

What is Networking?

Networking is the process by which relationships and contacts between people and communities are nurtured and utilised to share skills, knowledge and experience for mutual benefit.' (Gilchrist, 2009)

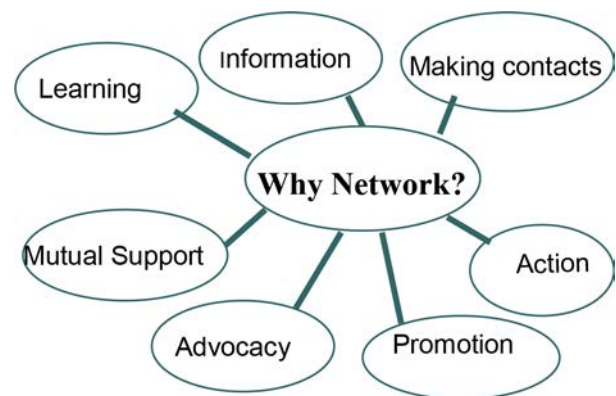
The model of the "well connected community" argues that community development has a role to play in helping people make connections that are useful and empowering and in particular, it addresses how to overcome or dismantle some of the obstacles that prevent people from communicating and cooperating with one another (Gilchrist 2009)

Networking can happen informally through personal connections or more formally through a networking structure. Informal links between people and organisations can grow into something more open that ensures access to all members. This process is often facilitated by community workers and can help community organisations and representatives become involved in formal partnerships with decision makers.

Why is it so important?

"Individuals with robust and diverse networks lead healthier lives than those who are more isolated, lonely or whose networks consist of similar people" (Gilchrist, 2009). This work of maintaining relationships is often hidden but is vital to:

- Strengthen community infrastructure • Build social cohesion • Ensure successful partnership work
- Develop collective action • Empowerment • Challenge discrimination



WHY CDHN NETWORKS

Information: to keep members informed about current developments in their field and share information among each other.

Making contacts: members can meet others to share ideas, think of new ways of tackling issues, work together and share resources.

Promotion: to raise awareness of activities and work. Members know who is doing what, this can prevent unnecessary duplication and give them a contact to approach for support.

Advocacy: to promote a Community development approach to work and to articulate a collective view on issues.

Action: to create opportunities for members to do things together while protecting their own identity. Providing members with a forum for debate and discussion.

Mutual support: to maintain confidence and enthusiasm.

Learning: formally and informally.

Networking & Community Development

One of the main aims of community development is to ensure the participation and empowerment of both individuals and communities and to promote equality.

"Development of community is about strengthening and extending networking between individual, between groups between organisations and just as importantly between different sectors and agencies" (Gilchrist, 2009)

An important role of the community worker is networking both within the community and with other groups and agencies. Without building good networks long term sustainable change is less likely to occur.

Personal qualities of a good networker (Gilchrist, 2009)

Affability Warmth, compassion, empathy, humanity, responsiveness

Integrity Self aware, trustworthy, reliable, realistic, honest, open, confidentiality

Audacity Relishing change & innovation, prepared to challenge authority, take risks, breaks rules

Adaptability Tolerant of differences, enjoys cultural diversity, flexible, non judgemental, open to criticism

Tenacity Patient, persistent, being comfortable with uncertainty & stress

Network development...

Networking can take place at a variety of levels and it can be very beneficial to clearly identify the specific groups/agencies or departments that you wish to network with and be clear about why. It is important to take part in events which give you the opportunity to meet people you may not normally meet or who may be marginalised by mainstream organisations. It is also important to maintain good relationships across the community.

Any potential network developers would need to:

- gather information about their circumstances and resources
- analyse their situation
- prioritise actions they wish to pursue
- join together to form a group or organisation
- workout the means to implement these actions.

The challenges of networking

- Enabling groups to participate without losing their valuable independence and voice.
- Ensuring networks don't promote personal interests or exclude any people or sections of the community.
- Ensuring groups have the resources (time, money and skills) to take part.
- Enabling groups to participate at regional and national level without diverting their energy from the work at local level.
- To ensure they are not used to exert pressure to conform.

In recent years there has been a growing interest among community workers and other professionals in the practice of networking and the development and use of networks. Like 'community', the concept of 'networking' is in danger of losing its meaning and becoming a catchall phrase for any kind of communication or loose association of people.' (Gilchrist and Rauf, 2006)

References

Ledwith M (2nd ed)(2011) Community Development. A critical approach. Poicy Press Bristol. Lin, Fu & Hsung (2001) "Position generator: A measurement for social capital" in *Social capital: Theory & Research* (ed) Lin, Cook, Burt, New York, Cambridge University Press. Gilchrist A(2009) *The well connected community*, Policy Press Bristol. Gilchrist & Rauf, T (2006) Community Development & networking, CDF. Putnam (2007) *E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty first Century*, *Scandinavian Political Studies* Vol 30: 2 Fact sheet updated January 2012

Networking and Inequalities

'Networking has the potential to redress inequalities as it creates the possibility for skill, knowledge and expertise to flow across organisational and cultural boundaries. This can give disadvantaged individuals and smaller groups access to support and information that they may not be able to access on their own. Feelings of oppression and hostility can be lessened through shared support and discrimination can be tackled by joint campaigning, education, debate and negotiation.' (Gilchrist and Rauf, 2006, p.4)

Networks, social capital & health

Networks are closely associated with social capital. Networks can be used to promote and build social capital both with communities and with those around them. "Social capital is captured from embedded resources in social networks" (Lin, et al 2001)

Social capital can be viewed as the resources available to and between networks or the levels of trust and reciprocity in social relations. There are three types of social capital:

Bonding - That which brings a group together.

Bridging - That which brings different groups to gether.

Linking - That which links the groups with the state and statutory bodies.

Putnam writes extensively on social capital and the benefits of this on health and wellbeing. " Much evidence suggests that where levels of social capital are higher children grow up healthier, safer and better educated, people live longer happier lives and democracy and economy work better" (Putnam, 2007)

While good networks and social capital can have a positive effect on health "factors associated with poverty & social exclusion...can not be eradicated simply through the buffering effects of social capital" (Gilchrist, 2009).

The challenge is to use our networks for the purpose of collective action to take action on issues such as poverty and social exclusion.

"The work of the community practitioner is to create the context for developing the skills and knowledge for people to join together collectively to bring about change". (Ledwith, 2011)