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DEVELOPING A PLURALIST APPROACH TO ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SOCIAL SERVICE AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the 'Achieving Better Community Development' (ABCD) model for organisational practice (Barr & Hashagen 2000) with the organisational practices in New Zealand 'social development' approach to social service provision. As a result of this comparison, we evaluate whether the ABCD model is a more appropriate framework for evaluating voluntary-sector organisations that are informed by community-development concepts.

Since the late 1990s the rejection of a strictly imposed economic rationalism has led the New Zealand government, like that of most European countries, into a major policy shift to democratic pluralist or 'third way'-style government. The state, acting around key rhetorical terms such as 'partnership', has sought to create partner relationships with community organisations in 'joined up' government (Craig and Larner 2002). The current government promotes a 'social development' response to social issues, which in turn influences their funding and accountability models. While this model may demonstrate 'best practice' for those who support a desire for accountability and control, we argue that it is not appropriate for organisations that seek community development in their organisational practice. This discussion is of particular relevance to social workers who are employed in the community sector, as this dominant discourse will impact on how they are accountable to their stakeholders and, ultimately, on their ability to work 'holistically' with the community.

We conclude that community organisations should be wary of adopting a standardised, centrally imposed way of working if that does not suit their political or practice standpoint. Furthermore, alternative models, such as ABCD, should be accepted by state funders as an alternative best practice for such organisations.

KEYWORDS: social development; third way; community development; community organisation.

INTRODUCTION

To open the argument for a pluralist approach to organisational practice and accountability, we begin by examining the principles of the organisational practice associated with the 'social development' approach alongside Barr and Hashagen's (2000) community-development approach, the 'Achieving Better Community Development' (ABCD) model for organisational practice. We then examine the organisational practices of two community organisations in Dunedin, New Zealand, and align them to these two models. By making this comparison, we find that the two organisations illustrate best practice for each of the two models. We therefore contend that one size does not fit all, and develop a case for a more pluralistic approach to organisational practice.

This discussion is of relevance to social workers who are employed in the state and community sectors, as the current dominant discourse of the 'social development' approach controls their actions and interactions. This social-development approach may also impact on how social workers value the contribution of self-help community organisations in partnerships with state organisations. How they value the contribution of this part of the sector will, in turn, impact on the professional social worker's ability to work 'holistically'.

The source of the data for this paper originates in a research project undertaken by the authors in 2001–2002 and subsequently published in 2003 (Aimers & Walker 2003). It explored the governance and organisational practices of eleven community organisations in Dunedin. The study used narrative methodology to explore a number of themes: life history, the influence of the external environment, the internal dynamics, the challenges to and the success factors of the organisation. The aims of this research were to allow the organisations to tell their own stories and to identify their strategies for achieving ongoing operation and for others to learn from those experiences.

In this paper we focus on two of these organisations: Anglican Methodist Family Care and Pasifika Women. These organisations were chosen to illustrate the two models, 'social development' and 'community development', in action. One organisation actively pursued partnerships with government by taking advantage of government contracts to employ professionally trained social workers; the other did not enter into formal partnerships with government agencies, preferring a community self-help approach. By comparing these organisations, we illustrate how different organisational practice and accountability evaluation models can allow

two very different organisations to be deemed successful and effective. We do this by applying the two evaluation models: the 'social development' approach and the alternative, the 'Achieving Better Community Development' (ABCD) model. We are not suggesting that any one way is better but that both systems of organisational practice offer a pluralistic understanding of an organisation's location in its wider ecological location (O'Donoghue & Maidment 2005: 32–49).

As a result of this comparison, we argue that alternative evaluation models are more appropriate for organisations that are concerned with community development and localised expertise through community self-help, while evaluation models based on the social development approach remain appropriate for organisations which engage in 'third way'-style partnerships with government agencies, i.e. those that have an emphasis on delivering 'professional' social-work-based programmes.

THE 'SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

The 'social development' approach was developed in New Zealand by the Ministry of Social Development to provide a blueprint for state sector agencies and community agencies to enter into contracting arrangements. Larner (2004: 7) defines this approach as a process that brings together the concepts of 'human capital' with 'social capital', thereby linking communities, families/whanau and individuals to broader economic and social processes. Quoting the New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark, Larner explains that the overall aim of 'the social development approach is to "reconcile social justice with an energetic and competitive economy"'.

For this study we view the social development approach as a standardised model for practice that includes the following steps:

• Processes should work 'with' communities to mobilise social capital.

• Services should be 'joined' to (government) policies with an emphasis on preventative and remedial activities.

• Practices should be collaboratively formed to respond knowledgeably to power relations between locations, agents and funders.

• Services should practise transparent, reflective and ethical practices.

• Organisations should adopt a form of governance that accept an ethos of mutuality on agreed tasks.

- Practice must be amenable to rigor and evaluation (Harrington 2005: 6–7).

This approach led to a standardisation of practice for those community agencies seeking such funded relationships (Harrington 2005). Harrington concludes that the social development approach displays a desire by the state to either extend 'bureaucracy into the lives of individuals' or increase the 'regulatory mindset implicit in the neo-liberal need for accountabilities and control' (Harrington 2005: 7). Larner observes that the latter need for accountabilities and control of third-sector organisations by their funding bodies has now become 'normalised' into community organisation's expectations: "Neo-liberalized" community organisations and community activists are now developing partnerships agreements instead of traditional contracts, arguing for social audits in which the *quality of relationships* are assessed, and advocating for *"process"* and *"formative"* evaluations in which the evaluators play a mentoring rather than a monitoring role' (Larner 2004: 15) (emphasis added).

This desire to neo-liberalise organisational processes was also found in an annual survey of New Zealand non-profit organisations (Thornton 2005). The survey found that among the main issues expressed by these organisations were concerns relating to the skills and expertise of board members, particularly in relation to their knowledge of legislation, managing compliance and reporting, with 71% of these organisations developing annual business plans. This is not surprising considering that over 33% of non-profit organisations have to satisfy accountability reporting to four or more stakeholders (Thornton 2005).

THE 'ACHIEVING BETTER COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT' (ABCD) MODEL

While the social development approach may dominate the voluntary sector, there are still a number of organisations who for various reasons have resisted 'joining up' with government. We suggest that these organisations operate to a philosophy of community development.

Barr and Hashagen's (2000) 'Achieving Better Community Development' (ABCD) model for planning and evaluating community development offers a conceptual framework based on community-development principles that organisations can adapt to their own circumstances. The model recognises the complex nature of community organisations and, in particular, the unpredictable variables that make a standardised approach difficult to apply. Barr and Hashagen suggest that this model is most appropriate for

organisations that have adopted a community-development approach to their practice. Consequently, the ABCD model recognises that an awareness of community empowerment process is necessary in order to evaluate such community organisations. To this end, there is an emphasis on involving communities in the process.

The ABCD model evaluates:

- the inputs to community development – resources provided from both inside and outside the community;

- the process of engagement with communities – working with communities through a recognisable community development process including engagement, relationship-building, intervention and assessment;

- the outputs (products) of the work – the actual concrete measurable products of intervention; and

- the outcomes (effects) in communities – the substantive effects on the community of the invention.

This simple framework is 'based on broadly accepted values of community development' (Barr & Hashagen 2000: 18) and explicitly identifies the process as worthy of investigation, distinguishing between the obvious tangible 'outputs' of a process and the longer-term and more substantial changes – defined as (overall) outcomes (Barr & Hashagen 2000:17–19). The benefit of the ABCD model as an alternative to the social development approach is that it acknowledges that community organisations engaged in community development are complementary to statutory and other voluntary agencies. Barr and Hashagen argue that effective community development should challenge these organisations to engage collaboratively with their communities to achieve outcomes of sustainability, liveability and equitability. The ABCD model therefore provides organisations with a blueprint for success that can sit alongside the social development model rather than contesting it.

APPLYING THE MODELS TO ORGANISATIONS IN PRACTICE

Our decision to illustrate a pluralistic approach to organisational best practice has been influenced by the narrative methodology used to collect the original data. In the original study we noted that narrative analysis allows the researcher to see how respondents view their own stories, and as such is useful for examining complex issues in a holistic manner where the researcher wishes to identify the similarities and differences between

organisations (Aimers & Walker 2003). While in this article we have selected extracts from the respondent's stories, we have sought to maintain the integrity of the original research with minimal interpretation in order that the respondent's voices remain dominant.

A. The social development approach: Anglican Methodist Family Care

Background

Anglican Methodist Family Care (AMFC) (now Anglican Family Care) is a medium-sized ecumenical organisation originating from a coalition of church-based organisations. Church-based social service organisations were among the first social service agencies established in New Zealand. These organisations were established on the Christian charity model brought with European settlers (Nash 2001).

In examining the organisational practice of AMFC, we use the social development framework.

1. Employ processes that work 'with' communities to mobilise social capital.

AMFC illustrates the multiple accountabilities required of voluntary agencies 'joined up' with government. While it has accountabilities relating to government contracts, it also acknowledges the needs of the community. For AMFC, it is the role of the staff to interpret community needs for the governing board. However, the needs that are identified by the staff are not always translated into programmes unless they also match government priorities which are then able to attract funding. AMFC notes that since the advent of government contracting, the financial support from the churches has dramatically declined:

> We are getting less money from churches now, and we find it difficult when we see needs and are unable to address them. Money from the churches in the past enabled us to attend to the needs. It is a challenge for us as an agency when we identify needs that we are unable to secure funding for.

2. Services should be 'joined' to (government) policies with an emphasis on preventative and remedial activities.

AMFC has been actively engaged with central government since the early 1980s. Since this time, not only has its funding base transferred from the churches to the government, its programmes have changed to reflect the

government priorities of the day, such as budgeting, counselling and social-work-based 'homebuilder' programmes.

> By about 1992, funding was accessed through contracts negotiated with Community Funding Agencies, which operated out of a business environment. This changed the climate hugely for service providers. Fortunately for AMFC, the government saw as priorities the budgeting, counselling and homebuilder programmes we were currently offering.

It could be argued that all these programmes are 'preventative' or 'remedial', aimed at educating families to become more independent from government support or intervention. AMFC also extended the geographic spread of its programmes in response to the availability of government funding opportunities.

> The advent of contracting, and the funding avenues opening up through the Community Funding Agency, enabled us to increase the services we provided in the Central Otago area, and to extend our services into the South Otago area.

This supports Craig and Larner's (2003) argument that a number of organisations, including church-based providers, have found themselves re-cast as 'little arms of the state' (2003: 17–18).

> In 1992, under the direction of the Minister of Social Welfare at the time [Jenny Shipley], funding became available for a budgeting service. She believed that budgeting was the answer to everything. There is less funding available for budgeting services now than when it first was funded, so we restrict our service to family budgeting only.

3. Practices should be collaboratively formed to respond knowledgeably to power relations between locations, agents and funders.

AMFC's response to a government desire for co-ordinating foster care in Dunedin illustrates the organisation's willingness to *collaborate* with other providers in order to pool their collective *knowledge*. This was a controversial decision within the organisation, indicating the complexity of the task and the need to respond appropriately and knowledgeably with an awareness of the *power relations* within the organisation as well as between all the parties concerned.

> One of our biggest initiatives came in about 1992/1993, when there was no single organisation in Dunedin that could offer foster care. Before this, both AMFC and Presbyterian Social

Services provided some services, but the new Child Youth and Family legislation required much more oversight and accountability of children in care ... There were different feelings among staff about us taking on a contract like this, so there was a lot of discussion.

4. Emphasis on transparent, reflective and ethical practices.

Because of their long association with government contracting, AMFC have had over twenty years to adopt the organisational practices that contract-negotiation and accountability demand. AMFC's comment that the business model has not had a huge effect on its day-to-day running supports Larner's (2004) argument that these practices have become 'normalised' into community organisations' expectations.

What are the impacts of the business model? I don't think this model has had a huge effect on the day-to-day running, but its impact is certainly evident. For a period of time we had annual contracts only. It is unsettling for us not knowing if we would have funding from year to year. It is less challenging now that we have some longer-term contracts which help to provide security from a service perspective.

5. Adopt a form of governance that accepts an ethos of mutuality on agreed tasks.

As noted previously, the organisational practices of AMFC have been greatly influenced by its relationship with government. This is also reflected in its governance practices, which have evolved to meet the needs of being 'joined up' with government. The growth in size of AMFC meant a revisiting of the 'flat governance' model and the adoption of a more hierarchical bureaucratic structure, which is partly as a result of the increase in staff necessary to manage new contracts but also likely influenced (although we cannot say for sure) by the 'best practice' requirements promoted by government agencies.

At one stage we had a flat management structure where decisions were made at staff meetings, but this became more difficult because of the increase in staff numbers. We now have monthly Co-ordinator meetings, drawing in staff working in the South and Central Otago areas.

6. Practice must be amenable to rigor and evaluation.

We have already noted that the community needs identified by AMFC do not always match government priorities and, as AMFC is dependent on government funding, it may not be able to provide programmes that meet these expressed community needs. As a result of evaluation, AMFC stated that it had put new emphasis on programmes that fitted into its new profile as a 'one-stop shop' for families, suggesting a more centralised approach to its work than may have occurred in the past.

About five years ago we evaluated our service and planned a direction for the future. It was clear to us that we were providing family-focused services. Projects over the years have included our involvement with the community house in Stenhope Crescent, a group for the elderly in Caversham [a Dunedin suburb] and a budgeting service for people with special needs, such as psychiatric illness. We believed that all these services connected to family in some way. However, our new focus has been to develop a one-stop shop to enable families to access a variety of help easily. The main indicator of success is seeing families sort themselves out and turn their lives around, given the opportunity to give life a go.

B. The 'Achieving Better Community Development' (ABCD) model: Pasifika Women (Dunedin Branch)

Barr and Hashagen's (2000) simple framework of inputs, process, outputs and outcomes (see Figure 1) explicitly identifies the process as being worthy of investigation and distinguishes between the obvious tangible outputs of a process (often misnamed as outcomes) and longer-term and more substantial changes, defined in this model as 'overall outcomes'.
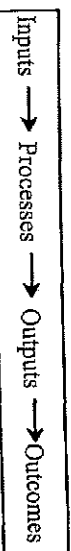
Figure 1: ABCD framework

Inputs ➝ Processes ➝ Outputs ➝ Outcomes

We now will apply this model to the narrative of Pasifika Women:

Background
Pasifika Women is a national network of small membership-based self-help groups established by immigrant women from the Pacific Islands. In the 1970s there was a large increase in migration to New Zealand by Pacific

peoples, who were encouraged by the New Zealand government to immigrate to fulfil labour shortages. Life in New Zealand was a culture shock for these immigrants, who came from tribal village societies to the growing cities of New Zealand. Along with Maori (New Zealand's indigenous people), Pacific peoples still feature prominently in poor social outcomes, suggesting continued need for empowerment (Spoonley 1999).

1. Inputs – community and external.

While strong community networks and a self-help ethos are significant inputs for Pasifika, the organisation is financially resource-poor due to the limited funding available to it. A lack of reliance on government inputs, however, frees the organisation to develop its own activities according to expressed community needs.

In the past we got sick of applying for funding and [being] turned down. I suppose because people didn't want to know that we exist. I tell you a lot of people don't want to know us.

I don't think there is really very many applications that are turned down because they are not applicable – it's more just spreading the money.

I understand that we're not the only group in need.

2. Processes – community empowerment, personal development, positive action, organisation, power and influence.

Pasifika's approach to process is intuitive, concerned with identifying and responding to the felt needs of its members and their wider community. This involves elements of personal development (as illustrated by Pasifika's leadership programmes), positive action (shown in the celebration of Pacific culture through practice of traditional music, weaving and cooking), organisation (displayed in Pasifika's culturally embedded organisational structure) and power/influence (by the organisation's promotion of an ethos of self-help support).

We organise planning meetings where we decide roughly what we're going to do over the next year, and sometimes we've got so many ideas that come forward that we have to prioritise those ideas and work on the ones that are top priority for us.

But we've done so much. Not only are we going to work, we organise our children, school, meals for the family and our husbands. To work in an organisation, it's not easy, so I can understand some women that haven't got time to come to monthly meetings.

3. Outputs – action in the community, social economic, environments, cultural and political.

Pasifika has been active in organising and supporting a range of activities, including social and cultural development, leadership and self-esteem programmes, health promotion and education grants. Embedded in the organisation's work is a commitment to working with the wider community as well as their Pacific communities. Their activities reflect their community needs of preserving Pacific cultural identities, developing personal and educational skills to enable Pacific women to participate in the social, political and economic spheres, and education programmes to improve Pacific people's health and education outcomes.

We organise Women's Day at Burn's Hall – Women's Day is open to all cultures, not just our Pacific women. It's a good way of sharing with the rest of the community.

4. Outcomes – quality of community life, sustainable, liveable and equitable.

Pasifika has contributed to the quality of life of Pacific peoples in Dunedin by offering an organisation that is small, personal and community- and family-oriented, thereby reflecting the values of the Pacific communities members have come from. The organisation's self-help ethos has empowered members to respond collectively to their own felt needs. This process is completely driven by their community and is generally free from government influence. The outcomes are sustainable community networks that create a more liveable New Zealand society for Pacific peoples.

I really missed Samoa when I came to live in Auckland. It was just great to have an organisation set up. I felt a belonging – there were women from Tonga, from Niue, from Cook Island, from Fiji, from Tokelou – they were like all sisters to me.

Pasifika's like a family – an extended family. We all have our own families we go home to, but Pasifika is quite a unique organisation where we can feel comfortable with each other

and know that we can confide in each other. That is what Pasifika is all about – sharing knowledge and also I ... because we live in this cold country, well, when it's winter; you know, you feel isolated, and I think it's good to have other people's ways, like our dancing.

DISCUSSION

When considered against the key success measures of the two evaluation models, it appears that both AMFC and Pasifika could be considered successful. While we do not have the space here to apply each model to each organisation, we can see from the quoted narratives that each organisation sits more comfortably with one model rather than the other. For example, the ABCD model requires organisations to engage in community empowerment. If this aim was applied to AMFC, it is not clear whether it could achieve community empowerment, as the professional nature of its service is dependent on 'expert' staff assessment of the needs of the community rather than the actual engagement of the community to meet their own needs. Conversely, Pasifika Women has not been successful in attracting government funding, suggesting that it does not meet the requirements of government funders, either due to its programmes not fitting with government priorities, a lack of professional staff or an inability to meet contractual reporting. This is not to say that either organisation is not undertaking effective work; rather than critique each organisation against the opposing model, we prefer to suggest that each model complements the other.

Difficulties are raised, however, for those organisations not following the path set by the dominant discourse of social development. As we have seen, this dominant discourse leaves Pasifika Women reliant on community fundraising as it has had little success in obtaining government funding. Whether this funding should come from the independent philanthropic sector, the government-run Lotteries Commission or other sources is a topic that requires further investigation.

What is clear in the case of AMFC is that the organisation's strategy to move towards a more professional service has aligned its operation with government desires, which has led to a distancing from community embeddedness. In contrast, the community embeddedness of Pasifika Women leads to a more intuitive understanding of its role as an inclusive community organisation providing services undertaken by volunteers rather than professional paid staff. This difference in focus raises the question of

who the clients of each organisation really are, with AMFC having contrasting accountabilities both to community and government. However, financial accountability, linked to government policy outcomes, overrides community accountability within the social development model. In contrast, Pasifika, accountability within the community development model, is strongly accountable to its community.

This research questions Craig and Courtney's (2004) argument that centralised needs-assessment and service-delivery ensures equality of provision. We suggest that a holistic perspective places organisations in their wider political context – community forms of decision-making, as illustrated by Pasifika, still exist and are surely likely to remain.

The increasing desire of government to partner with communities has seen the development of what Larner (2004) terms 'indigenous authorities' of community. These community leaders or spokespeople tend to come from established groups that have a culture of accountability and consultation embedded within the social development practice model. Larner (2004: 16-17) notes that while this can lead to new opportunities for 'local ownership' of social policy, 'this new role for localized community organisations also raises important questions about the role of informal community networks and not previously organized communities in local partnerships.'

The resulting acceptance of the voluntary sector to 'join up' with the state has seen the voluntary sector transform from one working wholly independently of government policy to one that contributes to and is intricately linked to the government's agenda. As Craig and Larner (2002: 17-18) note, 'social service organisations, including large church-based not-for-profit entities, found themselves re-cast as "little arms of the state" and, to a certain extent, forced into competition with each other.' It could be argued, therefore, that voluntary agencies would retain more freedom to pursue social change objectives if they rejected these state-directed partnerships.

It is worth noting that receiving government funding is not always inconsistent with community-development ideals. Shannon and Walker (2006), for instance, argue that while central government is more involved with the community than it once was, in practice this involvement has occurred in a fragmented and inconsistent way, due to the siloed nature of government agencies and funding. This fragmentation has resulted in an environment that expects community organisations to develop and maintain relationships and accountabilities with multiple government departments with varying and potentially competing goals. Shannon and Walker (2006) see this fragmentation of government silos as an opportunity for community

organisations to gain more agency within their partnerships with government, as the multiple relationships makes it more difficult for the state to 'manage' the partnership across departments. They found, however, that in order to capitalise on this situation, community organisations needed to have a strong basis of social capital, thereby enabling them to mobilise local knowledge and networks to achieve positive outcomes.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen from the two organisations studied, there are different ways of achieving and measuring success for voluntary social service organisations. While AMFC may offer professional counselling, foster-care services and budgeting, Pasifika Women is providing grassroots support for its community of people still adapting to life in New Zealand without losing their own cultural identity. Pasifika appears well-placed to achieve what Barr and Hashagen (2000) argue is the role of community development: to challenge other social service organisations to engage collaboratively with their communities to achieve outcomes of sustainability, liveability and equitability. The two approaches, therefore, are complementary rather than competitive. We argue that by recognising the differences in the voluntary sector, we can begin to mitigate the competitive nature of earlier neo-liberal policies without surrendering to the 'one size fits all' philosophy that is the risk of imposing the 'third way' social development approach exclusively.

We do, however, see two main challenges for the situation in New Zealand and in other countries with competing accountability and organisational evaluation models. The first is to promote a more pluralistic approach to evaluation and best practice by embracing both the social development and community development methods; the second is to ensure that those organisations which go down a community development route are able to access financial resources that do not involve 'joining up' with government, as is required under 'third way'-style contracting.

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