

## EMPOWERING THE MARGINALIZED THROUGH COMMUNITY WORK: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Victor Otieno Okech<sup>1</sup>, Štefan Neszméry<sup>2</sup>, Monika Mačkinová<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** Community work is one of the methods of practice that is at the heart of the social work profession. It entails working with communities that have been marginalized. The goal of community work is usually to have communities improve their wellbeing. Without empowerment, marginalized communities remain powerless over circumstances that prevail in their environments.

The main object of this article is to review literature on steps that may be taken to empower communities. In writing this article, we adopted a traditional style of literature review where we obtained our data from the following databases: Springer Link, Wiley Online Library and ProQuest central. We used the following key words to retrieve articles from the online databases: power, community, empowerment and community empowerment. We paired each of the key words using the Boolean operator AND. We observed from the literature that there are three levels of empowerment; psychological, organizational and community levels of empowerment. We also identified three models of that are suitable for use in community work for the purpose of empowering marginalized communities.

From the model developed by Jackson et al. (1989), we concluded that steps that may be taken in empowering the marginalized through community work are; developmental casework, mutual support, issue identification and campaign, community participation and social movements.

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### Introduction

Community work is one of the methods of practice in social work. It is used in ‘assisting people to improve the wellbeing of their communities through collective actions.’ Through community work, social work prides itself as a profession that strives in restoring dignity and the worth of every person, a very important social value that easily get eroded by oppressive social structures. Oppressive social structures are human creations that are designed to prevent some people from accessing community resources, consequently disempowering them. Those who get disempowered mostly end up with low self-esteem, and feelings of hopelessness (Teater, 2014).

The main objective of this article is to determine steps that may be taken in empowering communities that have been marginalized. In doing so, we will start by first outlining the meaning of the concepts; power, empowerment and community empowerment. Thereafter, we will outline steps that may be followed in empowering communities.

### Power

Power is a very elusive concept that depends on how one views it and the contexts in which it is exercised. Some view it as a positive concept while others view it as a negative concept. Power assumes a positive status when it is used as an instrument for improving the wellbeing of people, such as uplifting their living standards. On the other hand, it assumes a negative status when it is used as a tool for oppressing others. In addition, power is also a fluid concept that keep on changing with time and contexts in which it is being exercised. An individual may be in possession of power when a country is enjoying peace and stability, but the same individual may become extremely powerless when his/her country descends into chaos and wars. This is a situation that refugees are very familiar with, especially when they find themselves living in camps designated for them.

Power is also thought of as a relational concept i.e. ‘power to’ vs ‘power over’ someone/something, or ‘power with’ vs ‘power within’ someone/something. Where ‘power to’ refers to one’s capability to act, whereas ‘power over’ refers to abilities to effect somethings against people’s wishes and thoughts. On the other hand, ‘power with’ refers to collective action of groups while ‘power within’ refers to sense of self-worth and dignity of either individuals or groups. Power never exists in vacuums but rather within social structures and human agencies. Within these social structures and agencies, power can be used either to enable or constrain people’s thoughts and activities. Further still, power can also be used as a means of determining who enjoys the good life at the core of the society or the bad life at the periphery

<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Work, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia, okech1@uniba.sk

<sup>2</sup> Department of Social Work, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia, neszmery@fedu.uniba.sk

<sup>3</sup> Department of Social Work, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia, mackinova@fedu.uniba.sk

(Arnason, 2018; Lazarus, 2018). The use of power as a gate pass to community resources leads to people being classified as either: Privileged or Oppressed groups

a) Privileged group

The privileged group comprises of people who are in possession of power and have access to community resources. They are the dominant members who set rules that determine access to community resources.

b) The Oppressed group

Oppression refers to ‘a systematic and widespread social inequity that occurs through the use of power by dominant groups to restrict activities of the minority groups’ (Case & Hunter, 2012). The minority groups, due to oppressive systems, normally have difficulties in accessing power and opportunities. More specifically they are usually barred from or are given partial participation rights to societal matters such as politics, economy, socio-cultural activities etc (Lane & Pritzker, 2018). There are five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (Young, 1990).

Exploitation is a form of social relationship where some people benefit from the labour of others, i.e. a skewed transfer of products of labour such as income from the minority groups to the dominant groups. To achieve this unfair distribution of income, members of the dominant groups normally resort to devaluing work done by the members of the minority group regardless of how important or difficult the work might have been. For instance, in cases of the worst forms of child labour, children may be exploited by being paid fractions of what adults would have been paid for the same work.

Marginalization is a form of oppression where members of minority groups are involuntarily pushed to the edges of social, political, economic, ecological, and biophysical systems. These peripheral positions disadvantage them from accessing resources, assets, services as well as exercising their freedom of choice (von Braun & Gatzweiler, 2014). Socio-economical factor is a key driver of marginalization. Low or lack of income, caused by either denial or partial access to labour, is a vital socio-economic factor that causes marginalization. When market prices of commodities, such as housing and food, exceeds the purchasing powers of individuals, marginalized individuals slowly drift to the margins of the society, for instance, some may end up living on the streets. This deprivation of materials is what makes marginalization a dangerous form of oppression. It typically disconnects groups of people from means of production and consumption (Kenny et al., 2018; Renahy et al., 2012).

Powerlessness is another silent form of oppression where members of the minority groups have no control over their lives, are treated with disrespect and have no abilities of determining their destinies . Powerlessness relates to a lack of authority to carry out given tasks. It is more prevalent in labour relations where members of the minority groups find themselves on the lower ends of the labour hierarchy with no power. In these hierarchical arrangements, marginalized people are neither represented nor their voices listened to. Decision making organs, which are always situated at higher levels of these hierarchy, always have tendencies of making decisions that only favour the interests of the dominants at the expense of the minority. Without proper education and stable income, minority group will never find themselves in these organs.

The other forms of oppression are cultural imperialism and violence where the former involves portraying the marginalised, usually through mass media, as bad, lazy, ill-mannered , and troublesome. The latter form of oppression involves subjecting the marginalized to systemic unprovoked attacks either verbally/in writing or physically by use of force that results in bodily injuries (Tourse et al., 2018; Lane & Pritzker, 2018).

Oppression can also be further classified as either vertical, horizontal, or internalized. *Vertical oppression* occurs when members of the dominant groups directs their oppressive acts to the powerless minority groups. For example, vertical oppression may occur when an adult recruits or forces a child into armed conflict or a lady is trafficked against her wish for the purpose of sexual exploitation. *Horizontal Oppression* is a type of oppression that takes place among members of the same class i.e. between members of the dominant or minority classes. For instance, it may occur when parents from low economic background marry off their daughters for financial gains. *Internalized dynamic oppression* occurs when both the dominant and minority group adopt ideologies that sustain oppression. For example, when youth from a poor neighbourhood develop ideologies that depicts policemen as bad people while police themselves develop ideologies that makes them believe that all youth from poor

neighbourhoods are criminals. This kind of attitude between police and youth always result in spontaneous violence when members of these two groups meet (Levchak, 2018). This leaves us with one unanswered question, what role does power play in oppression? The answer to this question cannot be clearer without an understanding of how the misuse of certain instruments of power leads to oppression.

### **Instruments of power**

There are three instruments of power: (i) *Superiority of resources*, those who have more resources tend to have a higher bargaining power in all social interactions compared to those who do not have. This superiority gives them a wider bargaining power over those who do not have, where they can easily influence decisions by using their resources to either reward those who support them or punish those do not. . This instrument of power is susceptible to abuse and misuse, it can be used for the purpose of committing oppressive acts against marginalized individuals and communities. By using superiority of resources to their advantage, perpetrators of oppressive acts easily find their way out of criminal justice system through various means such influencing decisions or buying their 'justice'. . For instance, they can hire some of the finest lawyers to argue their cases in courts of law, something members of the minority groups cannot afford to do (ii) *Authority*, i.e. right to command a behaviour and expect compliance, is another widely used instrument of power. It allows those who possess it to determine who can and cannot participate in given activities as well as the kind of agendas that can be brought to the table for discussion. . This instrument of power is also liable to misuse and abuse, for instance, people may use their positions of authority to intentionally exclude marginalized individuals from social activities such as employment or pay them meagre salaries that cannot meet their basic needs. (iii) *Force*, is another instrument of power that is normally used in controlling the conducts of people. It too can also be subjected to misuse especially when it is used for purposes of suppressing voices of the marginalized (Sikula, 1975; Speer & Hughey, 1995).

### **Empowerment**

Empowerment refers to a process and outcome that involves enabling individuals, groups and communities to obtain resources that increase their spiritual, political, or socio-economic strengths so that they can have greater control over their environment and move towards achieving their personal or communal aspirations (Teater, 2014; Stoeffler, 2018). Empowerment is an approach in community work that normally involves working with the marginalized to identify and remove barriers that prevents them from accessing power, and by extension community resources (Lee, 2001). There are three levels in which empowerment can be realized in communities: personal, organization and community levels

Empowerment at the personal level, also called psychological empowerment by theorist Zimmerman, is the most important part of the empowerment process. It is 'the psychological process through which individuals gain control over their lives, are involved in democratic decision making, and become critically aware of their socio-political environment.' At this level, empowerment is normally directed towards enhancing the capabilities and competency of individuals. More specifically their emotional, cognitive, and behavioural domains. In their *emotional (intrapersonal) domain*, empowerment is the process that encompasses working with individuals so that they can develop positive self-perceptions of confidence in influencing their socio-political environment. In the *cognitive (Interactional) domain*, empowerment focuses on assisting individuals develop analytical skills, such as problem solving, that assists them in influencing their environments. Finally, the behavioural domain, involves individual taking actions needed for exerting control over their environment by participating in community activities or organizations (Zimmerman, 2000; Christens, 2012).

Empowerment at the Organizational level, focuses on 'organizational efforts geared at generating individuals who are psychologically empowered as well as enhancing effectiveness of organizations needed in assisting them achieve their objectives' (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004). At this level, according to Zimmerman (2000), there are two subtypes of empowerment: *Empowering organizations* and *Empowered organizations*. The former subtype refers to organizations that provides opportunities for individuals to be psychologically empowered while the later refers to organizations that have abilities of facilitating changes in a community. There are three processes and outcomes, according to Neal (2014), that influences the abilities of empowered organizations in bringing social change to communities. The three are; (i) *Intraorganizational processes and outcomes*, which refers to courses of actions that takes place within organizations, such as good leadership and support, that facilitates efforts

of members in realizing goals of their organization. (ii) *Interorganizational processes and outcomes*, are relationships that organizations form with others, such as cooperation and partnerships, for the purpose of pursuing common or related goals. (iii) *Extra-organizational processes and outcomes*, are efforts that organizations put in order to shape broader societal systems that they are a part of such as influencing public policies and practice (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004).

**Community Empowerment**

Community empowerment refers to ‘a group-based participatory developmental process in which members of marginalized groups gain greater control over their lives and environment’ (Stoeffler, 2018). In this approach, members of marginalized communities work in unison towards identifying, planning, implementing, and evaluating interventions that are designed at addressing the root causes of their problems. These problems may range from social, political, environmental to economic challenges (Sianipa et al., 2013). The process through which individuals and communities get empowered has been of interest to most scholars such as Charles H Kieffer, Swift Carolyn and Levin Gloria (1987), Nina Wallerstein, Jackson et al., and Ronald Labonte just to mention but a few. In this article, we will limit our discussion to models of community empowerment developed by Kieffer, Swift and Levin (1987), and Jackson et al., (1989).

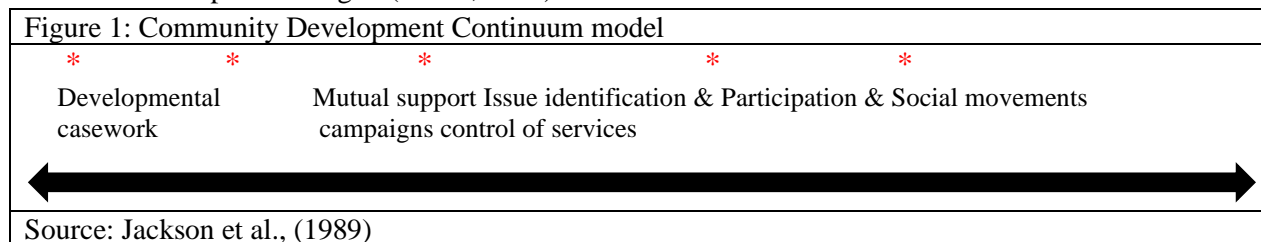
**The Empowerment processes**

The empowerment process refers to the mechanisms through which individuals and communities acquire power. Several scholars have advanced various models to explain how empowerment takes place. Some of these models are; Kieffer’s Four Stage Model, Swift and Levin three stage model, and Jackson et al.’s model of community development continuum.

Charles H Kieffer postulated that the process of empowerment takes place in four progressive phases. The first phase, the *Era of entry*, involves individuals spending time to explore power and authority. In the 2nd phase, the *Era of Advancement*, individuals through assistance of mentorship and peer influence, develop analytic understanding of their environment including how factors such as social, politics and economics are interconnected. In this phase they mostly engage in dialogues and mutual problem solving. In the 3rd phase, the *Era of Incorporation*, individuals begin to hone their political skills and leadership capabilities that are needed in confronting institutional barriers and role conflicts. . In the final phase, the *Era of Commitment*, individuals integrate their skills and use them in solving day to day challenges while continuing with activism (Rissel, 1994; Kaminski et al., 2000).

Swift and Levin also contributed towards understanding the process of empowerment. In their article (1987) they proposed a three-stage model. In the first stage of their model, they theorized, that people must first recognize their powerlessness state before they can venture into any activity of empowerment. In the 2nd stage they proposed that individuals should feel strongly enough about their inequity and seek interventions together with other like-minded individuals. In the final stage, they advised that the like-minded individuals should take actions aimed at addressing problems that bedevils their communities (Rissel, 1994; Garnets & D’Augelli, 1994).

Jackson et al., (1989) in their article developed a linear model where they identified five key steps of empowerment: Developmental casework, Mutual support, Issue identification and campaigns, Participation and control of services, and Social movements. According to this model, ‘the potential of community empowerment is maximized as the focus shifts from the individual to collective social movement’ as depicted in fig 1. (Rissel, 1994).



a) Developmental casework

This model is based on the assumptions that the process of empowerment begins when marginalized individuals are powerless or when there are unaddressed social problems despite there being ways of solving them (Rissel, 1994). Development casework, or psychological empowerment as referred by

Zimmerman, is the starting point of the community empowerment process. It entails building capacities of the individual members of the community, in this case individual members of the marginalized communities. Developmental casework plays a very important role in the empowerment process of communities (Ahmad & Talib, 2015). According to Laverack (2004), these empowered individuals in turn bring to community organizations valuable human resources that enables such organizations to effectively define, analyze and act on issues that affects their communities.

#### b) Mutual Support

Mutual support entails individuals reaching out and, also being sought by others for the purpose of sharing their concerns and experiences. Mutual support plays a vital role in strengthening bonds between community members. According to Gitterman (2006), the role mutual support plays in the empowerment process can be equated to the role energy plays in machines. It is the fuel that drives empowerment process, this is because 'individuals cannot develop greater control over their own lives when they are socially isolated' (Jackson, Mitchell, & Wright, 1989). As a matter of fact, mutual support makes community members develop sense of belonging and affirmation, appreciate the importance of interdependence among each other, and have a feeling of emotional connectedness with others (Cox & Parsons, 1996). In this stage of empowerment, Jackson et al., (1989) recommends that community workers should enhance mutual support among community members by assisting them to create or strengthen bonds that already exist between family members, friends, and neighbours.

#### c) Issue Identification and Campaign

This stage marks the beginning of collective actions by community members in addressing their shared problems. This stage entails members of the community engaging themselves in discussions that lead them to identifying and prioritizing their concerns. Through such discussions, community members may also become critically aware of how political structures operate and affect them. In addition, in this stage community members also form or join vehicles for community empowerment, such as self-help groups or Community Based Organizations (CBOs), which they may use in turn to build and expand their social networks (Rissel, 1994). According to Speer & Hughey, (1995), there are three interrelated phases that community members may follow in identifying and prioritizing their concerns: (i) *Assessment Phase*, where community members engage themselves with activities that are geared towards identifying and putting their concerns in their correct perspectives, (ii) *Research Phase*, which involves members of the community examining and studying the correlations between issues identified in the previous phase, and finally, (iii) *Action phase*, which entails members of the community acting on the identified concerns by mobilizing themselves and developing various strategies for responding.

#### d) Participation and control of services

In this stage, community members are encouraged to take up active roles in various aspects of community organizations such as planning, decision making, implementation, and evaluation. Allowing marginalized people to take active roles in running and managing community organizations, provides them with opportunities to practise their skills before they apply them in wider political arenas. According to Rissel, (1994), collective participation is 'fundamental to the successful redistribution of resources, which is a key ingredient of community empowerment. In addition, community participation has been found to promote good management practices such as transparency, efficiency, and feelings of ownership (Jackson, Mitchell, & Wright, 1989; Kummitha, 2017).

#### e) Social movements

Social movements are collective actions against perceived political, economic or cultural grievances (Dolata, 2018). The aim of such movements is usually to bring attention to people in authority, the desire for a change over prevailing power structures and social arrangements (Stoeffler, 2018). The desire for change may range from equal representation, better and secure neighbourhoods, to fair sharing of the tax burden (Laverack, 2001).

### Conclusions

We conclude that for community work to be effective in empowering the marginalized, the empowerment process should be realized in the following three levels: individual, organizational and community levels. In addition, any of the three models, developed by Kieffer (1984), Swift and Levin (1987), and Jackson et al (1989), may be used in bringing about community empowerment. Some of the

steps that may be taken in realizing community empowerment are developmental casework, mutual support, Issue Identification and Campaign, Participation and control of services, and Social movements

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