Cross-country exchanges: a retrospective of SCCD’s/CDX’s achievements

This short paper provides an overview of the origins, achievements and demise of the Community Development Exchange. As CDX prepares to dissolve itself it has been written to record and celebrate the organisation’s life as one of three national infrastructure bodies supporting community development in the UK from the 1970s to the present day. We see it as a working document, to be added to and possibly amended over the years, so feel free to contribute by sending comments to the author.

**History**

The idea for a UK-wide network of people working with communities was first floated in 1984 in response to a proposal from a Gulbenkian Foundation funded study to establish some kind of National Centre for Community Development in the UK. However, extensive consultation revealed considerable scepticism and in some areas outright opposition to the proposal for a National Centre for Community Development, as likely to become a top down, London-based agency, which might promote a single view of what ‘good practice’ might mean in terms of public policy and practice and which would not be accountable to the field.

The Gulbenkian study had argued that community development had fallen between two practice traditions in the UK – on the one hand, youth and community work and, on the other, social work. The time had come for it to ‘come out of the shadows’ as a recognisable and vitally important area of practice and public policy, namely the empowerment of local communities.

In response to the National Centre proposal a steering group was established at a London conference, with its secretariat subsequently provided by the National Consumer Council, working closely with the Association of Community Workers, the Community Projects Foundation, the Federation of Community Work Training Groups and others.[[1]](#footnote-1) This group produced a report and in 1985 organised a national conference in Birmingham at which the establishment of a National Conference for Community Development was proposed. This would be a practitioner led body promoting and supporting community development practice.

The 1985 Birmingham conference approved the idea of a practioner led Standing Conference for Community Development, organised through networks around the country and co-ordinated by a council with representatives from all the main national voluntary and statutory organisations who worked with communities. This standing conference model was agreed as the best way of ensuring democratic grassroots involvement and coverage across all UK jurisdictions and regions. Anyone could become a member provided they agreed to a core statement, or Charter, setting out a shared understanding of community development principles and practice.

Soon after it was established, the organisation attracted funding from central government and was able to recruit a small staff team based in an office in Sheffield, sharing premises with the Federation of Community Work Training Groups. The early years concentrated on building the membership, promoting community development and connecting together anyone with an interest in community development. This included paid community workers, community activists and managers of CD teams, academics and policy officers. This mix, along with the fact that community development was regarded as a cross-sectoral activity, proved really crucial to SCCD’s success. Its cross-cutting nature meant that it could integrate all kinds of views and experiences, and feed these into debates and policy development at a national level. It acted as a conduit between what was going on at community level and decision-makers higher up the tiers of government, including local, regional and national authorities.

With the emergence of CDF as the de facto ‘National Centre’ and with CDF also establishing ‘regional’ offices, such as the Scottish Community Development Centre, CDF and SCCD increasingly worked closely together, with the latter in turn influencing and informing much of CDF’s work. SCCD played a crucial role in making sure that the concerns and ambitions of communities were heard at both local authority and national levels and that policy officers and civil servants understood the practical implications of their attempts to increase community engagement and public participation across a whole raft of policy areas.

In terms of practice, SCCD was a founder member of the steering group which established PAULO, the UK wide national standards body for community learning and development that subsequently formed part of the Lifelong Learning UK Sector Skills Council. Two national surveys were conducted, in partnership with CDF and the Federation, which gave a good sense of the state of paid community work practice, and also highlighted the important contribution made by unpaid community work through a qualitative study produced in parallel. Developments such as these over the past thirty years gave recognition to community development as a discrete professional area of practice.

**Achievements**

Achievements can be measured in so many ways and from so many different perspectives. This paper can only provide a snapshot of how SCCD/CDX has benefited and promoted community development in its short lifespan. In fulfilment of its remit of ‘supporting the people who support communities’, SCCD’s initial priorities lay in the development of local and regional networks. A regional development fund (RDF) enabled many to start up and to organise mini-conferences around a variety of themes. These networks were brought together on a regular basis through ‘regional road shows’ that provided a platform for sharing ideas and information. These were wonderful networking opportunities for people working with communities to come together, exchange ideas, raise issues and learn from each other about community development thereby building the movement nationally and creating a strong practice-base for this approach. In the first phase of its existence, SCCD/CDX explicitly acted as an umbrella body for national community networks and has encouraged the formation of new organisations, such as the Urban Forum and later the Community Sector Coalition, which it chaired in recent years.

In recognition of this vital function, SCCD changed its name to CDX in 2003 and has continued to promote networking at every level since then.

An early success was to double the funding from central government to cover core costs, and then to attract additional project funding to develop the use of information technology, including the website as a source of information on community development. This was a valuable resource and a forerunner for CD websites that have followed. CDX has pioneered the use of social media in the field, being an early adopter with a profile on Facebook and prolific use of Twitter, as well as playing a major part in setting up and servicing on-line forums such as Our Society and NatCAN. Virtual peer-to-peer networking will be crucial to the future of community development as reductions in funding make it more difficult to meet face-to-face.

For many years government valued CDX’s input into policy discussions, allowing community development workers and activists to influence the design and implementation of various programmes, including the New Deal for Communities and the Local Strategic Partnerships. It worked with CDF on the Building Communities Week in 1996, including a 2 day conference in London, resulting in recommendations to the Conservative government for small grants and support for local networks which laid the basis for the subsequent Community Chest aspects of the Neighbourhood Renewal programme and the community empowerment networks. CDX has consistently contributed a vital community-level perspective on several government-led working parties, notably contributing to reports such as Firm Foundations and the Community Development Challenge.

Strong links were established with local government through a regular forum attended by all the main national networks as partners with the Association of Metropolitan Authorities and Local Government Association. This resulted in two important reports about community development in local authority settings, paving the way for an expansion of Council-employed CD teams. CDX has also produced its own publications on evaluation, equalities practice (with CDF) and numerous case studies and discussion papers, all made available through the website. A well-designed and informative magazine was supplemented by e-mailings, including the popular ‘PARP’ briefings with updates on policy and practice.

CDX has played a unique role in connecting community development players with one another, especially bringing together the main national organisations, CDF and FCDL, in collaborations such as the national occupational standards (NOS) and the production of the Strategic Framework for Community Development (published in 2001). This was launched at an event at the House of Commons, and was widely used to raise the profile of CD. A second parliamentary reception was held in 2009, organised in conjunction with CDF and the Federation, but unfortunately the current government has shown little interest in community development.

**Challenges**

SCCD/CDX has faced a number of challenges over the years and has had to re-structure itself several times to accommodate changing contexts and resource levels. During its early years SCCD/CDX operated as a UK-wide infrastructure body, with well-attended and hugely enjoyable national conferences bringing together members from across all four jurisdictions. Recent trends towards devolution and regionalisation led to increased decentralisation. CDX worked closely with partner organisations in Wales, Scotland and northern Ireland to organise conferences and support the development of national and regional networks that have become more oriented towards their various national parliaments, assemblies and regional decision-making bodies.

These developments posed a challenge for CDX which has become an England-hub almost by default but at the same time they created opportunities for comparing rapidly diverging policies and priorities across the UK. Involvement in the Regionalisation Consortium enabled CDX to play a role in addressing the growing significance of the English regions in the first decade of this century. Adapting to the four-nations approach was not easy and it proved virtually impossible, given limited staffing to find the time and energy to network within and across Europe let alone the foster international links.

Within its remit CDX has striven to keep the flame of CD alight as a movement and as a profession. At times this has been a delicate balancing act, combining a principled commitment to the politics of social justice while demonstrating how CD methods and values are applied ‘on the ground’ across a range of settings and policy areas to produce the clear outcomes wanted by politicians and policy-makers, as well as creating benefits with communities themselves.

Tensions between a ‘purist’ values-based model of CD and a more pragmatic approach are inevitable and CDX has sometimes struggled to provide clarity in this respect, especially in relation to the respective roles of the two other major national partners, CDF and FCDL. Despite many examples of collaboration, the incipient rivalries were never satisfactorily resolved, resulting in a lack of unity and several lost opportunities.

**Conclusions**

SCCD/CDX has existed as an independent community development agency for a quarter of a century, supporting practitioners and activist (paid and unpaid) at the grass-roots and strategically influencing local and central government policy. It has benefited from central government funding for most of its existence. This covered core costs and was supplemented at different times by specific project grants. Losing this funding has left the organisation with no means to continue its central co-ordinating functions and the Board, feeling it had exhausted all options, reluctantly decided it had no alternative but to close down.

We know that the landscape of organisations and networks is continually changing, as new bodies emerge, some evolve to take on new functions and shapes while others simply come to an end of their viable lives. In some instances it is because they are no longer meeting a need and in others resources are no longer available to sustain it even though the need remains. SCCD/CDX has been part of these processes of evolution, going through cycles over its lifetime and seeing others do the same. However, in this instance an independent agency for CD is disappearing amid a climate where political and economic decisions are increasing social inequality and set to dramatically widen divisions in society.

CDX has supported a whole range of initiatives – sometimes in partnership with others, sometimes on our own. Perhaps our most significant contribution has been to build alliances and networks between different groups and agencies that have an interest or a stake in community development. CDX can take pride in surviving for so long and championing the principles of co-operation, communication and self-determination. Ensuring the connected-ness of the field and associated groups and agencies has been a core aim, and we hope this commitment will continue through the local and regional networks which are currently being established using the ‘starfish’ model. The need for independent agencies to promote the core community development values of equality and social justice is likely to remain with us for a very long time. It is hoped that at some stage in the not too distant future changes in government thinking will allow a resurgence of interest in community development and a new national networking body will emerge once again.

1. In fact the proposal for a National Centre was taken forward by making the Community Projects Foundation the ‘QUANGO’ for community development in the UK and renaming it the Community Development Foundation (CDF) in 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)