Book review

Community Development: community-based alternatives in an age of globalisation (3rd edition)


This third edition confirms the status of the text as an Australian classic among community development books. In 2006 it is less an idealistic vision and more a practical response to the challenges of global sustainability than it ever was. I suspect it may resonate with even more people than earlier editions had, as recent events have left few people in doubt that our planet is besieged by problems of our own making. It deserves an audience among policymakers and politicians, as well as practitioners, teachers and students. For readers unfamiliar with the earlier editions, it takes as its premise that the limited life expectancy of the welfare state and the rising tide of environmental crisis impel us to act differently, and that change from below requires an integrated form of community development, informed by understanding the interconnectedness of the social, environmental, political, economic, cultural, and personal or spiritual domains that constitute our experience.

In noting that the welfare state exists only in the minority world (a term Tesoriero substitutes for Ife’s earlier use of ‘the north’), and is receding under the weight of globalisation, they challenge us to examine our social democratic assumptions of the continuing role of the state in resourcing programs and services as we know them, (however frequently they are restructured), and to look to alternative ways of meeting human need through community groundedness and ownership. They are critical of the current community-building approaches of government that impose agendas and objectives onto communities rather than allowing and facilitating community self-reliance and the development of their own solutions. Importantly, this edition also highlights and critiques the rise of individualism in the neoliberal climate and the contradictions it produces in debates about working in communities, collectively, non-competitively, and for the greater good.

The authors challenge modernist assumptions of progress in the form of economic growth, which defies the finite nature of resources and the capacity of the environment to support it, and they suggest that living sustainably requires us to develop capacities for living and working differently. Their thesis integrates social justice and human rights with ecological sustainability, and rolls out an ambitious intellectual and practical mapping of the principles and strategies that support their theoretical framework.

Jim Ife’s partnership with Frank Tesoriero, who is responsible for the new edition, has produced a more coherent educational text than its predecessors, enhancing its value for teaching and for practice, as well as further illuminating its possibilities for policymakers. It is sixty pages longer. All chapters now have two sets of excellent questions at their conclusion: one set for discussion which is designed to test understanding of the content, and another set for reflection, well aimed towards readers examining their own responses to the material and making connections with
their own life or community experience. Each chapter also has a number of brief case studies, drawn from local and international community development practice, which illustrate the principles very well, make them achievable, and demonstrate the way in which practice that strives towards a more just and sustainable world is always contextualised, always partial, yet a meaningful and authentic step that all practitioners could take.

The one new chapter is a great addition. I had looked in previous editions in vain for a useful discussion of participation. Perhaps the most fundamental principle and most contested and challenging aspect of community development practice is how to engage communities or groups, how to maximise their participation, how to deal with (others’?) often victim-blaming accusations of apathy, how to value the local (knowledge, skills, culture, resources and processes) and expect local ownership, not tokenism. This chapter deals effectively with these issues in the broader context of participatory democracy and the significance of achieving cha