

# Adult Education and Community Development in the West of Ireland

MICHEÁL S. Ó CINNÉIDE, M.A., PH.D.<sup>1</sup>

Community development is the goal of an innovative adult educational programme being provided on an extra-mural basis by University College Galway throughout the West of Ireland. This predominantly rural region has experienced significant out-migration of mainly young people resulting in a residual dispirited aging population. The natural research base is poor and even more importantly there is a low level of awareness of development opportunities amongst the indigenous population. The overall aim of the educational program is to develop the capacity of individuals and local communities to undertake development initiatives. An attempt is made to encourage widespread participation in community affairs, to replace apathy and dependency with a spirit of self-help and to get people to embark on various community based initiatives such as the preparation of a comprehensive resource survey or the establishment of a community enterprise. The program consists of two major elements, one consisting mainly of lectures and seminars on predetermined topics which are germane to community development and the other consisting of class centered projects which are designed to provide practical learning opportunities for course participants. A number of positive indicators provide evidence that the program is very well received and highly successful.

## INTRODUCTION

Adult education and community development was the theme of a major conference organized by the Council of Europe at its headquarters in Strasbourg in May, 1986. Several contributors to the conference discussed the vital role of universities in promoting the process of community development. It was generally accepted that social evolution was forcing universities as a whole to review their roles and extend their scope and the Conference concluded that the Council of Europe could apply its own modes of intervention in order "to urge university authorities to become more involved in the community development process, particularly in economically depressed regions" [7].

Community development through education is the goal of an innovative programme of extra-mural studies offered throughout the West of Ireland by University College Galway, a campus of about 4,000 students, situated on the west coast of the country. When it was first established as Queen's College, Galway, in the middle of the 19th century, the subjects of its professorships included Agriculture, Civil Engineering and Celtic among others, indicating that those who planned a University Institution for Galway had in mind that it should contribute to the economic and cultural development of its predominantly rural hinterland, no less than to the scholarship of its students [11]. The University, therefore, has a long history of involvement in the development of its region and its community development programme, which is the primary focus of this article, is but one facet of its current contribution.

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Community development is a term which has come into international usage and is used loosely, ambiguously and even wrongly used to denote a range of strategies and activities having different underlying philosophies [5]. However, the essential elements in the classical communi-

ty development model are not in dispute. They are: (1) the community is the unit of action; (2) emphasis is placed on the mobilization of indigenous human and natural resources; (3) internal resources are supplemented by external supports; (4) all segments of the community are given an opportunity to participate and in effect to obtain increased control over decisions and resources; (5) the approach is holistic or comprehensive, going beyond segmented efforts and the limited interests of particular groups within the community; and (6) the process of decision making is rational (e.g. based on identification of needs) and democratic [2]. Accordingly, community development represents a bottom-up approach to development which involves: (1) local groups in organizing, planning, co-operating and implementing projects for the benefit of their community; (2) emphasis on indigenous human and natural resources and (3) interaction with outside bodies (e.g. government agencies) from which necessary advice and support is sought.

The accomplishment of specific tasks such as the building of a community centre, the preparation of a local resource survey or the creation of employment opportunities locally, through the establishment of a community business, represents the most tangible results of community development. However, the ultimate goal is much less apparent and may be easily overlooked. In its ideological sense, community development places strong emphasis on the approach or method of undertaking local development. What is stressed is the intrinsic merit of getting a local community to identify its own needs, the desirability of involving all segments of the local community in a collaborative effort, the importance of representative democratic structures to encourage citizen participation in community affairs, the nurturing of local leadership and the development of the community's capacity to function effectively on a self-help basis in its own interests over a period of time [4].

In other words, community development is basically an educative process. Participants are expected to develop a range of multi-situational skills. The acquisition of these

<sup>1</sup>From the Centre for Community Development Studies, University College, Galway, Ireland.

skills is a gain in itself, and a gain with a potential to multiply so that most observers attach greater significance to the attainment of the educational goal than to the accomplishment of specific tasks which are best regarded as a means to the ultimate end. As such community development represents an approach to local and regional development that emphasizes investments in human resources as opposed to the more traditional approach of assisting lagging regions through the provision of buildings, locational grants and enhanced infrastructural facilities. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that regions can develop comparative advantages based upon indigenous enterprise, and that their fate is not entirely predetermined by locational, structural or resource characteristics. It is contended that even areas with great physical disadvantages (e.g. Japan, Switzerland) can prosper if their inhabitants can develop sufficient initiative and expertise. While by no means supplanting the more traditional views and strategies of regional development, the "people development paradigm" is proposed as a necessary complement to investment in physical capital [3].

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WEST OF IRELAND

The West of Ireland is beset by many intractable problems which have greatly retarded its development. Situated along the Atlantic seaboard it is geographically remote from the mainstream of European economic activity. Poor communication facilities, at least until very recently, have augmented the effects of geographic isolation. The area is characterized by a relatively poor natural resource base, and even more importantly there exists a low level of awareness of the development potential of existing resources. The local economy has been dominated traditionally by small farmers engaged in dairying and the rearing of cattle and sheep.

Insufficient employment opportunities locally has stimulated a long tradition of selective out-migration resulting in a residual, aging, imbalanced and dispirited population. National Government, through various regional policy measures, attempted to arrest the decline. The attraction of mobile foreign industrial projects to this predominantly rural area was the principal instrument of development although some attempts also were made to stimulate agriculture, tourism and fishing, and to provide service employment in the area. Buoyant economic circumstances during the 1960's and 1970's facilitated considerable industrial expansion in the West of Ireland with the result that many rural areas experienced population increases for the first time in over a century.

However, the economic recession of the 1980's has made the attraction of sufficient external investment to the area an insurmountable task. Furthermore, many industrial projects already established have closed in the face of dwindling consumer demand for products. This has led to ever-increasing unemployment levels (now approximating 18% nationally) and renewed net out-migra-

tion from many parts of the West of Ireland. The failings of the industrial policy pursued has led to increasing skepticism about its efficacy. It is argued that not only has it not led to the creation of sufficient employment but that it has resulted largely in assembly type employment consisting mostly of processing imported raw materials, the products of which are then exported, with minimal local linkages in the form of subcontracts. It also has been established that a large proportion of profits are being repatriated. Furthermore, it is argued that the top-down approach to development, which characterized the industrial policy, has fostered a dependency mentality so that the State is now regarded as the provider of the required job opportunities to the detriment of local initiative and self-reliance [9]. It is against this economic background that the programme of extra-mural education in community development, which University College Galway now offers, evolved.

Cultural considerations are also of paramount importance in the West of Ireland as it is along the west coast that the largest Irish-speaking communities are located. Despite official restoration policies, Irish as a community language is in serious decline for various reasons, including out-migration and adverse effects of exogenous industrialization policies pursued by development agencies in these areas [10]. The real challenge is to create employment opportunities that will enhance the position of this minority language. Community based development is considered as one potentially fruitful strategy in this regard.

### ADULT EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

University College Galway, mindful of the development problems that beset its hinterland and of new educational responses to unemployment throughout peripheral regions of Europe [e.g. 6], provides courses on community development, as part of its general extra-mural programme in adult education. The courses are aimed at community groups which lack the know-how to undertake community development but which express an interest in developing that capacity with the help of the University. In this sense the programme is a reactive one with the result that courses are generally provided at centres in which local interest in them is previously expressed. The courses are commonly provided in association with local vocational education committees and with some financial support from state agencies charged with promoting regional development.

The community development courses now being provided by the University have been in their present form for six years. The courses are generally staffed by full-time teaching personnel attached to various academic departments but principally those of Sociology and Geography. Courses are held in centres (usually a local vocational school) which are convenient to the community groups. This ordinarily involves considerable travel for the tutors concerned as many of the centres are far re-

moved from the campus. Some courses already provided involved round trips in excess of 600 km. The courses last for the duration of one academic year (approximately 25-30 weeks) during which class is held once weekly for a period of two to three hours.

Attendance at the courses varies considerably, but generally approximates 20. There are no special requirements for admission to the course. Rather, at some time prior to the proposed commencement date, a public meeting is held to which all members of the local community are invited and at which details of the proposed course are given. Those attending the courses, however, are drawn predominantly from the upper socio-economic classes and are largely representative of the already better educated strata of local communities. It is not easy to persuade many people with little or no formal educational qualifications to attend these courses. This is regrettable as it is felt that very often they have the potential to make an appreciable contribution to (and stand to benefit more from active participation in) community development.

The overall aim of the course is to develop participants' interest in and awareness of their own community with a view to encouraging them to participate actively in local affairs. Fundamental to this approach is the view that education is not a neutral process. Rather, it should make learners more aware of their own social reality so that they are stimulated to endeavor to build a better society. It tries to respond to the negative circumstances in which people live and give them the tools by which to change them [1]. The best known exponent of this position is Paulo Freire who formulated his ideas in Latin America, against a background of illiteracy and poverty.

Specific objectives may vary slightly from centre to centre but generally include: (1) promotion of a spirit of self-help and self-confidence amongst local communities and the dispelling of apathy and dependency; (2) encouraging widespread participation in community activities; (3) establishment of an appropriate vehicle for community development in the form of a local community organization; (4) increasing awareness of indigenous human and natural resources for development; (5) identifying development constraints and appropriate remedial measures; (6) familiarizing participants with various external supports and incentives that may be available; (7) introducing the class to the rudiments of sound business management practices (especially if they indicate a desire to engage in community economic enterprises); (8) assisting with the execution of specific projects so as to instill confidence in their ability to achieve something worthwhile as a group.

Course syllabi may also vary in order to meet specific objectives and because individual tutors may stress (or individual communities may have a particular interest in) some aspects of community development to the exclusion of other topics. However, each course contains two major distinct elements. The first one consists mainly of lectures and seminars on predetermined topics of special importance to community development. During the course

of these sessions the fundamental principles of community co-operation and self-help are examined with particular reference to the Irish context. Approaches to regional development and the principal instruments of regional policy employed in Ireland and elsewhere are analyzed. Various models of community organizations such as community councils, community co-operatives and development associations are outlined and their appropriateness to the local scene is evaluated. Where classes express a desire to initiate community enterprises a number of teaching sessions may be devoted to topics such as product identification, feasibility studies, costing and financing projects, plant requirements, accounting procedures, taxation, marketing and industrial relations. Clearly, these subjects cannot be examined in detail within the scope of one course. Nor is any one tutor deemed competent to lecture on the wide variety of topics covered. Consequently, every effort is made to recruit guest lecturers with special expertise and practical experience in the chosen areas. The onus is on these lecturers to outline the material which they consider most appropriate to the attainment of course objectives. Students are referred to copious readings and they generally exhibit an eagerness to study them.

The second major element of each course consists of class centered projects which are usually identified by the students in consultation with the course tutor. The element is essentially task oriented and is based on the maxim that to do is to learn and vice versa. The aim is not so much one of acquiring useful knowledge as of assimilating a scientific approach and method. In this way the student is expected to observe and reason scientifically (i.e., rigorously, objectively and coherently) and apply the methods of science to the solution of problems so that a scientific attitude becomes a habit, and the ultimate result is that science becomes one with culture [12].

A comprehensive survey of the local area is a commonly selected project. The object is to actively enlist the participants in recording the community's aspirations, in analyzing local problems, in searching for solutions and in implementing and monitoring projects. In this regard, the tutor's role is one of guiding and facilitating. There is an inherent risk that an over-anxious tutor may assume too much responsibility for the execution of projects, whereas ideally responsibility is shouldered largely by the pupils. There is also a danger that teachers may unwittingly create an aura of authority about themselves and thus contribute to a feeling of greater dependency amongst the attendants. Another common problem experienced is that students have an unreal estimation of the time it takes to complete a worthwhile project so they have to be persuaded that it takes enthusiasm, resources and perseverance to consolidate projects.

#### EVALUATING THE PROGRAMME

It is difficult to assess the impact of this innovative programme at this juncture as no formal evaluation of it has yet been undertaken. However, there are a number of

positive indicators which are worthy of brief mention. First, there is a strong demand for the course from numerous rural communities such that it is beyond the present resources of the University to cope with many of the requests that are received. Second, attendances at these courses are very satisfactory despite the fact that students have to pay a sizeable fee and that many are already engrossed in local community affairs. Clearly, the necessity for such courses, their usefulness and their functional quality are apparent to the target communities. Third, many attendants are teachers and parents or both, so that a ripple effect in the wider community can be reasonably presumed, insofar as these people influence the attitudes of other people (especially children) and open their eyes to local opportunities. Fourth, government agencies (e.g. Udaras na Gaeltachta) with specific development briefs for various parts of the West of Ireland have acknowledged the value of these courses and play an important role in instigating and providing partial funding for many of them. Fifth, there is ample evidence that several worthwhile exercises, ranging from relatively minor undertakings of a social or recreational nature to major economic projects such as the establishment of a multi-purpose community development cooperative, have been successfully undertaken by groups that were brought together initially through these courses. Sixth, some communities that have embarked on this course have successfully developed indigenous entrepreneurial ability which has led to widely acclaimed local economic initiatives [8].

In conclusion, community development represents a bottom-up approach to development which places the onus on local communities to strive toward self-reliance and as such it involves local people in meeting the needs and aspirations of their own community. This involvement results in a process of human development whereby apathy and dependency are replaced by caring self-confident attitudes. The experience of University College Galway suggests that education has much to contribute to the enhancement of these processes. Its community development programme represents a convenient means of bringing university expertise to bear on issues relevant to local development. Finally, involvement in such courses enables participating university staff to see starkly the issues and the inadequacies of present rural development policies and promotional instruments. An

awareness of local perceptions and values also is facilitated and consequently university teaching and research is greatly enriched by the experience.

#### REFERENCES

1. Arkleton Trust. *Can education change rural fortunes*. Scotland: Langholm, 1981.
2. Cary, L.J., (Ed.). *Community development as a process*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1970.
3. Coffey, W.J., & Polese, M. Local development: Conceptual bases and policy implications, *Regional Studies*, 1985, 19, 85-93.
4. Commins, P. Co-operation and community development in the West of Ireland. In J. Sewel & D. O'Cearbhaill (Eds.), *Co-operation and community development, a collection of essays*. Galway: Social Sciences Research Centre, University College, 1982, pp. 53-70.
5. Commins, P. Rural community development: approaches and issues. *Social Studies*, 1985, 8, 165-178.
6. CDCC. *Adult education and community development: Draft Summary Project No. 9*. Strasbourg: Directorate of Education, Culture and Sport, Council of Europe, 1985.
7. CDCC. *Adult education and community development Strasbourg: Final Summary Report*. CDCC, 1986, 29(86), Council of Europe.
8. Dillon, F. Our town: How Killala killed the recession. *Success*, 1986, 5(1), 2-6.
9. Ó Cinnéide, M.S. *Aspects of the development of the West of Ireland*. Paper presented at 8th International Seminar on Marginal Regions, Galway, 1985.
10. Ó Cinnéide, M.S., Keane, M., & Cawley, M. Industrialization and linguistic change among Gaelic-speaking communities in the West of Ireland. *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 1985, 9(1), 3-16.
11. Ó hEocha, C. The Queen's College at Galway - some memories. In D. Ó Cearbhaill (Ed.), *Galway: Town and Gown, 1484-1984*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984, 165-182.
12. UNESCO. *Education in a rural environment*. Paris: UNESCO, 1980.