organisation which wishes to stimulate a community-focused network it may be essential to take a staged approach; for example, you may need to begin with a hierarchy and move over-time through a decentralised hub and eventually an autonomous arrangement. Nonetheless, the key decision about *what type of network you ultimately want to establish should be taken before starting implementation,* and this decision should be well documented. The documentation should clearly outline the strategy and time-scale for moving through the different types of networks. The tendency otherwise is to become accustomed and perhaps even a bit complacent about moving beyond what is familiar. There is also the danger that once a hierarchy or decentralised hub network is established and successful, decision-makers may be reluctant to step-back and allow an autonomous non-hierarchical structure to develop.

Creative tension is a natural part of any thriving network. There is a delicate balance however between this and personal behaviour which fragments and subverts the process of network building. Important network-building skills include: working with groups, consensus building and mediation.

Good Practice in Developing and Managing Community Networks

This section begins by describing the qualities and characteristics of community agents, animators, and facilitators. It provides ideas about their selection and considers issues to do with their training. Subsequently it provides practical management tools useful in *organising, co-ordinating and monitoring work.*

Qualities and Characteristics

The most fundamental quality of any community workers is their belief in the abilities of local people and their recognition of the knowledge and experience that people already have. This requires a breaking away from the methodology of attempting to deposit pre-packaged knowledge in people. The way community workers function needs to begin from the place where people are: *their history, how they live, what they do, their resources*. This is not to say that peoples' existing knowledge provides an adequate base for their development. What is rather said is that peoples' knowledge is the starting point in the process of enhancing people's capacity. While people often have a better understanding of their local reality than outsiders, their knowledge of the wider external situation, and their understanding of the links between the two may be more limited. This is the knowledge gap which community workers must assist people to overcome; the gap between scientific and experiential knowledge.

Beyond this fundamental belief in people's abilities, **common characteristics** which emerge from various cultural contexts are that these workers:

- have come from active elements in society,
- have prior practical experience as social activists before being selected,
- have begun to critically reflect on whatever activist role they had been playing earlier and are looking for ways of becoming more effective.

Selection

Selection involves identifying potential animators, facilitators or Community Agents already shaped by their work as local activists to work within a network focused on a common issue of concern.

In practice two methods have been commonly adopted to identify and select potential workers:

- Hand-picking persons through personal or professional contacts and knowledge.

- Identification of persons through a public noticeand screening through a process of interviewing and apprenticeship. Examples of this approach include: LEADER *animators* in the Western Isles, Skye and Lochalsh; LEADER 2 Local Agents in the Inverness and Nairn, Ross and Cromarty and Moray, Badenoch and Strathspey.

The first method has been the most commonly used in most countries because personal knowledge and contact provides a generally reliable basis to make judgments on the suitability of a candidate. In instances where selection has used the more open method of public advertisements or notices, a rigorous process of screening has been adopted.

Rigorous screening has involved field testing the candidates. The following example from the Philippines shows how this can be done:

> *"Ten candidates were fielded in teams of two each to five barangays (villages) with instructions to "learn as much from and about the people" as they could during that period without doing a formal survey. They were asked to keep notes of the process and prepare an analysis of the situation. The care and depth with which they recorded and analysed their experience and the information they gathered served as a major basis for deciding who would be in the Network.*
>
> *An equally important basis was feedback from the residents themselves on how well the candidates were able to integrate themselves with the people during their stay in the barangays (villages). A third, although relatively minor, criterion was the candidates' own recommendations on whom they would choose. This helped to gauge their acceptability to each other. Hence the Network was very confident about the final selection."* (Tilakaratna, 1987)

The process illustrated above shows how selection and training can be integrated and complementary; experience has shown the importance of *combining* the two. It is not a question of selecting and then training in the hope that the community agent will succeed; success is built into selection which is rigorous and ideologically oriented. This type of selection is a radical departure from conventional practice which selects workers on the basis of pre-determined qualifications and then seeks to train them.

Training and Learning Opportunities

Training for community workers such as agents, animators, and facilitators is perhaps an inappropriate term because it tends to denote a formal exercise in which knowledge is transferred in preparation for a pre-determined task. Although training is required for such workers, it should be focused on methods of enhancing local participation. Technical competence alone is not adequate; a broader perspective is needed if they are to function effectively at the local level. Training should focus on building their knowledge of participatory processes and their practical skills in stimulating people's involvement and collective action.

Training should combine, as a minimum, the following four distinct phases:

Phase 1:	The **selection** training process as outlined above;
Phase 2:	A **structured course** in which workers explore and analyse various dimensions of the local context in which they will be operating as well as techniques of group organising and facilitation (through techniques of community action research);
Phase 3:	Direct **experience** at the local level outwith their own community; and
Phase 4:	Regular **reviews, analysis and reflection** focused on practice and done with other Community Network members.

Each phase should have a specific content and structure, but nonetheless they all should be based on **principles** which highlight:

- The qualities and characteristics of the workers as equally important to knowledge or particular skills,
- Sharing of experience and practice rather than only the delivery of information,
- Techniques which have proven effectiveness in enhancing local peoples participation and understanding of their situation (*e.g. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Participatory Action Research (PAR), Participatory Evaluation (PE), Action Planning*). Within each of the *participatory methodologies* there are variations.Guidance should be sought as to the principles and options within each. A good book soucre is *Participatory Learning & Action – A Trainer's Guide*, Pretty, et al, 1995.

There is a need to insure that certain *'hard'* skills are well mastered by community workers. These are most often taught through a structured course (Phase 2), and then put into practice through direct experience at the local level (Phase 3). The box below outlines these basic skills:
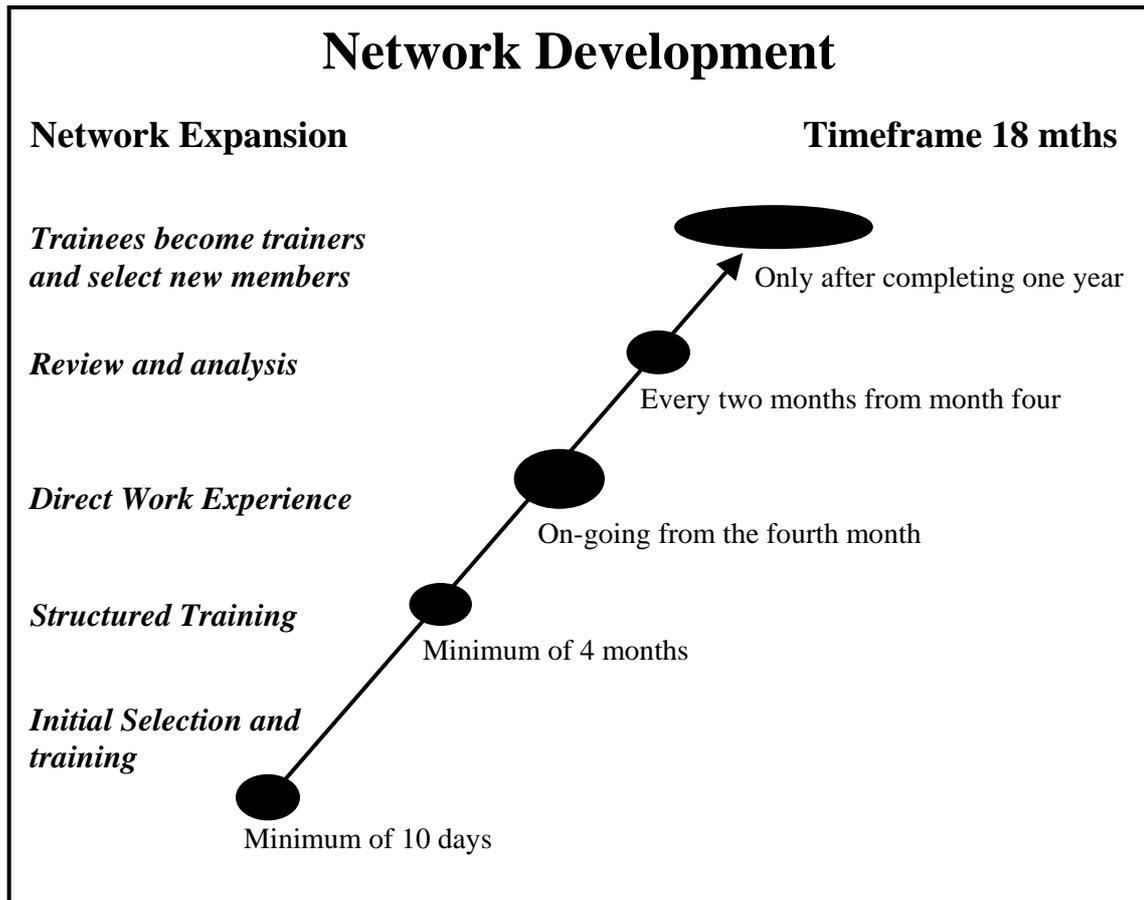
Skills Training Topics
(*Techniques of Community Operational Research*)

- Documentation and analytical techniques:
  case studies, life histories, information gathering.
- Workshop techniques
- Group dynamics: *analysis and strengthening*
- Participatory techniques for gathering and analysing information, action planning, monitoring and evaluation
- Consensus building; conflict resolution
- Negotiating & mediation
- Analytical techniques: *SWOT and others.*

Training in the skills outlined above does not necessarily have to be done through a centre-based approach, although this can strengthen the relationships and thus the networking between community agents. If a wide geographical area is to be covered, methods of training which include distance-learning work packs, exposure visits, computerised tutorials and tele-conferencing may be usefully implemented.

Developing community agents' abilities to organise, facilitate and deliver training to new network members helps to build their individual and the network's strength. How this happens can be visualised through the spiral as shown below.

Network Development

Network Expansion   **Timeframe 18 mths**

*Trainees become trainers
and select new members*   Only after completing one year

Review and analysis

                                        Every two months from month four

Direct Work Experience

                            On-going from the fourth month

Structured Training

                    Minimum of 4 months

*Initial Selection and
training*

        Minimum of 10 days

The time frame on the above diagram illustrates the time-consuming nature of the initial work which requires a minimum of 1 year to move from the selection process through to a point when trainees can begin to function as trainers. Once this foundation is built expansion of the network can be relatively efficient. Expansion does assume, however, that the initial members make room for new entrants and do not seek to dominate the network's decision-making processes.

SECTION 2: Practical Management Issues

The practical aspects of developing a network of Community Agents are outlined here. It is written to clarify the options in terms of legal structures and contracting of work. But first, before these, practical management issues need to be discussed. These will help develop autonomy and self-reliance.

Issues in Developing a Network's Autonomy

Organisations which plan to support the establishment of a network of Community Agents need to be aware from the outset that their support is likely to be required for several years. Too often community activists are selected and trained and then left to their own devices. **A substantial gap exists between the stimulation gained from being selected and initially trained, and actual work.** In principle this gap should be filled by the network itself; in reality the process is not that simple or direct. Even with strong leadership amongst its members, new networks struggle to find a clear direction and ways of surviving the forces of fragmentation and disintegration.

If the ultimate objective is to support the growth of a self-managing network, it is essential that the network and the support organisation go through a carefully orchestrated weaning process which should begin in Year 1. There is no model to follow for this, each network is unique. Weaning involves the shifting of decision-making and resources from the support organisation to the network itself. **The advisory role of the support organisation should grow simultaneous to the network's capacity for decision-making and implementation. This shifting of roles and resources needs to be openly and explicitly re-iterated** from the very beginning of selection and training of members. If it is seen as a *hidden agenda* network members may react by feeling abandoned and hostile towards the support organisation.

Several measures can be taken to ease the somewhat lengthy transition from a network perceived as *'belonging'* to the support organisation to an *autonomous network.* These include measures taken by the support organisation, as well as by the network members themselves.

Weaning Measures by the Support Organisation:

- Provide clearly defined **training sessions in which network members themselves define their vision and work.** This should not be a one-off event, but a regular aspect of training. Insure this is well facilitated and documented; involve network members in the planning and implementation of these sessions.

- **Allow the network to be self-managing** on a day-to-day basis. Build this capacity over-time. Resist the temptation to control decision-making and organise the contracting of work in an attempt to *get things moving*. Plan and prioritise work jointly and agree contracting processes jointly.

- For a limited period of time provide *sheltered work* for network members. Network members are seldom able to immediately access or define work. Prepare for this by having ideas, contacts and funding in place for the first year or two.

This will provide the network with the time required to develop their own identity and strength.

- Provide regular **on-going training** which links the network to new ideas and new trainers.

- Provide **information** to network members about current events to do with the wider context and issues on which they are focused.

- Provide **technical guidance** in regard to organisational management and structural issues.

- Discuss and determine the most effective and efficient **use of resources** within a self-managing and self-reliant organisation.

Weaning Measures by the Network Members:

- Adopt a constitution and **legal structure** agreed by network members.

- Develop a '**guiding code of good practice**' for use by network members. This may help to avoid tensions within a network from issues such as individual members undertaking work solely for their own benefit.

- Develop a **practical management system** for your network which is not dependent on the support organisation. Many innovative initiatives have included the use of e-mail and computer conferencing in order to reduce the disadvantages faced by those in remote rural areas.

- Adopt an **'advisory' group** of individuals outwith your network who can be called upon for advice and who will share information about current issues and events. Insure that this group involves a wider selection of individuals than those who have been involved from the support organisation. This will widen the understanding of the network. However, do not choose solely prominent people who may be too busy to give the time required. Make your choice on the basis of a mutual commitment to similar aims.

- Develop **open and accountable decision-making systems** with regard to the use of resources within the network: *i.e., fee rates, honorariums, travel and subsistence rates.*

Management Tools

The four key components which guide the management of Community Agents networks most often include the following:

a.   **Legal Frameworks**
b.   **Terms of Reference**
c.   **Work Plans**
d.   **Guiding Code of Good Practice**
e.   **Social Auditing: an innovative approach to monitoring**

These components provide the basic management parameters of work and conduct for individuals within networks. They also address issues such as members' rights, responsibilities, ethics and specific work tasks. With these, and with a formal democratic mechanism for decision-making insured through a legal framework and constitution, the implementation of decisions then depends on the Agents respect for these collectively agreed organisational rules and procedures.

a. Legal Frameworks

The basis of any organisation, and thus any network, is its constitution and "*you will be deemed by the courts to have one whether or not it is written down.*" (Pinder, 1985). A constitution should be flexible and broad enough to cope with situations its members envisage. It should also reflect the style of organisation which maximises participation of network members. Careful consideration should be given to the delegation of powers especially to office-bearers and support organisations

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Components of Constitutions

1. The Objects of the network
2. Membership: *individual and group, co-opted members, application and termination of membership*
3. Subscription: the membership fee
4. General Meetings
5. Special General Meetings
6. Appointment of Officers
7. Procedures at Meetings
8. Standing Orders
9. Accounts
10. Dissolution
11. Alterations to the Constitution

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which can lead in practice to a hierarchical network structure. In reality, "*the level of activity by any network member will depend on the perceived 'usefulness' of the network, and the amount of 'spare capacity' which people have left over from other commitments. As a result, the responsibility of servicing the network sometimes falls on a core group of just a few individuals who may come to be seen as a controlling clique.*"(Gilchrist, 1995). This tension is experienced by many networks and needs to be addressed through collective open discussion as well as through constitutional safeguards which require democratic practices and regular reviews of the allocation of tasks.

There are references to guides about constitutions at the end of this document. The essential components of a constitution are summarised in the box.

b. Terms of Reference

For many community activists, becoming an Agent within a network is a completely new experience. Individuals may be puzzled as to what is expected of them, and what their relationship should be to others in their area, and within the network. To clarify these issues, and to set the practical work in motion, contracting work can be a useful tool.

For many Agents, working under a contract will also be new. It is therefore important to keep the details as clear and simple as possible. However, clarity and simplicity should not mean short-cuts. Agents who work on a part-time, self-employed basis need to be given guidance for their work through a contract. This is a formal term for two essential components: ***terms of reference and an agreement for work***. These tools guide the individual Agent's work, and should clearly state their role and responsibilities. Overall they should be a tool to ensuring efficient and effective work.

Such formality may initially seem daunting to activists, and therefore the way in which they are introduced to it is important. A thorough and open discussion of d*raft* Terms of Reference is a useful way to begin. This should preferably be done face-to-face with all potential Agents. If this is not feasible, individual discussions with each Agent is the next-best approach. This is limiting however because each individual Agent does not benefit from other Agents' perspectives and Agents may therefore be delayed in relating and linking to each other rather than through a central point.

A clear and brief presentation which reviews each part of the Terms of Reference should take place. Agents should then be encouraged to ask questions and to informally discuss the contents with each other. The perceived ownership of the Terms of Reference needs to shift from the *'author'* to the Agents themselves. Therefore changes in its contents should be considered positively. Remember, the ideas which the Terms of Reference contain may be new to many activists and pushing them to accept details without alterations may cause subsequent difficulties. It is in everyone's interest to take time in agreeing the Terms of Reference.

The Terms of Reference are commonly agreed in writing by signing a brief Agreement form, or *'contact'*. In some cases this is included in the final section of the Terms of Reference. The essence is to have on record written confirmation that an individual has agreed to undertake the tasks outlined in the Terms of Reference, and that all parties are in agreement about what they are each offering and the time needed to carry it out.

c. Work Plans

Community Agents are generally pragmatists. They want to *'get on with the job'* and it is therefore essential that they know clearly what task they are meant to undertake. This is particularly important during the early formation of a network: letting members flounder through not knowing what practical activities they are meant to undertake can only lead to frustration and disillusionment. Clarity and motivation can result from a work plan or *'task'* list which outlines in general terms what is expected, by when, and the rate of remuneration. Often, when a new network is forming, Agents play a key role in gathering local information or identifying local training needs.

Whatever their function they may NOT know how to actually get started. Therefore a step-by-step approach to work plans which initially span over a relatively short time period (3 to 6 months) is likely to result in the greatest accomplishment. It should go without saying that it is essential for Agents to fully participate in drawing-up work plans.

d. Guiding Code of Good Practice

Community Agents should be given the opportunity to develop a guiding code of good practice. This may require a skilled facilitator to assist in *'teasing-out'* ideas and to present examples of situations in which conflicts can arise within the network because of the lack of a guiding code. Such codes should clearly define the individuals responsibilities towards the network, and draw the line between the individual as a member of the network and as a free-lance community activist. It is the lack of such a *'line'* which causes considerable conflict and tension between members, particularly when they perceive that another individual has gained access to resources or opportunities because they are a member but have kept these solely for their individual benefit and not shared them with the network.

Guiding Codes of Good Practice should also set a framework for respectful communications between members. If this is not set, it is likely that some members will participate infrequently, and may only function within it when it is of personal benefit to themselves. Petty, personal and severe criticism of individuals can be extremely destructive, and a code of Good Practice can assist in moderating such tensions by setting group rules.

Indeed, the main purpose of a Code of Good Practice is to clarify where the network stops and the individual's interests begin. Active networks can and should provide opportunities for individuals, but where these are not openly acknowledged and shared with other members tension can develop.

e. Social Auditing - an innovative approach to monitoring

Increasingly networks, and organisations, are under pressure not merely to report on their work, but in some way to evaluate it. If monitoring systems are well established, any external evaluation required by supporting agencies need not appear sinister or worrying. Social Auditing methods are one of the most comprehensive methods of effective monitoring, and in some cases may satisfy or dove-tail into evaluation requirements. Social Auditing has become established and recognised as a useful method of reflecting an organisation's annual work in Northern Ireland, and in ad hoc cases in England and Scotland.

Social Auditing is a process which enables organisations, or networks, to assess and demonstrate their social, community and/or environmental benefits and limitations. A successful network is undoubtedly good news, but what may not be clear is what constitutes *'success'*. Social Auditing is a process which can help judge success by determining key indicators and measurements which are monitored over time. This can enable a network to address issues which are often considered *'unmeasurable'*. In do this it becomes a management tool with which a network can set its annual goals.

Social Auditing differs from evaluation in that it is on-going, and owned by the network rather than done to it. A Social Audit focuses on the network itself, rather than exclusively on a project or programme and becomes an intrinsic part of the social record-keeping of an organisation. Information is gathered through a variety of methods which include social book-keeping, surveys of stakeholders and case studies.

Finally, Social Auditing is a potential tool which can strengthen community networks if done regularly and comprehensively. Without strong monitoring systems networks are likely to face difficulties maintaining a clear sense of purpose and measuring their progress towards their goals.

Conclusion

Networks of Community Agents are potentially powerful mechanisms for strengthening rural people's participation in the development process. Their growth can be supported by existing organisations who are clearly committed to spawning new and potentially autonomous networks. In practice, existing organisations require a clear strategy built from having reviewed, debated and considered options at each stage of the process. This paper has attempted to provide a framework to guide and inform this discussion.

Implicit in this process is the assumption that community networks serve as a bridge, or a vehicle whereby rural people can, through organised efforts, participate in influencing, shaping and transforming the development process in their favour. In this respect we can leave aside the role of merely organising people's contributions to maintain existing institutions, systems or projects, or of merely functioning in a way that is more sensitive to rural people's views. Networks must be more than a mere instrument of system maintenance or project implementation. If networks are to genuinely promote people's participation, they must recognise their role as being to essentially create the conditions whereby people can begin to get involved and have influence and ownership of activities before they begin and ultimately bring about social change. This is the key aspect of their role; if it is undertaken in any other way the network will end up basically trying to accommodate rural people within existing institutions, structures and systems.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing community participation in Scotland is to overcome the entrenched *'project'* approach reinforced by the role of the project officer as development gatekeeper. If the objective is to support capacity building, local diversity and learning then the role of the project officer must change. Currently they function as the gate-keepers to resources and take, by their very definition, a time-bound and standardised project approach. Only the most forward thinking are beginning to let go of this traditional power role and allow a broader base of community involvement in decision-making and ownership. Many project officers have misguidedly assumed that *'capacity-building'* equates with training, perhaps because of the plethora of funding directed to this mechanistic end. However, there are many more subtle and important aspects to capacity building. These include the need to shift the decision-making away from experts *'who know best'*. Project officers need to be out of the limelight and function only in the shadows of community networks, allowing them to control and own the process. This requires project officers to play a facilitative role: working with networks to draw-out potential options and difficulties during their growth, and to learn with the network members, exercising influence but not control. This influencing role is sometimes misinterpreted as manipulation; the difference is rooted in the issue of trust. Influencing is a flexible, transparent and open process; manipulation is not.

Support through facilitation cannot be time-bound, and this is where conventional top-down and centralising project approaches break-down. Gauging the number of years required to build capacity of networks is extremely difficult. What can be said, however, is that it does not result in quick or immediately measurable results. A crucial sign of progress is the increasing redundancy of the *'project officer'*. Woven

into this redundancy is the building-up of organised efforts of local activists. The role of these people is to encourage and support local participation. Fundamental to their success is their belief in the abilities of others and their willingness to share opportunities and power with others.

The language of community involvement in Scotland is, however, already beginning to exhibit confusion about the concepts and roles of animators, facilitators, activists and Community Agents. Much of what is labeled as participatory and empowering is not system-transforming but system-maintaining. Indeed, many parts of Scotland are on a steep learning curve with regard to participatory methods. Innovative participatory methods have been relatively infrequently used in the planning, implementation and evaluation of projects. Thus the concepts intrinsic to these various kinds of workers are not well understood, and the words are used to the convenience of those primarily concerned with delivering services and accommodating people within existing institutions, systems and project plans. This is illustrated in a recent publication which states, *"Animateurs need to be appointed to stimulate awareness of the training opportunities that are available to ensure the maximum uptake."* (SCU and RSPB, 1995). This clearly illustrates the misunderstanding of the term *'animateur'*. The statement implies that animateurs should be involved in *'selling'* the organisation's objectives to communities. If there were sound thinking and processes which involved local people in the setting of objectives and owning the development process from the start, it would not be necessary to *'sell'* opportunities; there would be no reason to believe that local peoples' objectives would differ fundamentally from the external organisation's objectives. One way of developing such common aims and complementary functions is through establishing community networks.

Organisations committed to supporting community networks must advocate for the wider understanding of the principles, concepts and issues involved in participatory methods. There is a need to actively demonstrate commitment to *'people-centred'* development through promoting the growth of independent local organisations and networks.

Endpiece

" The importance of people-centred development lies in its promotion of the civic virtues of solidarity, service to others and community benefit through the establishment of value-based organisations with a strong common bond between members. These organisations, unlike private sector businesses or government agencies, seek to motivate members by promoting the concept of citizens exercising their intellectual capacity to create social change through building an independent economic, social and cultural life based on self-reliance, self-help and mutual assistance. This is in sharp contrast to the private and public sector, and is the basis of the social economy. The social economy needs to be better researched, promoted and harnessed as the agent of people-centred development given these fundamental differences in approach which include: the need for rural development research and practice to tackle the new agenda for combating social exclusion and poverty; promoting innovative and equal opportunities; tackling the issues of demand rather than supply."

Source: Comments on EU REAPER Programme: Common Themes for Rural Research, Graham Boyd, Inverness July 1996.

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