



## Community development by the complexity theory

Shay Ben Yosef<sup>1</sup>

### The fundamental complexity of the community approach

**The community approach enables professionals from varied disciplines (police officers, doctors, social workers, community center directors, urban planners, attorneys, etc.) to deal with social challenges while making use of both their professional expertise and the community approach.**

**As the awareness of the necessity of partnerships grows it becomes more and more complicated to apply it. The complexity theory provides a guideline for handling that challenge successfully.**

### **Community development – a complex matter**

Community development<sup>2</sup> is the name given to a professional approach that views the community as a **playing field**, **resource** and as **a goal** in of itself.

As a **playing-field**: Proper community action makes it possible to contend more successfully with social challenges.

As a **resource**: Individuals, groups and organizations are a very useful resource for community development. Achieving political, economical, educational and social goals is much easier when we effectively bind the community potential.

As a **goal**: The community itself is viewed as a basic human need; good communities enable individuals and groups to **organize themselves**, develop **a relationship** and realize shared **values** as a community in order to improve their quality of life and lifestyle while taking responsibility for the welfare and well-being of the others.

**Activity taken in the context of a community approach is carried out within a complex context.** The need to plan and act in a comprehensive fashion, taking into account the large number of stakeholders, the considerable number of interests, the great internal variability among the ages and cultures in the socio-economic positioning, multi-disciplinary activities and a multiplicity of organizations and sectors.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a shortened version of an article that was written as part of a shared learning process carried out by the Interdisciplinary Forum for Community Development. Thanks for their support and contributions. This paper was written for NY Jerusalem Community dialog forum meeting, March 05 NY.

<sup>2</sup> I am also referring to related professional approaches, such as community building, community organizing or community capacity building.

The approach of complex systems that has developed in the natural sciences and sociological theories enable a renewed understanding of social systems and the development of professional and practical approaches to cope with social challenges in the community.

### **What is the challenge in the complex-systems approach?**

With the coming of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it began to be understood that social systems “behave” on the edge of chaos.

This behavior is reflected in the fabric of connections and effects that cross internal and external boundaries very dynamically and with a high level of internal variability.

The behavior of a complex system is closer to the chaos threshold than to organic or mechanical systemic processes. **This type of system is known as a “complex system.”**

The problem with systems of this kind is that it is impossible to predict in advance how changing the detailed rules of the individual interactions will affect the global behavior. **The complexity theory, poses a new challenge to those seeking to develop communities. The new approaches regarding the essence of the community and its principles and methods of action have already begun to develop and there is still a long way to go. I will try to outline here some preliminary ideas regarding this matter.**

### **How is the fact that communities are complex systems expressed in practice?**

1. The increasing **freedom of choice and independence** of individuals and groups make it difficult to set social change in motion and create the need for meaningful dialogue among the community’s leadership, the construction of agreements and two-way, top-down, bottom-up work.
2. **A high level of social and cultural variability** makes it difficult to reach a consensus on values, priorities and worldviews. The difficulty in creating a cohesive community poses a question to the very existence of the system.
3. **Quick pace of change:** There is no certainty that it is at all possible to learn from experience, creating difficulty in long-term planning and the need to continuously update and adjust short- and mid-term plans.
4. **Complex interactions:** The community system is influenced by unpredictable factors. It is difficult to attribute output to input. The planning, control and assessment processes become increasingly complex and are often not relevant. The linear planning model that moves along the pathway of mapping, planning, implementation,

improvement no longer provides an appropriate response due to the difficulty in identifying the key point for intervention.

### **How we could develop communities at this conditions?**

There are four principals that should be taken into account:

1. **Relying on community resources** – The development of a community oriented first and foremost to **enable its members to organize and act** in order to affect their lifestyles and quality of life, physically as well as on the organizational, emotional and spiritual levels.
2. **A place for diversity** – people asking for recognition. Community development is about empowerment, about making space for diverse groups to express their uniqueness. A place for diversity means also accessible community life.
3. **A common space** – creating a caring, familiar community, forging shared values, norms and a sense of common identity.
4. **Sustainability** – creating a community mechanism, processes and channels for leadership to emerge, in order to achieve long-range outcomes with limited intervention.

### **How can these situations be better contended with?**

**Leadership:** Professional, elected and civil leadership is moving from command and control leadership patterns to service and facilitation leadership patterns.

The improvement of **internal communications:** This relates in particular, to the fostering of informal social networks that make it possible to overcome the different mapping of the internal and external environment.

**Accessible information:** We are inundated with information but often find it difficult to locate the relevant information at the right time. Transparency, accessibility and immediacy in the dissemination of information will facilitate appropriate and coordinated action in complex systems.

**Knowledge:** The understanding that **knowledge** (about the situation, possible paths of action, resources, connections) does not belong solely to the “experts,” but is accumulated among all stakeholders; constant accumulation of knowledge is part of the involvement process.

**Freedom of occupation:** This involves the creation of conditions in which stakeholders can act by choice out of a broad and deep awareness of the

community as a whole (How does a bull behave in a china shop? With the knowledge that it might break everything it doesn't see!).

Focusing on the tension between process and result; as a rule, setting in motion **mechanisms and process** in the community will be more effective in the attainment of the desired results than control by means of outputs.

Focusing on the **value-based and spiritual core** of the community will make it possible to overcome the loosening of external borders and the organizational structure's binding nature.

The creation of various **inclusion processes** (accessibility, dialogue, empowerment...) will make it possible for a community to manage the variability within it, including continuous acts of **bonding** and **bridging**.

The creation of a climate of **self-organization** that will enable the community to act within a constantly changing environment.

**The realization of these principles makes it possible to improve the functioning of the community as a complex system based mainly on interdisciplinary, inter-organizational and inter-sectorial action.**

**Action methods that promote interdisciplinary activities in complex systems:**

In recent years, a new generation of community practice has developed, based on the principles and values described above. These action methods include:

- **Meeting point** - Multi-dimensional planning and action model that make use of a circular community model and are based on partnerships between organizations and interdisciplinary practices.
- **Mission adjusted** - Greater use of task forces rather than committees, of interest groups rather than activists, of round tables rather than steering committees.
- The use of methods that have been adapted to activity within a complex environment, such as Open Space Technology, Appreciative Inquiry, Narrative Approach, World Café', scenarios, accessibility, alternative dispute resolution, community dialogue.
- Community diagnosis that includes all the stakeholders in the focused diagnosis of a task.
- Methods of energizing participating community design processes.

- A Social Impact Assessment survey (SIA) of environmental development plans.
- Techniques to map out and manage 'community networks'
- Varied methods to build inter-sectorial, interdisciplinary, inter-organizational, inter-cultural and other kinds of partnerships, like round tables.
- Methods to develop a dialogue between different views, conciliation and alternative dispute resolution.
- Extensive use of formative assessment with an emphasis on coordination and integration among stakeholders and the development of self-observation capabilities in groups and work teams.
- Population or geographically oriented comprehensive ventures that mobilize all stakeholders to cope with a common challenge.
- A time bank, self-expression center, good neighbor: self-organizational methods in the fields of leisure and volunteering.
- Open Space: A method that encourages a self-organizational process for community activity in a broad, heterogeneous forum.
- Long life learning – a learning community: The development of community mechanisms for continued learning from infancy to old age.

## **Conclusion**

Work within complex systems is not restricted solely to community developers; studies show the extent to which talented managers in the business sector have grasped the need to adapt their actions to the characteristics of complexity theory. Consequently, community developers must also strengthen interdisciplinary, inter-sectorial and inter-organizational cooperation. This calls for the continued development of new methods of action that are based on the encouragement of self-organization by the community in order to successfully contend with social, economic and environmental challenges.