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Community Development

HELEN M. LEWIS

Rebuilding Communities: A 12-Step Recovery Program

Helen Lewis is a sociologist, community organizer, and former director of the Highlander Center. This essay is based on a presentation she made at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama–"Community Development as Ministry," the Dotson Nelson Lecture on Religion in Life, on October 10, 1995. Many have relied on and used Helen Lewis's community development ideas, though these have not previously appeared in print. A longer version of this article is forthcoming in *Participatory Development in Appalachian Communities: Essays on Cultural Identity, Social Capital, and Sustainability*, edited by Susan E. Keefe.

With both industrialization and de-industrialization, we have experienced the erosion and destruction of communities. Through so-called "development" programs and spurred on by our great faith in industrial "progress," we have destroyed towns, homes, and social networks. With the growth of our national consumer-based economy, we have seen local mom and pop grocery stores, cafes, and filling stations, which provided local gathering places, replaced by smart, modern outposts of distant firms located on the outskirts of town. The negative impacts to the local economy are more than the loss of small businesses. There is also the loss of self-determination, social networks, community participation, cooperative caring, and mutual aid.

Economic growth in the South has become limited to certain "hot spots," deepening the uneven development in the region. The movement of industry to Appalachia and the Southern states is limited to a few "big deals" in which states compete and offer very large packages of tax incentives and cash benefits in exchange for jobs. Benefits to the states take years to realize, if ever, and the social costs are never counted.

But we continue to rely on industrial recruitment as a main strategy for economic development. Like the cargo cults of the South Pacific with natives who built airstrips in the jungle and lit torches to magically call down the planes which left after World War II, our industrial parks sit empty, hoping to attract a flying factory. Our reliance on the industrial recruitment model seems almost like an addiction. Perhaps we need a 12-step program similar to an Alcoholics Anonymous recovery program to recover from this addictive, non-functioning model of development and the co-dependent behavior which accompanies it. We need a model which builds communities rather than exploits and destroys them.

This 12-step recovery program grew out of work in rural mountain communities, most of whom had lost their economic base of mining, timbering, agriculture, or manufacturing. They were usually located on the back side of the mountain and the back side of the county, ignored by the county seat and

Helen Lewis, photographs courtesy of Patricia D. Beaver

by-passed by whatever development came down the new interstate highways. In many of these declining rural communities, in places like Ivanhoe, Virginia; McDowell County, West Virginia; Owsley County, Kentucky; Dungannon, Virginia; Rose's Creek, Tennessee; and Letcher County, Kentucky, people formed community development groups to try to rebuild their communities and economies from the bottom up. The ideas are drawn from their work and provide some suggestions, guidelines, and strategies for building social capital and developing socially responsible, democratic, sustainable communities. The 12 steps are not a straightforward stairway to community revitalization. They are more like dance steps. Sometimes you go two steps forward and one step back to repeat number one. You tapdance for the funders, foxtrot around the local authorities, and slow waltz into some projects. Sometimes individuals come up with creative improvisations. Sometimes they drop out of the dance. The leadership model is that of the choreographer who helps to plan, train, cheer, and lead, and who both participates in and watches the performance with pride.

Some basic values and assumptions underlie this model: *sustainability*, which means using resources today so there will still be resources for future generations. It stresses *people development*: gaining skills, education, pride, and confidence. It is *culture based*; it encourages creativity and preserves important cultural values and traditions. It is *inclusive*, not limited to one group, one gender, or those who already have power. It starts with *local resources*, and instead of concentrating on deficits, it looks to the aspects of community which people want to preserve, including people's knowledge and skills from which they can build and maintain an economy. It must be *ecologically based*. The land, the water, the resources must be cared for. It requires commitment to the long haul, the *long term*. There are no quick fixes. It aims to build a just

economy, a moral economy. These strategies have worked for other communities–they could work for yours.

1. Understand your history–share memories. A conventional economic developer going into a community to work would start with a survey of needs, develop business plans and feasibility studies, seek outside capital, and build physical infrastructure. As important as these steps may be, they do not build community. They do nothing to strengthen people's personal resources or sense of connection to one another. So with the 12-step plan, you start by telling stories, understanding the past, sharing memories. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah writes that community is made up of shared memories.[1] People's stories, experiences, and histories help to save and celebrate human qualities which are the lifeblood of community. Stories build connections between people, provide ways to share knowledge, strengthen civic networks, provide the tools to rebuild communities, and produce the infrastructure, the social capital which is essential in democratic community-based development. You need to get people talking, planning, dreaming. As people begin telling stories of individuals and local places, as they share work histories, listen to stories from the elders who recall the good old days and the bad old days. On these stories, community is rebuilt, pride develops, a sense of identity and roots are established.

Recalling past development histories is a way to begin planning and developing an understanding of the economic system and what has happened to produce current problems. When mines close or factories move, often the people feel they have failed, have caused the problems, are not worthy people. Understanding the reasons for the moves, the economic benefits of leaving or closing, frees people to make changes. As communities regain their histories, they also develop an understanding of the community's role in the larger history of region, nation, and world.

2. Mobilize/organize/revive community. You need a gathering place to share stories. In many rural communities, the post office and the churches are the only viable institutions left where people can come together and talk. Unfortunately, churches tend to divide people by race, class, and family. Congregations can, however, come together and work to build community. Some good examples of cooperative church programs center on housing, food pantries, and social services.

You need unifying events. Meetings, reunions, festivals, parades, discussions, study groups, and celebrations are ways to make community building fun. Music, dancing, and food bring people together and revive the spirit.

Community building also requires an organization to coordinate actions, and it must include all segments of the community. If efforts are limited to one social class or age group or ethnic or racial group, the community will never be complete. Democratic participation is essential to a healthy community. Encourage organizations already in existence–churches, 4-H clubs, fire and rescue departments, and civic clubs–to expand their work, be more inclusive, and become a force for community development.

3. Profile and assess your local community. Survey and map community resources and needs. Catalog "people resources": skills, gifts, talents, and local

expertise. Survey land resources: water, soil, timber, minerals, and beauty. Draw on the resources rather than emphasizing deficiencies and needs. Look to businesses and organizations which are already in place. Do a study of the various groups, networks, and social capital which exist. Outside resource persons to facilitate or assist with research can be helpful, especially if they are committed to participatory research, but local members can do their own assessments and research. They can do a simple cost-benefit analysis of local industries and businesses to determine potential for growth or to understand whether it is exploitative rather than developmental. Participatory research provides data for future planning.

4. Analyze and envision alternatives. Talk and plan together; share dreams and hopes and visions in study groups, bible study, civic group meetings. Determine what the community wants to preserve and to change. Visit other communities, look for models, alternatives, new ways of development, and analyze strategies for change. Concentrate on the potential and resources. When the process is that of outside recruitment, then the outside industry makes the choices, and often the community trades health and environment for jobs without due consideration or democratic participation in the decision making.

5. Educate the community. Personal transformation and community transformation should occur together. To develop new and better businesses, people need to develop new skills. The community organization needs to develop a leadership program–and people need to rethink leadership styles to allow for greater participation and use of many skills and talents. The program should include education for democratic participation. The community group can organize literacy/GED classes, local community college classes, workshops, study circles, tutoring, women's support groups. Youth programs and older citizens programs are also venues for education. The community can recruit local young people to learn the skills needed in the community, to become doctors and teachers, and provide community scholarships so they will return.

The process of education allows a community to develop understanding which can be used to plan, control, and monitor change. The questions become not only about which development policies will shape the region, but also about who will participate in shaping the policies in the first place, and how to define success. Ask questions like "development for whose interests?" and "development by whom?" and "toward what ends?"

Participatory development requires educating for creativity, regaining popular knowledge and history, understanding democratic decision-making, and consciousness of religious and political symbols. With this investment, people can become better equipped to rebuild their own communities and economies. They have the capacity and the social capital to access other resources, network, and collaborate with other groups to revitalize or develop their community.

6. Build confidence and pride. Communities that have been dominated by one industry have a history of dependency and attitudes which must be changed. Regaining community history through oral histories, music, and theater helps build identity and pride. As the community rebuilds, people's work and the group's accomplishments should be recognized and celebrated. Graduations for

GED completion and educational achievements and rewards for learning new skills help build community. Artists, writers, poets, and song writers emerge and flower when a vital community development process begins. Spiritual growth should also be encouraged. Community rituals and ceremonies should be initiated to express the new spirit of development: personal and community.

7. Develop local projects. As the group begins a planning process, they can link needs and resources and develop projects to bring them together: a volunteer child care center, tutoring for children after school, a craft cooperative, a recreation area, a park, activities like cleaning up the town, repainting, planting flowers or trees, honoring the ancestors. Community-wide and small group projects increase participation and involve new and different groups in the community.

Often a community project, such as building a memorial park for veterans or coal miners who died in the mines, may not seem to outside resource persons as meeting essential needs, but these projects may be the way to mobilize, to build community, which has to precede other work. Encourage young enterprises, look for local entrepreneurs, and celebrate each new project. Excitement becomes contagious.

8. Strengthen your organization. The community organization group needs care and nurturing. Although many communities have very strong charismatic leaders who get the process started, they can't rely on one charismatic leader. Charismatic leaders can be most important in early mobilizing and continue to add spirit and enthusiasm to projects and activities, but broader, more diverse, collective leadership is needed for long-term sustainability. Solo leaders burn out and organizations fold, unless there is broader leadership. Leadership development and staff training are important, and training is needed for special skills such as fiscal management, bookkeeping, and fund raising. Everyone needs to be involved in strategic planning and evaluation. The organization may need to seek outside help with organizational development. Learn from other groups and enlarge participation so that the organization doesn't evolve into another small clique pursuing its own self-interest.

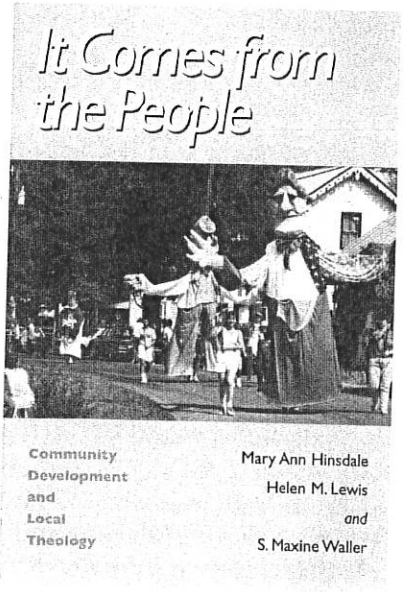
9. Collaborate and build coalitions. Community groups need to make linkages and form networks and partnerships with other groups to gain strength, share resources, and learn from each other's efforts, successes, and failures. Small isolated community groups can become marginalized, be labeled as "trouble makers," and ignored. A coalition of groups can form a power base to influence or control local government. Community organizations should begin to make connections: local, regional, and national ones to access resources, use existing networks, and get representation on boards–schools, libraries, county commissions, and economic development groups. Groups need not only to locate outside help but also to learn how to use and control outside resources and not be co-opted or controlled by them. Communities must set the agenda and make a contract with outside resource persons and organizations.

With a coalition of groups, it is more difficult for the established power structure and decision makers to ignore them or marginalize them. You can't develop alone.

10. Take political power. Political activity becomes essential to challenge and change policies to redirect resources to the community. Community groups can encourage and support members of the community to run for political office. They can begin civic education, voter registration, facilitate participation, develop a local monitoring program, attend all council/commission/board meetings, and get members on all the boards. Advocacy skills can be taught, and members can lobby elected officials, bring them to your community, recognize them when they make progressive moves, and educate them about community needs.

11. Initiate economic activity. Community groups can encourage and begin development of home-grown businesses. They can seek capital for local projects, develop a revolving loan fund, establish a mini-grants program, and work with local banks to invest in community businesses. Groups can work to make policy changes in banks and economic development agencies. They can confront plant closures and try to recruit responsible outside industries and make community contracts with new industries. Communities also need to look for alternatives for survival, relearn older ways of self-sufficiency and survival from elders: raising and preserving food and home remedies. They can use the history of the region or the natural environment for historical or ecological tourism. Through the education program, they can develop local job training and business development programs. Communities can establish an incubator for small local businesses. They can work with young people in the schools to develop entrepreneurial training and encourage small business development as a career.

12. Enter local/regional/national/international planning processes. Communities must recognize that they are part of a regional, national, and international economy, so they need to understand how the global economy impacts the local community. They can join international movements which will help small communities world-wide. They can make international linkages with other grassroots community groups and rural communities. They can be a part of an international movement to develop a moral, just economy. In a global economy, communities must also organize globally to make structural changes.

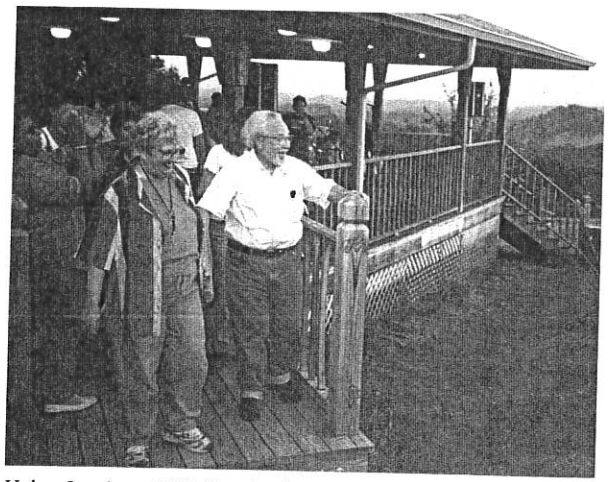


The Role of the Community Developer[2]

The role of the outside helper, the development "expert," in building social capital and community capacity is quite different than the role of the economic developer in the conventional industrial recruitment model of development who comes with plans, feasibility studies, and the questions and the answers for the community. The participatory,

collaborative research model better describes the process whereby the researcher/educator comes to the community at the invitation of the community to help them ask questions and find their own answers. She may help facilitate their planning and development work by working as a resource person, sometimes a teacher, a trainer of skills, and participant in the work. She must assist the group in their analysis and reflection, working to develop critical consciousness and understanding of the historical background and root causes of their problems and pointing to alternative paths they may choose. The term "animator" describes an important part of the work, which is to encourage and help uncover creative talents and skills, to help people gain confidence in their own knowledge and abilities to solve their own problems.

As an outside "stranger," she is often needed to negotiate between conflicting interests. She becomes a buffer and a sounding board. She can help groups become more inclusive, pushing for more diversity and participation from all segments of the community. She can cross and sometimes break down barriers of class, race, and gender. She can recommend other resource persons when needed and share stories of other communities and link communities. She can be a catalyst for bringing about change. If her home base is a place such as the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee which has been working with grassroots in Appalachia and the rural South since 1932, she can serve an important role to bring groups together to share their experiences and link them together to form a social movement. Such organizations remain when the individual staff person is gone and can continue to provide support, information, and resources to community organizations. If she is from a university, she can often find useful university resources to help with technical problems or make other resources available.



Helen Lewis and Highlander board member Lewis Sinclair celebrate their birthdays at the Highlander Center in Tennessee, October 1994

But there are also difficulties in being connected to a prestigious university. Judith Stacey concludes that the collaborative work of scholars with community subjects can give the appearance of respect and equality, but that it actually masks a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation. Because the relationship also becomes a personal relationship, "engagement, and attachment, ... places research subjects at grave risk" of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer.[3]

Participatory research encourages accepting, supportive, friendship, kin-type relationships. If the community development worker also tries to document, analyze, evaluate, and lead the community group to self-evaluation and self-criticism, the community may resist and define her work as betrayal. Yet the community worker has the inescapable tasks of interpretation and evaluation. The difficult but necessary task is to involve the community in the analysis/evaluation process.

Researchers discover that the process of collaboration does not allow them full control. However, some of the interventions can be useful, offering practical help and emotional support, a chance to reflect and gain understanding of the process which is going on. Researchers can provide comparatively non-judgmental acceptance and validation, recognition of the importance of what the community is doing. Though dangerous and painful, such collaborative methods provide greater depth and understanding of the process. Participatory development requires participatory evaluation.

A major goal of popular education and participatory research is to develop critical awareness which enables the learners to recover their experience, reflect upon it, understand it, and improve it. This requires the ability to be self-critical and to learn from the internal practices and organizational experiences as well as analysis of the outside economic and political system or the specific problem which the group is seeking to change. Self-criticism and group criticism of the organizational structure and leadership practices are frequently the most difficult for both grassroots groups and their leaders to do and similarly difficult for social activist trainers, educators, and facilitators. But it is essential for developing strong, viable groups, good leadership, and democratic practices. Organization building requires the same analysis and action based on the research and reflection process which the group uses to understand the social problem.

When working in communities often the outside professionals who come to help in the community, although technically qualified for the job, are not fully prepared for collaboration with community people. University and government assistants usually work on community or economic development from the centers of power which are ruled by technicians, academics, and specialists who engage in development "from the top down."

Nelda Daley and Sue Ella Kobak describe two types of outside helpers in one rural community: the "familiar outsider" and the technical expert. The "familiar outsider" is permissive–emphasizing education, developing self-esteem, and critical consciousness. The technical expert emphasizes skill, discipline, and training for the staff and board to compete in the economic development world. The latter can be interpreted as cold and condescending, a heavy task-master who makes the community group feel inadequate. The community learns to work with technical experts because of the needed skills or the resources which they control. The "familiar outsider," on the other hand, emphasizes support but does not leave the group with some of the needed skills.[4]

The two roles complement each other and provide resources the community can use. But working together has to be learned. People and situations do not always fit the textbook examples. Despite the different ways of analysis by the

community people and the outside experts, community groups learn that some of the things they want to do or the skills and understanding they need for certain projects require mutual commitment and cooperation between local members and outside workers. Outside helpers must always remind themselves that this is not their community and avoid leading the community into confrontations or commitments they cannot deal with. For the outside helper can always escape, leaving the community folks to live with the situation.

When a community movement gets started and receives a lot of media attention, activists, educators, public interest groups, and social change organizations will offer resources and help. Other community groups want to share in the excitement of their activities and learn. Colleges want to send students to help or observe. Some helpers become "predators of communities," a term Wendell Berry uses to describe professionals in our society who are rootless, without community, and who use other communities to fulfill their own needs for community.[5]

Sometimes outsiders find it difficult to leave communities and the projects they have "delivered." They are tempted to remain to "protect" them, becoming watchdogs and adoptive parents. But paternalistic or maternalistic attitudes can prevent autonomy from flourishing and impair the ability of the communities to take control of their own development.

In community work, everything is not always successful. Most community groups go through stages. At the beginning, there is often a movement based on the struggle for specific demand. There is great excitement and energy. If demands are not met early on, many drop out, and only the most dedicated or "hard-headed" stay with the movement for the long haul. Fals-Borda describes how community organizations and movements experience death and resurrection by turns, alternately bursting like a bubble and rooting themselves successfully in the ground like seeds. Death occurs when the communities give in to exploitation and submission, when they return to the passivity of old, or forget protest and vigilance. They may be co-opted or become tired of fanatical, compulsive, over-eager, or demanding outside helpers.[6]

The Steel Ceiling

While grassroots community groups have succeeded in developing many creative, innovative programs, they cannot become completely self-sufficient within the present system. It is almost as if they find a steel ceiling which limits how far they can develop. For some the ceiling seems higher, depending upon their resources and ability to manipulate the larger system, but for some of the poorest communities with the fewest resources, the ceiling is very low. The more capacity and social capital they have developed, the more resources they can access, and the higher their ceiling.[7]

Rural communities find that they can develop community services, rebuild community spirit, and develop educational programs, but they still lack access to capital and other resources needed for substantial economic development. They are still outside the mainstream economy. Major changes in development policies, distribution of development money and resources must occur before rural

communities can really develop economic security and substantially improve their income and economic well-being. Entering the political-policy development arena becomes essential. Coalitions must be formed and enough power developed to change the conventional development model.

Rural communities are still part of national and international economies, the agendas of which do not include preserving or reviving small rural communities. Until the needs and agendas of these communities are included in national and international development plans, community efforts will be stalled and short circuited. Rural communities will continue to be disposable, and the creativity and participation which these grassroots movements encourage and develop will be ignored. That is why communities must also enter the policy arena, change development policies so that this vigor, energy, and social capital can be used to develop socially responsible, democratic, and sustainable communities throughout the world.

NOTES

1. Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

2. Much of this information is drawn from the book which documents the community development work in Ivanhoe, Virginia: Hinsdale, Mary Ann, Helen M. Lewis and S. Maxine Waller, *It Comes From the People: Community Development and Local Theology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

3. Judith Stacey, "Can There be a Feminist Ethnography?" in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words, The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 113.

4. Nelda Knelson Daley and Sue Ella Kobak, "The Paradox of the 'Familiar Outsider,'" *Appalachian Journal* 17.3 (Spring 1990), 248-60.

5. Wendell Berry, "Higher Education and Home Defense," *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 52.

6. Orlando Fals-Borda, *Knowledge and People's Power: Lessons with Peasants in Nicaragua, Mexico, Columbia* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1988), 40-41.

7. Anne Lewis of Appalshop Media Center, Whitesburg, Kentucky, has developed a video comparing Ivanhoe and Trammell, Virginia, and the community development process. Her 56-minute VHS film–*Rough Side of the Mountain* (1997)–can be obtained from Appalshop.