Urban Community Development
Its Nature and Scope

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The experience of community development has so far been limited to rural areas. There is, however, a growing realisation of the need for urban community development. The pattern and content of such programmes for urban areas have not yet been worked out although a beginning in this direction has been made, notably in Delhi, where the Municipal Corporation has set up a separate department of Urban Community Development with the assistance of the Ford Foundation.

Rural community development ideally encompasses the entire village community, even if in reality it results in greater benefits to the economically better off section of the population. It is an integrated programme of development covering all aspects of the farmers’ life but mainly emphasizing the economic. The programme is implemented through stimulation of local effort and State assistance. It involves introduction of improved practices in the field of production which yield tangible economic gains to the individual peasant, stimulation of collective effort to meet both economic and non-economic needs of the whole community and educational programmes for social and cultural betterment. Successive reports of the Programme Evaluation Organization have shown that people have responded mainly to the economic aspects of the programme. Efforts to involve people in planning and execution of programmes for their own benefit have included strengthening of village panchayats by making them integral parts of the system of local self-government.

Urban Conditions

Thus in rural areas work has been with entire village communities and the programmes have aimed to cover all aspects of village life. Villages moreover are characterised, relatively speaking, by homogeneity, both social and economic, and by common bonds and traditions, which have to some extent created in the people a sense of belonging and loyalty to the village. In spite of this the task of the rural development worker has not been an easy one.

The situation in urban areas is substantially different. The city is not a community. It is characterised by heterogenous population, by competing groups, by wide disparities in income, by formal, impersonal relationships and by relatively high spatial and class mobility. When we think of urban community development we think of lower income groups, particularly the residents of slum areas who live in sub-human conditions. It is thought that the community development approach would be able to make an effective contribution to the improvement of the living conditions of these people. The lower income group, however, can be considered a community only in a Marxist sense.

It is true that people in slum areas may be clustered together, if not organized on the basis of religion or caste. Neither of these bonds, however, are sufficient from the point of view of community development which is concerned mainly with neighbourhood communities residing in the same locality and having, therefore, some common interests and concerns arising out of residence in the same area or neighbourhood.

Provision of Civic Amenities

In urban community development, therefore, community is an entity that we can take for granted much less than in rural areas. It has to be cultivated and nurtured. The urban community development worker may have to begin from the very beginning. He may have to draw boundaries and create a community. The content of the urban community development programme will also be different from rural community development programmes. Rural community development, as has been stated earlier, includes programmes for economic betterment. Development of agriculture and rural industries is an important aspect of community development. The diversity and nature of the urban community makes development programmes of economic welfare very difficult. The scope of urban community development is consequently very much restricted and it can not possibly offer a total programme of development. It concerns itself mainly with seeking community interest and cooperation in the provision of civic amenities and services and in enriching the social and cultural life of the community.

Probably the only possibility of bringing economic benefit to the community is through the provision of part-time jobs that could be undertaken by women with little or no training in their spare time at home, and the organization of consumers’ cooperatives. It is not easy to find suitable jobs that women can do at home. A consumers’ cooperative if run properly may be of some benefit to the members in the long run.

The Neighbourhood

The situation is somewhat different, when one comes across a neighbourhood in a city that is entirely inhabited by people carrying on certain professions like dairying, craft-work, tanning and other small scale or indigenous industries. Kherwadi in Bombay, which is inhabited by tanners is a case in point. In such cases, it may be possible to draw up a programme of community development that would improve the economic condition of the people in the community. Such programmes may include provision of credit, introduction of new production techniques and organisation of cooperatives for buying raw materials and selling the finished product. As in Kherwadi, these cooperatives could also undertake a variety of welfare activities for the members of the community.

It is clear, however, that in urban community development the usual target group is a conglomeration of people living in a certain well-defined area in a city and not a community. It is also apparent that we cannot, generally speaking, treat this area as a more or less self-contained unit of development. It would be difficult for urban community development to provide for programmes which bring economic gains to the community. What could then be the possible goals of urban community development?
Community development lays great stress on self-help. It attempts to generate cooperative effort to meet the problems faced by the community. Urban community development programmes may, therefore, help the underprivileged living in congested areas with inadequate amenities to improve their conditions of living.

Self-help

It does seem somewhat incongruous that we should emphasize self-help for the provision of basic amenities for decent living in the case of people whose resources are so limited and whose needs are so great. No such demands are usually made on the economically well-off section of the city population. Probably it is felt that they pay through taxes for the amenities that they obtain. However, if the principle of self-help has any intrinsic value besides being a useful expedient for meeting the overwhelming needs of low-income groups with very limited public resources, it is equally valid for all sections of the urban population irrespective of their incomes.

It is possible, however, to overemphasise the principle of self-help in community development programmes for slum dwellers and other low-income neighbourhoods. It can be used as an excuse for inaction on the part of municipal and public authorities. Community development cannot be a substitute for governmental programmes. It would be unjust to expect communities living in depressed urban areas to provide themselves with services and amenities that should properly be provided by the Government or local bodies. People living in such areas may have neither the resources nor the time for providing these for themselves.

A community could, however, be expected to make a fuller and a more constructive use of a service, as in the case of public bathrooms and lavatories. It could contribute towards the maintenance of a service, as in the case of, play-ground and recreational facilities for children. It could be expected to help in the establishment of a service by providing a room for a sewing class for women. It could also help the administration by indicating the deficiencies in the existing services and by asking for new services. A vigilant and vocal community is the best guarantee for administrative efficiency.

Besides cooperating with the civic authorities in the area of provision of amenities and services, the people in a residential area can concern themselves with evolving schemes of mutual aid and assistance to the needy in times of distress like illness, death etc. Problems of social defence, particularly juvenile delinquency, can also be tackled most effectively through community effort. The area of community interest and cooperation may be expected to widen with the improvement of social and economic conditions. The community development approach could be taken as a corrective to the individualisation and isolation of city life.

Administration

Community development programmes envisage an effective administrative machinery for the coordination of governmental or municipal plans and public effort at the local level. This involves formulation of plans for the provision of services to different areas of the city and laying down policies and conditions that a community should fulfil in order to become eligible for these services. There should be an effective agency for the implementation of these plans at the local level.

Planning for low-income group residential areas in a city would involve classification of these areas into various categories. In each of these categories the pattern of development programme should be different. Thus, in a city there may be well-planned housing colonies on the one hand and slums on the other. In between there will be depressed localities, at various stages of depression. It would be desirable to work out definite plans for each of these areas and fix targets for the accomplishment of these plans. The plans would include the quantum of services that would be developed within a period of time. The present situation in which services are not provided in some depressed areas because these are considered to be slums that will be cleared sometime is most unfortunate from the point of view of residents.

The agency for the implementation of development plans at the local level, must be supplementary to a Department of Urban Community Development which may work more or less independently of other municipal departments. In each of the depressed localities with which community development will have to be mainly, if not wholly, concerned, in the beginning there needs to be a community development worker who can effectively coordinate all the services in the locality. Only then could a proper synthesis between the efforts of the people and the municipal authorities be worked out. It should be possible for a community development worker to obtain for people in a neighbourhood, speedily and effectively, the technical and material assistance and support of the various departments. The community effort and the municipal and governmental services cannot be kept separate if the urban community development programmes are to succeed. The administrative machinery for bringing them together on the field level has to be provided.

Community development programmes necessarily involve a reorganization of administrative structure. The philosophy of community development should permeate the entire range of public services to the community. The administrative organisation would have to be made more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people. The community organizers who are expected to identify the felt and real needs of the people and generate cooperative effort among them should, therefore, have the directional responsibility for all services in the area.

It is also necessary to consider the nature of people's organisation at the local level. At present the people living in depressed areas of a city do not feel that they have any say in the municipal organisation. Administration must be strengthened, it should command the confidence and respect of the people and secure their cooperation for community welfare. In the cities as well as rural areas it is worthwhile considering the possibility of decentralization of municipal functions by delegation of specific functions to block or mohalla committees, or panchayats or vikas mandals or whatever these local units may be called. The interest of the people in these organisations can be aroused only if these become vital units in municipal administration. Democracy for people is real only if they can feel its impact on their day to day life.