



Serving diverse communities: The role of community initiatives in delivering services to poverty neighbourhoods



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ABSTRACT

The recent decades have witnessed a shift from the traditional top-down model of service delivery led by the state to the provision and delivery of services by community organisations. This article explores the extent to which community initiatives in Jane-Finch, a highly diverse, lower income, inner-suburban neighborhoods of Toronto, were successful in achieving their goals, and the relevance of the experience for current neighbourhood initiatives targeting diversity. It discusses the factors which contributed to the effectiveness of 10 analysed initiatives in terms of reaching their primary objectives. The analysis shows that despite the efforts within community initiatives to improve conditions for inhabitants, their impacts remain limited due to underlying structural challenges such as poverty and institutionalised racism, increasing fragmentation within the over-all network of initiatives and precarious funding, which pit programs against one another and hamper effective collaboration and solidarity needed in order to achieve transformative change.

1. Introduction

Low-income households living in racially diverse poverty areas often face multi-faceted challenges. Diversity in such neighbourhoods tends to go hand in hand with high levels of inter-generational poverty, lack of physical and social infrastructure and poor quality of life (e.g. Hulchanski, 2010; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Research has further shown that low-income households commonly struggle with meeting basic needs due to limited resources, low earnings and inadequate government support, and are affected by their neighbourhood environment in terms of health, employment, criminal and drug-related activities (Austin & Lemon, 2006; Chow, Johnson, & Austin, 2004; Sampson, 2001). Poverty neighbourhoods are thus not only a symptom of disadvantage, but also a source of it since they negatively impact the opportunities of their inhabitants (Fitzpatrick, 2004). Kintrea (2007) further underscores that poverty neighbourhoods, which are commonly situated at the urban fringes, are often the by-products of policy as well as the housing system, which translate labour market driven inequalities into spatial concentrations of poverty and segregation (see also Atkinson & Kintrea, 2002; Lupton, 2003). Furthermore, often in such neighbourhoods there is an inflow of households in extreme need and an outflow of upwardly mobile residents which exacerbates the challenges in service delivery and neighbourhood improvement (Kintrea, 2007).

Meanwhile, policy interventions have traditionally sought to tackle some of these challenges by implementing a range of programs intended to improve neighbourhood quality. Examples of such policy interventions include the new deal for communities in the context of the UK (e.g. Dargan, 2009; Lawless, 2011, 2006, 2004; Wallace, 2007), and Priority neighbourhoods in Canada (Cowen & Parlette, 2011; Hulchanski, 2007; Leslie & Hunt, 2013). Community-based initiatives often fall in the area of third sector welfare organizations, referring to non-government, non-profit organisations operating in the interstices of formal state institutions, the market sector and the private spheres such as the household whose primary area of focus is welfare (Brown, Kenny, & Turner, 2002). Seyfang and Smith (2007) further underscore that grassroots initiatives differ from market-based interventions in that (a) they embody diverse organisational forms including cooperatives, voluntary associations, informal community groups, and social enterprises; (b) Their resource and funding base is similarly diverse, e.g. grant funding, limited commercial activity, voluntary input and mutual exchanges; (c) They exhibit varying degrees of professionalisation and official recognition and support.

Brown et al. (2002) emphasize that third-sector community initiatives are increasingly relevant in the 21st century as an alternative to the traditional welfare state model which is highly centralized, standardized and bureaucratic. The traditional model often fails to take into account public input since it is grounded in patriarchal social relations, which render the decision of social ‘experts’ the objective truth in

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determining social needs, how they should be met and the methods through which they should be delivered (Culpitt, 1992). The result of this top-down model is an inherent paternalism in the relation between the provider and recipient of welfare which renders the latter as essentially passive with little will-power for self-determination. On the contrary, the relationships in third sector initiatives are often the inverse, reflecting the voluntary and self-governing nature of these programs (Brown et al., 2002). Community initiatives can thereby provide an alternative method to service provision and further bolster bottom-up local leadership in disadvantaged communities (O'Connor, 2001).

This paper expands the body of work on community initiatives by providing findings from a highly diverse, poor inner-suburban neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada. It provides an in-depth analysis of how a selected sample of ten community initiatives in Jane and Finch has worked in practice, particularly in relation to two notions: funding and community involvement and outlines the lessons they carry for future initiatives. The paper is based on a wider evaluation of policies to address diversity in Toronto (Ahmadi & Tasan-Kok, 2013) conducted as part of the DIVERCITIES project which investigates the impact of diversity upon social cohesion, social mobility and economic performance of inhabitants across Toronto in addition to 13 European cities. While the observations presented here are drawn from Toronto, many of the themes highlighted in the analysis of the community initiatives in this case have also been echoed elsewhere.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The following section will offer a brief overview of the theoretical background. Thereafter, the research methods and a brief introduction to the selected case study are respectively outlined. The data and analysis are then laid out. The paper concludes by presenting lessons and implications for future community initiatives and the research synthesis.

2. The role of community in service delivery

In the context of the declining role of the state in the delivery of welfare and services and the shift from government to governance (Rhodes, 1996), especially its market and partnership-based forms (Jessop, 2002), the role of community organizations has gained increasing relevance. The traditional top-down mode of service delivery by the state has received criticism, from both the left and the right. The political left has criticized the top-down delivery of services for creating welfare dependency and undermining, active citizenship, political activism and autonomy (Oosterlynck et al., 2013). Nancy Fraser (among others) criticises the liberal welfare state for leaving untouched the underlying socio-economic structures that create and maintain the unequal distribution of resources and class divisions (as opposed to changing the economic structure and transforming the conditions of existence for all) (Fraser, 1995). While the centralised welfare model does provide the poor with aid, it also targets them for stigmatization and hostility via creating essentialised antagonistic group differentiations (i.e. the demonization of the poor as inherently deficient, needy, and undeserving of the special treatment they appear to be receiving) (see also Fraser, 1999, 2011; Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Within the right, a common argument has been that the delivery of welfare by the state undermines individual responsibility, advocating for a model of service delivery that centres on the market and private sector. Central to such model is the belief that the devolution of responsibility from the state to the private sector enhances efficiency and output in delivering services, by creating individual and organizational competition and reducing union protection. This entails the privatisation of public utilities and contracting out welfare programmes. The devolution of responsibility through privatisation has been on the rise in light of the growing hegemonic prominence of neoliberalism in many post-war Western societies. However, there is ample evidence for the

failure of the market in meeting its premises in service delivery. The logic of the market model undermines ideals of social justice and collective responsibility, advocates for competition among service providers (a premise which it often fails to deliver as it may produce monopolies and oligopolies instead) and prioritises quantity over quality. It further creates an acute distinction between the provider and receiver of services by constructing the latter as consumers who supposedly hold power over the quality of service. However, this is a false promise since in reality service recipients rarely obtain the fiscal and human resources to dictate the market (Brown et al., 2002; Jessop, 2002).

Meanwhile, advocates of expanding the market economy and self-organisation of civil-society have responded to the inadequacies of the market model by increasing promotion of the notion of community over the past two decades. This is not to say that the language of the market has disappeared. Underlying these new communitarian alternatives remains the assumption that welfare states are costly, inefficient and likely to promote parasitic dependency as opposed to empowerment. State-provided monopoly services should thereby be minimized by contracting out services, promoting internal competition and increasing third-sector (i.e. agents located between state and market) and grassroots involvement (Jessop, 2002). Seyfang and Smith (2007) similarly advocate for 'grassroots innovation', referring to a network of activists and organisations which operate within civil society arenas and generate bottom-up solutions to sustainable community development. They further assert that such grassroots initiatives can deliver viable alternatives where top-down measures fail, by promoting community action which utilises contextualised experience and knowledge about what works in local communities and what matters to their members.

However, the promotion of community, as underscored by Jessop (2002) lacks explicit references to structures of power and authority, exploitation and domination (see also Raco, 2016; Taylor, 2011). Emphasizing human agency, local communities are thereby encouraged to empower themselves, create and sustain informal initiatives despite insufficient funds, support and infrastructure. Thus, there is an inherent contradiction in this model of community promotion which emphasises local contribution on the one hand while undermining the very conditions essential to it on the other. The financial effectiveness of the downscaling of service provision to community welfare institutions has further been questioned since, in the context of funding precarity, research has shown that decentralisation does not serve the purpose of financial savings (Oosterlynck et al., 2013). Rather, it results in a prioritisation of the interests of private investors, exacerbating competition and fixation on the economic outcomes of social programs. (Andreotti, Mingione, & Polizzi, 2011).

In light of the contradictions outlined above, the paper explores the question of how local community initiatives can work in practice. It specifically analyses a number of initiatives in relation to two primary notions: (a) **funding and support**, (b) **community participation and input**. Firstly, the issue of funding is highly relevant to the analysis of community initiatives since it makes explicit matters such as the role and function of the state in relation to the initiative and degree of autonomy. Brown et al. (2002) emphasize that the implications of state-funding are two-fold, underscoring that the concept of state responsibility is often invoked in community funding debates while acknowledging the co-optative implications of dependency on the capitalist state. While accepting state funding reinforces citizen rights to universal welfare, it may simultaneously undermine the right to autonomous action for community initiatives.

Secondly, community input and participation are relevant to the study of community initiatives in that they allow for the exploration of the degree of active citizenship as well as factors contributing to or undermining it, relation between service providers and recipients, and

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