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This book introduces a definition of the term ‘strong communities’ with seven key features: Active, Organised, Participative, Resourceful, Accepting, Connected and Fair. The material focuses on the first three of these seven features, because the author’s experience is mostly in these areas and because to address all seven features would need at least two publications. It draws on a community development approach, but places this in the current climate and the context of building stronger communities.

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Introduction

In the current climate, many communities across the UK are facing increased tensions and divisions. This has been caused over the last few years by a variety of factors, including insecurities around Brexit, the implementation of austerity policies, the media’s focus on migrants and refugees, and a tragic series of extremist attacks (Jones et al., 2017). Although austerity is officially over as a policy and, at time of writing, the current government is announcing new spending plans, many public services are still having to manage on years of reduced resources. Associated with this, funding for the voluntary and community sectors has declined, for both front-line services and for the supporting infrastructure. Public sector grants to community groups and voluntary organisations have been widely replaced by competitive procurement, involving demanding processes for smaller charities and community groups (Select Committee on Charities, 2017).

As well as this reduction of support, and the loss of posts dedicated to community engagement, there has been greater reliance by councils on volunteering and community self-help, with the well-worn expectation in many cases that such initiatives can help to maintain service levels normally provided by the public sector (Berner and Philips, 2008). In this context of reduced support, voluntary and community organisations have had to cope with higher levels of demand. They are often taking initiatives to diversify their income sources, and, in some cases, have been forced into artificial partnerships of which they would rather not be a part. Equally, many community groups are reviewing their traditional roles, are taking on new challenges and are keen to build wider relationships.

In this changing and demanding context, social media have increasingly become available as a tool in community engagement, providing new ways for people to get involved in their areas. The pattern of actual use of such media by community groups, however, still appears to be patchy (Harris and McCabe, 2017). Legislation in different parts of the UK has provided some new mechanisms for communities to have greater participation. For instance, the Localism Act of 2011 provided a number of opportunities for communities in England to have greater influence on local issues, such as land use and
the purchase of local assets, although research has questioned the impact of this (Locality, 2017). In Wales, the passing of the Well-being of Future Generations Act of 2015 required, among other things, public bodies to work better with communities. In Scotland, the introduction of the Community Empowerment Act in 2015 provided additional ways for communities to have influence on service design and delivery. The material in this book needs to be adapted to these differing contexts.

The Equality Act of 2010 made it illegal across the UK to discriminate against anyone because of one of the ‘protected characteristics’, which are age, disability, sex, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, and sexual orientation. In August 2018, the Government launched a new strategy, Civil Society Strategy: Building a Future that Works for Everyone (HM Government, 2018), though, at time of writing, it is hard to describe any likely outcomes arising from this initiative.

So, while there are new opportunities in some cases, the changes described above which are associated with the current climate are mainly having negative impacts on communities, especially in deprived areas. Overall, many communities in Britain face grim levels of deprivation. According to recent research, 1.5 million people, including 365,000 children, were destitute in the UK at some point during 2017 (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018). In 2017, 14 million people, one-fifth of the population, lived in poverty. Four million of these were more than 50% below the poverty line (Alston, 2018). Some minorities are experiencing increased levels of discrimination and face barriers to their active involvement in community life. Consequently, strengthening communities needs to be planned, resourced and implemented with an awareness of this challenging economic and social climate.

Part One: The aim – strong communities

In building stronger communities, it is useful to have a description of what strong communities could look like. Strong communities could be described as having the following seven features:

- **Active** – where people are involved in local activities, where they care about their community and are engaged in community action to improve the quality of life.

- **Organised** – where people come together to form and sustain groups, networks and organisations that run community activities, address common needs and provide local services.

- **Participative** – where people and groups contribute to decisions that affect their lives and have a real say about the issues that concern them.
➢ **Resourceful** – where existing skills and assets are recognised and used, where learning is valued, within a creative and enterprising environment.

➢ **Accepting** – where people are accepting of each other, with an understanding of different cultures, traditions and beliefs, and where a diversity of backgrounds is valued.

➢ **Connected** – where a sense of belonging exists; people and groups from different backgrounds have places and spaces to meet, contact and communicate with each other and, where appropriate, there is joint working between different groups.

➢ **Fair** – where people from different backgrounds and identities have a similar level of opportunities, with equal access to services and resources; where social injustice and discrimination are actively challenged.

This definition, based on seven key features, intentionally uses everyday language and attempts to address issues that are important to communities. For example, a recent study based on a sample of over 10,000 adults, identified the high level of concern for ‘fairness’ (Knight, 2015). Communities being ‘active’, in many cases, can mean people simply getting together for local activities, such as a social evening in the community centre or a night at the bingo. Such small-scale, self-organised activities are important in many communities, and significant for generating informal community support.

From this definition of strong communities, the work of strengthening communities will involve working with:

➢ **Individuals** – volunteers, active residents, group and network members, service users, campaigners, community representatives and local leaders, so that they are confident, well informed, skilful and effective (Chapter 2).

➢ **Local groups and organisations** – community groups, voluntary organisations, networks, clubs, online groups and community enterprises, so that they are well-organised and achieving their aims (Chapter 3). Those building stronger communities will also need to consider the pathways groups are choosing to achieve their aims. This is explored using the new Wheel of Participation (Chapter 4).

➢ **Public and private sector organisations** – such as local authorities, health service providers, police forces, housing associations and locally based companies, so that they actively support the strengthening of communities (Chapter 5).

When consulted about the term ‘strong communities’, some people described it as a place with access to jobs, education, recreation, care, a secure home, a decent environment and similar elements (SCDC, 2012). However, the focus of this publication is more on the nature of community life, described by the
seven features as introduced above, rather than the environmental, economic or educational aspects of stronger communities. Having said that, the seven key features may be interpreted in diverse ways by different groups in the community. Such differing perspectives need to be respected and considered by practitioners in their work on strengthening communities.

Different communities will display varying levels of the seven features; whatever the starting point, an asset-based approach, as explained below, is about recognising and building on what already exists.

Box 1.1 Outcomes arising from stronger communities

Increased resilience can be seen as an outcome of the process of strengthening communities. The term can describe where communities are able to cope well and respond to change, hazards and negative impacts in constructive ways (Walker, 2015). Although as a term it is sometimes used interchangeably with the term ‘strong communities’, in this publication it is seen as an outcome arising from stronger communities, especially associated with them being better connected and more organised. Bear in mind, the term resilience used in this context is complex, in that it has a variety of meanings; for example, it has also been used in environmental initiatives to describe the relationship between healthy functioning eco-systems and social well-being (WCVA, 2017). As a term, it has also been used in the Home Office’s Stronger Britain Together programme, initiated in 2016. This policy is part of a long-standing concern by different governments to promote greater community cohesion.

A second proposed outcome arising from stronger communities is higher levels of social capital. Social capital can be described as a situation where:

‘People are connected with one another through intermediate social structures – webs of association and shared understandings of how to behave. This social fabric greatly affects with whom, and how, we interact and co-operate. It is this everyday fabric of connection and tacit co-operation that the concept of social capital is intended to capture.’

(Halpern, 2005, p. 3)

While the link between civic engagement and increased social capital has been contested (Foley and Edwards, 1999), the concept of social capital has become increasingly popular among policy-makers, including, for example, the HM Treasury. Social capital, according to one influential writer, is the bedrock of relationships and collective activity, in particular involving ‘bonds and bridges’ between people to provide a platform for social support (Putman, 2000). Using the proposed definition of ‘strong communities’, it seems likely that the features of being active and connected will contribute to building social capital, for example, where people are involved in informal activities and groups, and where trust and connections can be built. Other outcomes of strong communities are described in a policy document published recently by central government (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019).
What does the term *community* mean?

Practitioners need to be aware of different interpretations of the term ‘community’ as it will influence their work with individuals, networks and groups. It is a complex term, with a long history of analysis (Farrar, 2002); a major piece of research in the 1950s revealed there were 94 different meanings to the term! (Hillery, 1955).

Understanding the term can be based around a number of questions, as follows:

➢ *Is it about shared characteristics?* These could be class, gender, age, or use of services or circumstances, such as being parents or being unemployed. For instance, research on traditional, white, working-class areas in Middlesborough indicated a strong sense of solidarity among residents through their position in the labour market (MacDonald et al., 2005). However, where such shared characteristics are strongly present, this can make acceptance of people with different characteristics more difficult.

➢ *Is it about a sense of belonging?* This can be through a strong attachment to place, for example, through living in a street for a long time. However, a strong sense of belonging may be rather exclusive, for example, through ownership of property or at worst, a strong sense of territoriality where local gangs perceive they ‘own’ their estate.

➢ *Are communities networks?* Communities can be seen as networks, involving mutual trust and shared obligations. However, it can be argued that just because a person is in a network, they are not necessarily in a community, as is the case in many online ‘networks’.

> ‘Community therefore is something that can be expressed through networks of socialibility, but it is not necessarily to be identified with such networks.’

(Somerville, 2011, p. 3).

➢ *Is it an ideal?* There are also underlying beliefs and hopes people may have about the term ‘community’ and its symbolic meaning. For instance, some people in the UK hark back to earlier times, believing that in the past, there was a greater sense of community. Equally the concept of community can be used to describe some future vision and inspire people to work towards an ideal state. This may happen locally, but can also occur at national levels (Anderson, 1983). It can be based on left or right political values and, for some communities, be based on religious beliefs (Farrar, 2002). The ideal of ‘community’ can also have its negative side, where it is used to strengthen fears and prejudice some social groups may hold against others and be used to justify these groups’ exclusion (Young, 1990).
➢ Is it a call to action? This is where individuals feel obliged to act in certain ways (Butcher, 1993). For instance, householders may feel obliged to keep their front gardens tidy and not leave rubbish littering the pavement. Obligations can be positive or negative, where people feel they must conform in order to be accepted. Such obligations can be unspoken and informal or more formally and explicitly presented, such as where police advise house-holders on crime prevention (Somerville, 2011).

➢ Is it about connections between people? Being connected is different from having a sense of belonging. The key issue here is that the connections are meaningful in some way. How people are connected with each other, so that it feels meaningful, will vary depending on their particular circumstance and setting. Connections can be weak or strong; strong connections, for example, can arise from extended family relationships or close cultural identities. Such ties can be positive or negative – negative in the sense that they can lead to domination of a person’s behaviour, such as women being kept in traditional domestic roles against their preference. So, it is crucial to bear in mind that such close ties may not always be positive. Being connected is one of the seven key features of a strong communities; consequently, the concept of meaningful connections, where they are positive, is especially useful for practitioners.

‘Community is about connectedness among persons, and the connectedness has to be meaningful to the persons concerned – there has to be a substantive grouping or collectivity with which those persons can be identified (by themselves or by others), with the possibility of recognition of one another as being members of it.’

(Somerville, 2011, p. 7)

Communities of place and interest

An important perspective is that the term ‘communities’ is more appropriate than the term ‘community’; in practice, areas are often made up of a combination of different cultures, attachments and identities. Communities can be described as having at least two different aspects, communities of place and communities of interest, and these are now discussed in turn. The term communities of place is useful where people share a location, such as a village, street, neighbourhood, town, city or borough. In using this term to describe some types of communities, there are a number of issues to consider. Firstly, while superficially appearing straightforward, the term ‘communities of place’ raises the question of who defines the geographical area involved (Farrar, 2002). Is it defined by the inhabitants or by some external authority? For instance, this question was an issue in drawing boundaries for some of the New Deal for
Communities regeneration areas. In addition, different groups may have different concepts of their territory; a local street gang might have a different area they identify with compared to a large community association. For some residents, their local community might be just their street (Hay, 2008). Any one resident may have several layers of attachment to place, ranging from their street to their village, the whole town or the whole district.

While the term ‘communities of place’ is useful, there are many limitations associated with it. Sharing the same place to live does not necessarily mean people feel they are part of a community. Some communities of place may define themselves as being strongly associated with defined geographical features, such as a valley, while others may have loose boundaries and not actually mean much as a basis of interaction and involvement.

Communities of interest, in contrast, can be described as people who share:

➢ an interest, such as a particular sport;
➢ an experience, such as refugees;
➢ a concern, such as carers; or
➢ an identity, such as belonging to a faith or ethnic group.

Some communities of interest overlap with or can be based in a community of place, such as a Jewish community living in one specific city neighbourhood. Equally, some communities of interest are spread out across a city or region without any geographical focus. Rather than based on where people live, people’s identity may be more based on their faith, their disability, their sexuality or where they came from, such as a particular island in the Caribbean (Hudson et al., 2007). The term ‘communities of interest’ has been a useful tool to help consider the needs of excluded and marginalised groups.

More generally, in using the term ‘communities of interest’, there are a number of issues to consider. Firstly, just because a person is a refugee, it does not necessarily mean they are part of a community of refugees. As explored above, being part of a community requires some other dynamics, such as a sense of meaningful connection. Secondly, how far does the term ‘communities of interest’ extend? The term is lacking clear definition; is a sports group, such as a golf club, a community of interest? The term has been used in work with communities to include such a broad range of interests. However, in practice, the term ‘communities of interest’ is generally intended to mean a social group that experiences discrimination or is marginalised in some way (Pugh, 2003). One further criticism of the focus on communities of interest is that it has diverted attention away from a focus on place, in other words, away from the lack of allocation of the state’s resources to poor areas.
Despite these reservations, the concepts of communities of interest and communities of place both contribute to understanding the process of building stronger communities. Different types of communities will have differing priorities between the proposed seven key features of strong communities. Any one person could be involved in two or three different communities simultaneously, and not want to be labelled as solely ‘local’, ‘gay’ or ‘disabled’. People’s attachment to these different identities will often also grow and change over time.

An additional, widely used and useful term is communities of identity. As shown above, people who share an identity, such as a faith or ethnicity, is included as part of the description of communities of interest, though the term ‘communities of identity’ is also often used separately. The growing movement in the UK involving people claiming their rights based on their identity has been very important for minorities to gain confidence and recognition of the discrimination they face. Increasingly identities are being seen as multi-layered and interacting with each other – a black women’s experience of discrimination may be different from that experienced by a woman with a disability. This important concept is called intersectionality (Shaw and Mayo, 2016). According to some writers, there was a failure by practitioners until the 1990s to recognise that people with disabilities also have identities as men and women, black or white people and other categories (Ramcharan et al., 1997).

Often a newly added element in describing communities is the term communities online – where people form relationships through social media networks. With this new concept of communities online, there is a valid question whether the use of social media is facilitating new relationships that are substantially different in nature from those already existing in communities of interest and communities of place or is just a new medium for essentially similar types of contact and connections. For example, an online network called Nextdoor is used by over 14,000 neighbourhoods across the country. The network helps people get in touch with other residents in their area for information on tradespeople, discussion on safety issues, planning local events and posting items for sale. Its membership is based on location, so such interaction could be viewed as communities of place using social media to communicate more effectively. However, the interactions of some groups of people, for example, those participating in video games online, presumably indicates forms of association that would not exist outside the internet. A key question is whether these function as communities, rather than interactions between people, without any meaningful connection. While there are many new opportunities, there has been a lack of research to identify what ‘community engagement’ actually means in the context of social media, and how it might be measured; is it reduced, in some cases, to a series of clicks on a keyboard? Despite its great potential, there has been non-use and lapsed
use of social media by community groups and smaller voluntary organisations (Harris and McCabe, 2017). A further question is: By getting involved in online networking, does that reduce the level of involvement of people in more direct, face-to-face forms of participation or increase it? A lack of literature on this type of issue prevents any clear indication of trends (Harris and McCabe, 2017).

Some writers argue there is no agreed definition of ‘community’ (Farrar, 2002). For an interesting discussion on the rather complex issues associated with the terms, see Somerville (2011).

Finally, as well as communities of place and communities of interest, there is a major question as to whether wealth or class should be used as a way of describing communities, a concept discussed in earlier decades (Boudier, 1984). In modern, divided Britain, with many areas facing harsh levels of deprivation alongside extreme affluence for some, the concept of ‘communities of income’ may be useful to describe the reality of how some groups form links and relationships. This also relates to the concept of ‘social capital’ and how poorer communities may have reduced levels of ‘bridging’ relationships (Halpern, 2005; Putman, 2000). The concept of communities of interest has been a valuable tool to better understand how communities work in modern Britain. However, some writers argue that a critical understanding of class is fundamental to understanding the term ‘communities’ (Mae and Mayo, 2016).

Bearing these considerations in mind, the different ways of describing communities discussed in this chapter can be useful for practitioners who are working with different groups and getting people involved. In particular, building meaningful connections seems a useful concept to inform the work of strengthening communities and directly relates to the features of being active and connected, two of the seven key features of strong communities introduced earlier. The aim of this brief introduction to the meaning of community and communities has been to make practitioners more aware of some of the key debates and difficulties in using the terms.

Box 1.2 Asset-based community development

The approaches used in this book are informed partly by what is known as asset-based community development. ABCD is a way of working with communities that starts from the skills, talents and abilities of people at the grass roots, focusing on assets and strengths, rather than on needs and problems. The ABCD approach values the key roles played by community groups and organisations, both informally and formally organised. One method of ABCD is called the ‘community building’ process (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). An early stage in community building involves a
Part Two: The process – community empowerment

Many public services, voluntary organisations and community groups are interested in the idea of community empowerment. ‘Community empowerment’ is a widely used term, though in practice rarely defined; many practitioners feel passionately committed to empowering people but have never really considered what it actually means! It is often used as a vague, rather romanticised concept and is in need of clarification. It can be understood in a number of ways, such as communities:

➢ having influence over local decisions
➢ taking action to improve the quality of their lives
➢ being valued for their skills, talents and abilities
➢ feeling confident, with high levels of self-belief
➢ accessing resources that improve people’s quality of life
➢ understanding the causes of discrimination and deprivation
➢ sharing power, such as where community representatives join a strategic city-wide body
➢ taking power, such as where a community group takes direct action to overturn a local authority’s planning decision.

To some extent these are overlapping concepts, though all of them are important as they might inform how practitioners work with communities. These different ways of looking at community empowerment are now explored in turn. The idea of empowerment as communities having influence on decisions that affect their lives is a well-established view (McArdle, 1989). It relates directly to one of the key features of strong communities given above: ‘Participative – people and groups contribute to decisions that affect their lives.’ This
understanding of empowerment can be seen in government policy. For example, in 2009, the Scottish Government defined *community empowerment* as:

‘A process where people work together to make change happen in their communities by having more power and influence over what matters to them.’

(The Scottish Government, 2009)

Self-help and locally based independent organising, where people *take action* themselves and do not rely on outside agencies for funding or support, has appealed to many activists as an empowering process. Here the focus is on getting on with practical actions, rather than appealing to external agencies for funding or other solutions. It can promote a ‘we are all in it together’ form of solidarity and be a powerful experience for participants. *Being valued* is important; appreciating people’s abilities can be very supportive, especially in communities in deprived areas that have faced a stream of publicity highlighting the problems. In contrast, recognising and valuing people’s existing skills and talents and the positive aspects of a neighbourhood, can be seen as an empowering approach to working with communities (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993).

Alternatively, empowerment can be viewed partly as a psychological process of gaining personal confidence (Yeung, 2011). This ethos is especially linked to the women’s movement of the 1970s and 1980s (Taylor, 2003), as well as assertiveness training (Back and Back, 2005).

‘Empowerment is about doing things others around you do not expect you to do.’

(Community Projects Worker, Bradford)

The self-advocacy movement for people with learning difficulties has been an important opportunity for people to feel more confident and empowered (Ramcharan et al., 1997). Rather than focus on personal aspects, a different angle is empowerment as a process of accessing resources, a view that has been promoted by some commentators (Somerville, 2011). In order to access resources effectively it depends partly on the capacity of the community to do this; some neighbourhoods, with a low level of community organisation and leadership, have struggled to access grants, manage buildings and win campaigns.

In contrast, another key perspective is that empowerment is about understanding the world around us, and the underlying causes of deprivation and exclusion:

‘Empowerment involves a form of critical education that encourages people to question their reality; this is the basis of collective action and is built on the principles of participatory democracy.’

(Ledwith, 2011, p. 3)
This approach draws on the work of Paulo Freire, a major thinker about radical education and the nature of empowerment (Freire, 1972); examples of using his approach are given in Chapter 2.

Finally, a major criticism of many perspectives on empowerment is that they lack an awareness of power issues. For example, a criticism of building confidence as the main emphasis in community empowerment is that it misses recognition of the role played by power in the community. Individuals might feel personally empowered, but little changes in terms of influencing the major decisions made about their community.

**Box 1.3 Understanding power**

Understanding the power aspect of community empowerment requires considering three key theories of power: structuralist, pluralist and transformative (Taylor, 2003).

- A *structuralist* view is where power is seen as being held by a layer of powerful organisations and individuals, who maintain their privileges as a dominant group through control of resources and policy-making. From this perspective, cultural norms and education act as ways to maintain the status quo; the elite will hang on to their power and resort to violence, if needed, to keep hold of their privileges. A structuralist position in relation to power is likely to lead to a conflict-based strategy to achieve change, an ‘us and them’ approach to community involvement.

- Alternatively, a *pluralist* view sees power as more spread out and de-centralised, that can be accessed and shared in a competitive manner. Within the pluralist perspective, there is scope for persuasion and negotiation in order to achieve change; the ‘them’ of the ‘us and them’ are more distributed, less coordinated and less oppressive than as described in the structuralist model. How these structuralist and pluralist arrangements are maintained by elites has been examined by writers such as Gramsci and Foucault (discussed in Taylor, 2003). Both the structuralist and the pluralist perspectives are based on the assumption that power is a finite resource of limited availability – this is called the ‘zero-sum’ view of power (Taylor, 2003).

- In contrast, a *transformative* view sees power as more fluid in nature, where it can be built and expanded as a resource, rather than just gained or shared. Rather than power being viewed as a finite and limited resource that different groups and interests hold for themselves and compete for, a different view is that power can be generated and expanded, and is seen as open ended (Taylor, 2003). Some elected members of local authorities, for example, welcome the growth of well-organised community groups and effective community leaders, seeing these as adding to the overall level of community influence in their wards, rather than as a threat to their status and role.
Increased levels of empowerment will often be a journey through several of the different processes described above. Some people start by being focused on their personal needs, and then, through their experiences over time, broaden their interests onto a wider range of issues (Miller et al., 1995).

This discussion has briefly looked at different interpretations of the term ‘community empowerment’, and these raise a number of wider concerns:

➢ Can empowerment as a concept be mis-used by authorities? For instance, is the term ‘community empowerment’ being employed to encourage people to provide their own services, rather than receive properly funded services from public funds (Craig and Mayo, 1995)? Empowerment can be presented by local authorities as a positive policy for community involvement, such as in promoting volunteering schemes, when in practice it means asking volunteers to carry out roles formerly done by paid staff who have lost their jobs because of the austerity agenda of central government.

A more positive approach, based on five key principles, is described in a recent publication by Scotland Audit (2019)

➢ Who is being empowered? For example, is it already well-established groups on an estate who gain further access to funding and services? Will middle-class neighbourhoods become more empowered at the cost of other, poorer areas losing out? Do older, male members of a group benefit from a training course and still exclude women from decision-making and leadership roles? (Constantino-David, 1995).

➢ Is personal empowerment a diversion from the real issues? Do people feel more confident and contribute to local decisions, but still face grinding poverty? Is having a say about local services even a diversion from the real underlying issue of the overall level of available resources?

‘We now have a larger say about how the cake is divided, but the cake still remains too small!’

(Community activist, Bradford)

➢ Will empowerment programmes be challenged by local leaders? In some cases, local leaders benefit from their existing positions of influence and
status and may feel threatened by initiatives that give others greater influence and impact. Some elected members in local authorities may react in this way, an issue discussed later in this chapter.

These questions touch on real issues that exist in communities. This book argues that, despite these difficulties, community empowerment needs to be part of the process of strengthening communities, as described in the next four chapters. It needs to be real – to be based in the reality of people’s lives, based on the poverty and exclusion faced daily by many and the demands of challenging the status quo. In this publication, community empowerment is not seen as an end in its own right, but part of the process of building stronger communities, and needs to be informed by a set of values, as discussed in Chapter 5.

So far, we have just begun to identify some of the issues and challenges associated with the term ‘community empowerment’. A final and crucial question is:

➢ Can empowerment ever be given to communities? Is it more about communities being supported to discover, release and win their own power? (Eade and Williams, 1995). This is a crucial point; that in the process of strengthening communities, practitioners cannot give anyone empowerment but can help to create opportunities and situations where communities can discover, experience and fight for their own empowerment.

‘By its very nature empowerment is not something that can be done to people; it has to be done by them and is therefore closely associated with the idea of partnership.’

(Thompson, 2011, p. 85)

In some cases, this may mean communities creating their own power through self-help and independent action. In other cases, a more campaigning stance could be taken, which will involve people being in conflict with authorities, public bodies or private companies. These options, described as ‘pathways’, are discussed in Chapter 4. Practitioners need to consider their own position on these issues and their understanding of the term ‘community empowerment’ in order to be consistent and effective in their work with communities.

‘Empowerment is about working with people and groups to release their potential. I believe, whilst we cannot empower people directly, we can only help people discover their own empowerment.’

(Community Worker, Leeds)
### Notes: The four main themes for strengthening communities

The approach to strengthening communities used in this book is based on four key themes:

- Building Organisations
- Building People
- Building Involvement
- Building Equality

The four themes were originally developed by Barr and Hashagen (Barr and Hashagen, 2000). Originally called ‘Community empowerment dimensions’, they were described in process and outcome terms as follows:

- Personal empowerment: a learning community
- Positive action: a fair and just community
- Community organisation: an active community
- Participation and involvement: an influential community

This useful model was called ‘Achieving Better Community Development’ or ABCD. Confusingly the same set of initials were unfortunately later used by other writers later to refer to Asset Based Community Development! The model also proposed that through community empowerment, communities could then usually engage in some sort of partnership with public services or others to promote the following set of ‘quality of community life’ dimensions:

- a shared wealth: community economic development
- a caring community: social and service development
- a safe and healthy community: community environmental action
- a creative community: arts and cultural development
- a citizens’ community: governance and development.

Overarching all this was the notion of a ‘healthy community’ that is liveable, equitable and sustainable. The framework was later developed further by Changes Consultancy for the Community Exchange network. A practical assessment toolkit was produced through a research project in Bradford (Skinner and Wilson, 2002). The framework has been used widely across the UK, and the Scottish Community Development Centre published a toolkit based on the framework called *Building Stronger Communities* (The Scottish Community Development Centre, 2012). In this publication, the four themes have been updated to address the current social and economic context.
Summary of main points

Chapter 1 has introduced some key material including:

➢ A brief description of the current economic and social climate
➢ A working definition of the term ‘strong communities’, with seven key features
➢ Different ways to understand the terms ‘community’ and ‘communities’
➢ Insights into the meaning of the term ‘community empowerment’.

Points have been the following:

➢ The current economic climate presents serious challenges to traditional levels of service provision and has created increased pressures on communities.

➢ Strengthening communities is also about enhancing community empowerment.

➢ Community empowerment is part of the process of strengthening communities, but not presented here as an end in its own right.

➢ Practitioners need to consider the role of power in communities – this theme is returned to in Chapter 4.

➢ That empowerment cannot be given, but practitioners can support communities to discover, fight for and win their own empowerment.

The chapter started with a definition of the term ‘strong communities’. This book focuses on the first three of the seven key features given in that definition: active, organised and participative. As mentioned, this is because the author’s experience is mostly in these areas and because to address all seven features would need at least two publications! The book draws on community development approaches, but places these in the current climate and the context of building stronger communities.

The material in Chapter 1 is an introduction to some of the issues around community empowerment and building strong communities. In practice, strengthening communities means working in a range of ways in communities: supporting and challenging individuals as discussed in Chapter 2; developing community groups, as examined in Chapter 3; using and comparing pathways, as explored in Chapter 4; building networks as briefly discussed in Chapter 5; and partnership working at strategic level as reviewed in the last part of the book, Chapter 6.
Developing your practice

Questions that you as a student, practitioner or policy-maker may wish to consider include the following:

➢ What does the definition of ‘strong communities’, with seven key features, mean to you? Do the features describe what you believe in?
➢ If in the UK, how has the recent environment of austerity affected you and the communities you work with?
➢ What examples can you think of that you perceive as describing community empowerment?
➢ What does ‘community empowerment’ mean to you personally? When have you felt empowered in your life?
➢ What is preventing you from feeling more empowered?
➢ What is preventing communities you work with from being more empowered?
➢ What values will underlie your work as a community practitioner?

Box 1.4 What does capacity building mean?

Capacity building is a part of the support needed to strengthen communities. It can be defined as:

‘A process of learning and change that increases the ability of individuals and organisations to contribute to the development of communities.’

(Skinner, 2006)
However, it is useful to identify two different versions within this general definition:

*Community capacity building* means activities, resources and support that strengthen the skills, abilities and confidence of people and groups to take effective action and leading roles in the development of communities.

*Agency capacity building* is learning, resources and organisational change that increase the ability of public sector and larger voluntary organisations organisations to engage with communities effectively.

In other words, it is useful to highlight that there are different types of capacity building. The term ‘agency capacity building’ is useful, because it recognises that public and private sector organisations need to enhance their own abilities to engage effectively with and strengthen communities. This is explored in Chapter 6.

More broadly, the term ‘capacity building’ has also been associated with focusing on gaps in individual or organisational abilities, rather than the approach taken in this publication, which is to value the assets, skills and strengths already existing in communities.

In this publication, the term *community capacity building* (CCB) is used to refer to specific programmes of support, such as a training course organised for community leaders, or grant schemes designed to fund the growth and development of local groups. One concern is that the term can be patronising in tone, in contrast to a partnership approach to CCB, where all interested parties are involved in development and change.

While it is not now a widely used term in England, in Scotland CCB is one of the three main government-led community learning and development (CLD) priorities. Within CLD, CCB sits alongside youth work and adult learning, and is a recognised profession for the CLD and voluntary sector workforce.

**Box 1.5 The Big Local approach**

Big Local is a programme of support for areas across England, where each area has been awarded just over £1 million of Lottery funding as a grant to be spent over a 10-year period. Several examples used later in this book come from Big Local areas, so the approach is introduced here. The scheme was established by what was originally called the Big Lottery Board, arising from concerns that some areas of England had not fully benefited from a fair share of funding. In total, 150 areas have now received the award, with areas being defined in each case through consultation with the local authority and voluntary sector organisations. For areas to access the award, each needed a partnership of residents to be in place, either building on an existing one or, as in most cases, newly created. The programme is now well-established with many local partnerships halfway through their 10-year funding period. The Big Local...
programme is refreshingly different from past regeneration schemes, such as the Single Regeneration Budget, which were often dominated by professionals and politicians making decisions on behalf of the local community. Obviously, in the current climate, having access to a significant funding source is an unusual setting, but Big Local has demonstrated the effectiveness of giving local residents the leading role in initiatives to improve the area and enhance community capacity.

Across England, Big Local partnerships have invested in a wide variety of schemes, from small-scale grants for community activities to larger capital investments to improve local facilities. Projects have included funding employment schemes, housing and park development projects, arts events and festivals. A key feature of the Big Local programme is that local partnerships are led by residents from the area, rather than by politicians and professionals. In practice, this has meant many people getting involved in working together and making decisions about local grants and projects, in some cases with little prior experience of managing public monies.

Big Local partnerships take different forms depending on local preferences – from a defined committee or ‘Big Local Board’ to more open-ended networks. Whatever form partnerships take, a condition on accessing the award is that the partnership connects with and involves a broad range of people from the area. Each partnership needs to draw up a Big Local Plan, describing how the award can be directed to building strengths and addressing needs in the area. Crucially, this plan is drawn up by the resident-led partnership, though help from professionals has often been used.

Most partnerships have active support from public services and voluntary organisations operating in the Big Local area, who contribute staff time and resources to increase the impact of the Big Local initiative. Each partnership also uses a ‘Local Trusted Organisation’ to administer the finances on their behalf, such as a locally based voluntary organisation. Even with a range of voluntary and public organisations involved, the consistent, underlying feature is one of residents being in control.

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