



Toronto Neighbourhood Centres  
Community Development Renewal Initiative

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## Developing a shared understanding of CD

### **Issue:**

What are various ways to generate a shared understanding of community development within an organization?

### **Background:**

As agencies begin to re-visit community development (CD) approaches, one of the first steps in moving forward is to identify a CD definition to guide their work. This can be challenging since CD covers a broad range of approaches and strategies, and can be defined in many ways. Further, CD could mean something very different depending on the vision and mandate of the agency and may vary widely based on the experience of staff.

Given the various ways CD might be interpreted, it is helpful to establish a clear definition early in the process of any agency change work. This will reduce ambiguity in terms of the agency's direction, lessen potential frustrations, increase collective understanding, and can help foster greater commitment to engaging in a CD approach. As well, this process builds confidence in staff new to CD work.

### **Solution:**

The following are four examples of ways agencies can build knowledge about the concept of CD. The first two exercises can be used when an agency-wide definition is being created but participants have limited knowledge of community development. The third is useful when participants understand community development in different ways and desire to preserve this diversity while discovering connections amidst their diverse approaches. The fourth exercise is useful when informally exploring how community development is understood, particularly by executive directors, senior management or persons leading CD efforts in an agency, or among several agencies.

### Using Community Development Definitions from the Web

Participants work with the handout "Community Development Definitions from the Web" (see appendix below) to select key concepts or phrases that they feel are relevant to creating a CD definition for their agency.

### Brainstorming about Community and Development

Participants brainstorm responses to the following questions: 1) What is community or what comes to mind when you think about community? 2) What is development or what comes to mind when you hear the word development? 3) What is community development? Key words and concepts from the brainstorm are combined to create a cohesive CD definition for the agency.

### Community Development People's Dictionary Chart

Participants use a People's Dictionary Chart (see appendix) to display and discuss different CD definitions, highlight key phrases, and explain why they find particular phrases appealing.

### Staff Interviews about their Understanding of Community Development

Interview the executive director and senior staff responsible for supporting CD in the agency about the current or past agency activities they describe as CD, and key components of CD.

### **Results:**

- Staff with a limited knowledge of CD are able to explore different meanings of CD in a participatory and supportive manner with their colleagues.
- Staff can identify differences and connections among their different understandings and interpretations of CD.
- Agencies develop a baseline knowledge of how CD is understood across their organization.

### **Analysis:**

Across agencies, and within agencies, staff hold different understandings of community development and have very different experiences of engaging in it. It is therefore important to provide a variety of opportunities that assist staff to build a shared understanding of community, clarifying differences in CD perspectives and identifying current CD activities. These discussions provide direction to agency change processes that seeks to initiate or deepen an integration of CD work. Creating a shared understanding of CD can foster staff commitment to the relevance of CD in their individual program work, and to an agency's social change role in the community.

### **Resources:**

- Appendix: Developing a Shared Understanding of Community Development
- Community Development Definitions from the Web, TNC CD-Renewal Project.
- TNC CD-Renewal Working CD Definition, TNC CD-Renewal Project.
- People's Dictionary Chart, Catalyst Centre.
- Community Development Intensive: CD Approaches, ICA Associates.

# **Appendix:**

## **Details for Developing a Shared Understanding of CD**

### **1) Using Community Development Definitions from Web**

#### Appropriate Use:

Participants have limited knowledge of community development and an agency-wide definition is desired.

#### Description of Process:

Participants are given a handout entitled “Community Development Definitions on the Web” and asked to work in pairs to select 1 or 2 definitions they feel are most accurate and interesting. They then discuss these definitions and create a list of key phrases or concepts that might be relevant in creating their own definition of CD.

Pairs are then invited to share their definitions and key phrases or concepts with the large group, explaining the reason behind their selections. Returning to pairs, participants are asked to create a two or three-sentence CD definition based on the key phrases they selected and then present their definition to the large group.

The full group then highlights phrases or words from CD definitions that resonate for everyone, and these are used to develop an agency-wide CD definition (usually drafted by a few volunteers following the session).

### **2) Brainstorming about Community and Development**

#### Appropriate Use:

Participants have limited knowledge of community development and an agency-wide definition is desired.

#### Description of Process:

Participants are asked to brainstorm responses to the following questions: 1) What is community or what comes to mind when you think about community? 2) What is development or what comes to mind when you hear the word development? 3) What is community development? The group explores the first two questions separately and then uses those responses to brainstorm about ‘what is community development’.

For each question participants first brainstorm as a large group and then break into pairs or small groups to discuss what has been suggested and add more ideas they believe would help to define these concepts, or capture important things they feel are missing.

After brainstorming about ‘community development’ (or reviewing survey responses about CD), participants highlighted some key words or concepts which they felt should be included a definition of CD. Participants are then led through a process of combining key concepts and words to create a cohesive CD definition for the agency.

Variations

If there are various levels of knowledge or understanding about CD, participants can be provided with definitions of community development to assist them in this process. If a lot of time is available, participants can do an online search of ‘community development’ on [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com), [www.cdx.org.uk/](http://www.cdx.org.uk/), and other websites listed on the ‘Community Development Definitions from the Web’ hand-out and use these as brainstorming resources.

If less time is available, participants can simply use ‘Community Development Definitions from the Web’ hand-out as a resource when brainstorming. Participants could also complete the three-question survey before a session, and begin their session with a compilation of these survey responses.

**3) Community Development People’s Dictionary Chart**

Appropriate Use:

Participants understand community development in different ways and desire to preserve this diversity while seeing connections between different definitions.

Description of Process:

Post several different community development definitions on a wall chart, called the People’s Dictionary Chart, in the first row of each column (see *visual below*). These definitions may be drawn from ‘Community Definitions from the Web’, the TNC CD definitions handout, or other sources.

	def'n 1	def'n 2	def'n 3	def'n 4	def'n 5	def'n 6	def'n 7
key phrase	□	▒	■	□	■	▒	■

Participants are divided into small groups and assigned one CD definition to read, discuss and highlight a key phrase. After 10 minutes of discussion, each group writes their key phrase on a poster and places it on the second row of the Peoples’ Dictionary Chart. In plenary, each group elects a volunteer to describe why they felt the phrase they selected was significant.

#### **4) Interview staff about how they understand Community Development**

##### Appropriate Use:

To informally explore how community development is understood, particularly by the executive director and senior management or persons leading CD efforts in an organization.

##### Description of Process:

First, interview executive director or person they designate about current or past activities in their agencies that they describe as community development. Two of the main questions to ask are:

- What do you think are key components or activities of community development?
- What activities does your agency do now, or have you recently done that you consider to be community development?

Responses are then grouped according to common CD activities or components and various levels of agency involvement in CD. For the TNC CD-Renewal Project, responses from these short interviews with twenty member agencies were used to craft the project's working CD definition, principles and guidelines, and positive organizational characteristics for community development. Results from these interviews were also used to create agency and staff assessment tools.