

Complexities and Challenges Affecting the Progress of Community Development in South Africa's Changing Sociopolitical Landscape

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Abstract

This article shows the strategic, institutional approach the South African government took in creating and professionalising an occupational group—community development workers (CDWs), later community development practitioners (CDPs)—as part of its human resource planning for the social development sector. It highlights the complexities and challenges affecting the progress of community development, not least adequate funding for CDPs employed in local municipalities that, in turn, had to budget and plan for the operation and delivery of services in partnership with the nongovernment sector. It begins with an examination of policy definitions of community development before discussing the ever-changing political landscape and community–government nexus. It highlights community development's entanglement with government policy and service provision and the community development infrastructure that opened doors for CDPs. It then discusses the policy-led changes shaping community development as a recognised occupation, the legislative requirements for professionalisation and progress towards meeting these. Finally, it suggests that future progress rests on the development of a comprehensive practice framework that addresses not only individual practitioner standards but also the obligations of employers to create an environment conducive to empowering transformative community development programmes in partnership with communities, relevant stakeholders and local organisations.

Keywords: Community development, professionalisation, social development, social policy, South Africa

Introduction

Prior to the professionalisation of community development, communities participated spontaneously in local activities driven by a set of values and principles promoting mutual aid and cooperative engagement. Postcolonial African scholars constantly highlight local indigenous communities' communitarian values prior to colonial settlement. They persist today in community groups across Africa engaged in savings and burial clubs, among other activities. While these, like most community activities, do not involve planned intervention, international development organisations have long drawn on voluntary local community involvement in their strategic community engagement (George, 2000; Gray, 2017). The postwar advent of

planned community development has spawned advances in scholarship surrounding, and the increasing professionalisation of, this activity, along with debates on its exact nature and merits. Within this scholarship, there is some agreement that it is variously a field, method, process, product and goal of transformative transdisciplinary practice used *inter alia* in adult education and international development programmes and social action and advocacy campaigns (Dithlake, 2022; Kenny et al., 2018; Van der Westhuizen, 2021). As a multidisciplinary, multisectoral field of social engagement, practitioners from diverse social sectors and from different levels of government work in tandem with one another to effect social improvement. As a method or intervention approach, it seeks widespread citizen participation and promotes values of self-determination and empowerment. As a goal or product, it seeks outcomes that improve people's quality of life. Additionally, within South Africa's developmental welfare system, community development has evolved from an intervention approach to a recognised profession with a key role in the country's transformative agenda (RSA, 1997). However, as the government increasingly embraced a conventional neoliberal economic framework, social policies and legislative processes essentially positioned community development as an arm of public service provision in which community development practitioners (CDPs) played a mediating role in bringing services closer to the people and linking them to local economic development programmes. Though as a method, approach or process, community development favoured bottom-up or community-driven programmes, once established within South Africa's institutional governance structure, top-down measures for national coordination and local implementation through provincial administrations and local municipalities followed. Thus, in South Africa, community development is variously a practice approach, method, process, field, product, goal and legislatively recognised profession embedded within an institutional structure, as envisaged in the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997). The White Paper's goal was an active citizenry closely involved in developmental processes with CDWs facilitating participatory engagement in government services and programmes. However, some 20 years later, the National Planning Commission (NPC) would report that the 'ideal of an active citizenry in a developmental state ... remained largely unmet ... [while] meaningful community engagement ... remained a challenge' (RSA, 2020a, p. 55). Why was this?

In an attempt to address this question, this article seeks to elucidate the complexities and challenges of community development within South Africa's changing historical, political and socioeconomic landscape and government–community nexus. It highlights the policies and legislative processes that positioned community development as an arm of public service provision mediated by CDPs to help people access public services and, as the government increasingly adopted a conventional neoliberal economic framework, participate economically. It shows the catastrophic service-delivery failures and government renegeing on its promise of collaboration and partnership that placed CDPs in an invidious position *vis-à-vis* the community, thus preventing them from becoming active forces in increasingly disgruntled communities (Van der Westhuizen, 2021). Since we know little about CDPs employed outside government and most of the discourse surrounding community development relates to those in the public sector, the following discussion relates mainly to institutional processes surrounding community development in South Africa and their social impact. Among other things, the authors were interested in exploring the way in which politics—and government policy—historically and contemporarily influenced the ever-changing field of community development.

The processes followed aligned with global community development initiatives and the values promoted by successive international development policies, with South Africa seeking to embed values and agendas surrounding citizen participation through bottom-up, grassroots

development. Thus, in this post-millennium and sustainable development goal era, the latest 2030 National Development Plan (NDP)—drafted in 2012 by the NPC, a special ministerial body constituted in 2009 by President Jacob Zuma—envisages ‘robust social and economic policies’ (RSA, 2020a, p. 56) to tackle ‘the root causes of poverty and inequality’ (RSA, 2020a, p. 55). As do most international development policies, it emphasises the importance of policy, legislation and a well-developed institutional infrastructure (Gray & Ariong, 2017). Against this backdrop, this article begins with a discussion of definitions of community development in contemporary policy before examining the community–government nexus and consequences of its entanglement with government. Thereafter, it examines the creation of an institutional structure for community development and progress towards the professionalisation of CDPs in keeping with government policy.

Policy Definitions of Community Development

In South Africa, successive policies have established community development as a legislatively recognised profession embedded within an institutional structure. The White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) envisaged a range of social service professionals servicing the social sector with CDWs working alongside social workers, and child and youth care workers, and professional boards regulating each occupational category (Gray & Lombard, 2023a). Implicit in this policy was the professionalisation of these occupational groups, with social work most advanced in this process, at the time. Importantly, it saw community development *as a professional occupation* with an intrinsic orientation towards democratic and participatory outcomes of collective change, inclusion and equality (RSA, 1997, 2003). However, these goals were extremely broad and could apply to any of the social service professions. The Social Services Practitioners Bill (RSA, 2020) fared no better. It defined a CDP as ‘a registered social service practitioner who facilitates community development initiatives and collective solutions to address social development issues, needs and problems that arise within that community including practitioners providing supervisory and management support services’ (p. 8). Interestingly, rather than follow the categories set out by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) then in place (CDP, assistant CDP and professional CDP), it included assistant CDPs, CDPs, caregivers and any other category designated in terms of subsection 3.

The Regulations for the Establishment of the Professional Board for Community Development within the Council (Department of Social Development (DSD), 2023a) defined a CDP as a person equipped with ‘theoretical knowledge and the practical skills to facilitate activities that enable households and communities to manage their own development ... to achieve sustainable livelihoods’ (RSA, 2023a, p. 87). Again, this definition is very broad though reference to ‘theoretical knowledge and practical skills’ does hint at the need for formal education rather than community-based training, as in the workplace learnership model discussed below. All indications are that most CDPs have accumulated practice acumen though lack academic grounding. Thus, they lack in-depth theoretical knowledge relevant to their work, while policy documents construe community development in broad terms as multidisciplinary [coming from 22 job fields in the CDP survey (DSD, 2014b; Hart & De Beer, 2022)], integrative and holistic, despite its sector-specific evolution in practice, for example, in local government, as discussed below.

Most useful here are the findings that CDPs worked mainly in non-registered community entities (28%) followed by local government (21%), nonprofit organisations (20%), national or provincial government (19%), community-based organisations (8%) and faith-based organisations (3%) (DSD, 2014b; Hart & De Beer, 2022). This data suggests that conceiving

community development as an all-encompassing, comprehensive rather than an explicit domain-specific area of practice has hampered efforts to develop a context-specific practice framework grounded in unique community development knowledge and practice skills. Further, an all-encompassing definition does not reflect the historical shifts in community development from a spontaneous activity to a planned intervention. From its contemporary beginnings as a consultative policy-making endeavour in the 1990s, it evolved into an arm of the public service, bringing services closer to the people and linking the unemployed with local economic development programmes in the 2000s. Thus, 40% of CDPs were public sector employees working mainly in the Department of Social Development (DSD) and Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) (local government municipalities), where they focused increasingly on welfare services, serving as welfare assistants to help people apply for welfare payments. This suggests a need for specific skills that have little to do with participatory organising, action and development, as well as definitional clarity within a demarcated practice domain. We know little about the work of 60% of CDPs employed in the nongovernment sector though imagine they might have more direct community engagement than those in the public service sector, since they ‘understand and practise community development’ (De Beer, 2011, p. 6). The following discussion shows the way in which the unfolding socioeconomic and political context in South Africa influenced the practice of community development.

Community–Government Nexus in South Africa’s Changing Political Landscape

The changing political landscape serves as a backdrop to ideologies informing community development under apartheid, since apartheid, and into an uncertain future. Exposed to ongoing socioeconomic and political challenges, South Africa’s continuously changing community–government nexus has had a major impact on the evolution of community development, not least its manipulation by successive governments for racist political purposes.

Turbulence and insecurity marked the 1970s as mass mobilisation led to increased opposition to divisive, oppressive and brutal apartheid policies. A generalised culture of resistance emerged through the Black Consciousness Movement, while labour unrest intensified. The 1976 Soweto student uprising against the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of school instruction was the last straw (DSD, 2014a). Thereafter, mounting, sometimes violent, social action against the illegitimate apartheid state continued through the 1980s, as deeply entrenched inefficiencies and inequalities sparked civil protest and rent and service boycotts in response to the overcrowded, unaffordable housing of black people that ‘made black townships increasingly dysfunctional and ungovernable’ (DSD, 2014a, p. 41). By the mid-1980s, South Africa had reached breaking point, as the repressive apartheid state and its intimidating violent tactics led to increasing resistance from the military wing of the ANC liberation movement (DSD, 2014a). Given varying political allegiances, disintegration and conflict inevitably followed, polarising communities (John, 2013). For example, this led to violent conflict between the African National Congress (ANC) and Inkatha Freedom Party in KwaZulu-Natal.

Responsive to context, community development inevitably bore the influence of toxic historical racial policies, not least its 1980s’ Population and Development Programme (PDP). Built on a belief popular in international development circles at the time, surrounding the relationship between poverty and overpopulation, this programme led to a major focus on family planning to reduce household size to match resource availability (Klugman, 1993; Population Council, 1981). As with all planned community development initiatives, family planning programmes sought to foster community self-reliance and emphasised the importance

of community participation in their design, development and implementation. However, as Klugman (1993) observed, since the programme ‘became operative during a period in which much of South Africa was under a State of Emergency, throughout which community-based organisations were systematically destroyed by government forces, the inclusion of the PDP into this System was the antithesis of community participation’ (p. 47). The important role the feminist movement played in promoting women’s rights surrounding family planning led to a backlash criticising development agencies’ failure to involve men in policy development on this, though research showed men and women approved of, and were practising, contraception (Klugman, 1993). Given South Africa’s racist apartheid policies, citizens construed this development initiative as a deliberate attempt to enforce birth control on the black population, especially since family planning community development programmes included contraception provision (Klugman, 1993; Population Council, 1981).

For Cornwell (1987), the influence of South Africa’s authoritarian apartheid ideology was nowhere more evident than in the example of separate or race-based development, where the government used community development to clear up ‘black spots’ and relocate people from so-called white residential areas to black homelands (De Beer, 1984). This inevitably led to suspicion surrounding the government’s goals, even those associated with participatory community development, like family planning. This led Cornwell (1987) to conclude that the formulation of a general theory of community development was impossible. At best, community development formed part of broader social policies shaped by international development frameworks and national politics and changed in response to these shifting discourses (George, 2000; Gray & Ariong, 2017).

In the early 1990s, a series of bilateral negotiations between the government and the ANC led to signed agreements to resolve the conflict and remove practical obstacles, including immunity from prosecution for returning exiles and the release of political prisoners (DSD, 2014a). The 1993 interim constitution and 1994 elections spelled the end of apartheid and beginning of social transformation embedded in a new constitution that laid the foundation for democratic and inclusive governance under the ANC (RSA, 1996a). This set South Africa on a path towards reconciliation and social inclusion to redress past imbalances in deeply divided communities shaped by protest and discontent. More than this, historical inequalities left blacks most disadvantaged in terms of social services. In seeking to address the legacies of apartheid, the new ANC government introduced an ambitious reconstruction and development programme (RDP) and developmental welfare system to bring services to disadvantaged communities with variable success (RSA, 2020a). The realities of its costly RDP soon led to more prudent social expenditure and a focus on economic growth to generate employment, fund social grants and pensions and increase real income (RSA, 1994, 1996b, 2014). Further, its rhetorical allegiance to community development, underperformance, lack of coordination within and between the three tiers of government and service-delivery failures greatly hindered progress, especially that of CDWs in local government, as discussed below.

Entanglement with Government

De Beer (2011) noted that, due to the pre-1994 history, most development nongovernment and community-based organisations had aligned themselves with the political ethos of the new democratic dispensation. Yet these close alignments to government led to their entrapment in service delivery to meet the needs of the poor. Successive governments used community development to ensure community conformity to their social policies. At heart lay the paradoxical goals of community development to enhance social inclusion, while

simultaneously serving as a vehicle for change, which required some independence from government (Bollens, 2000). During the transition to democracy in the 1980s, civil society was a radical arena of social protest effectively bringing the ANC to power through community mobilisation. The ANC sought to harness this energy and engage communities in its transformation agenda in the 1990s. Thus, it coopted civil society community groups that had protested against apartheid to serve its policy agenda and, like its predecessor, used community development as a vehicle for policy development and implementation with each successive president making announcements on how his government planned to deal with developmental challenges and address service-delivery failures. Inevitably, CDWs endeavouring to enlist community participation in government services and programmes found themselves caught in the vortex of these challenges and failures (Gray & Mubangizi, 2010). Thus, their role of bringing services to the people to improve their lives entwined deeply with broader social policy, as responsibility for community development came to rest increasingly on local government, with many starting from a low point of little-to-no services (RSA, 1998a). Most challenging for local municipalities was changing community culture to adapt to payment for services, such as water and electricity. As time went on, non-payment for services, corruption and managerial inefficiencies led to issues with service provision and maintenance and, in some instances, the collapse of municipalities responsible for the provision and maintenance of affordable basic services and amenities. Thus, communities began to take matters into their own hands by *inter alia* repairing roads and water connections; restoring playgrounds, and even bridges, following flood damage; and cleaning up the environment. Civil rights organisations like AfriForum (2023) have gone so far as to request that the United Nations Human Rights Council investigate local governments' violation of community rights to water and sanitation, with some communities taking municipalities to court for their service-provision failures. Mounting community anger and resentment against government non-provision put increasing pressure on CDPs to manage government demands and inefficiencies, while showing their allegiances to disgruntled local communities. This article thus comes at an important juncture in the lives of CDPs, not least within the context of increasingly vociferous dissatisfied communities.

In summary, grounded in the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) and reconstruction and development programme (RSA, 1994), community development proved a rocky road for CDWs, as many found themselves caught between government and communities, struggling for independence, under-resourced and with little power to be the voice of the people (Bollens, 2000). How CDPs negotiate the challenge of managing their connection to failed government-led community development, while aligning themselves with local demands and building community trust in their ability to contribute towards social improvement, will determine their ongoing relevance.

Creation of the Institutional Framework for Community Development

As already discussed, in 1994, the newly elected government inherited a civil society, comprising community-based and nongovernment organisations constituted primarily to resist an illegitimate state. This posed a major challenge for the ANC government faced with transforming these organisations to play a legitimate role in reconstruction and development (Bollens, 2000). It did this by making community development a centrepiece of its transformative developmental welfare agenda through two keystone policies—the RDP (RSA, 1994) and White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997)—and the restructuring of the social service professions (DSD, 2005, 2020; Gray & Lombard, 2023a; RSA, 1978). These policies

formed the basis for the subsequent creation of the community development infrastructure and professionalisation of community development, discussed below.

Transforming the Community Sector

As Bollens (2000) saw it, the community sector in the 1990s faced three major challenges. First, it had to achieve some independence so it could play a legitimate watchdog role to ensure the government fulfilled its promises and met its transformation commitments. Second, it needed funding and technical support, given many funders diverted funding for reconstruction and development directly to the ANC government. Third, as a vehicle of participatory democracy, it needed to ensure local representativeness to serve as a voice for the people. Given these challenges, Bollens (2000) noted tensions in South Africa's fledgling democracy as it sought to transition from a period of intensive community consultation on policy and programme development to policy and programme implementation. Democratisation and developmental welfare were two interweaving thrusts to its policy agenda. As stated in the RDP, the government viewed development, not as the delivery of goods and services to a passive citizenry, but as a vehicle for empowerment through *people's active involvement in democratic processes* (RSA, 1994). Thus, through these democratising and developmental thrusts, policy makers sought to restructure government–community relations at a time when a much-weakened civil society sector had lost many of its leaders and most of its funding to government (Bollens, 2000).

The huge injection of foreign capital to fund reconstruction and development through the 1990s did little to change this situation. At the time, the bulk of community-based workers were voluntary, untrained, local community members recruited by international nongovernment organisations (NGOs) to plug service gaps (De Wet, 2012). Most projects involved short-term *ad hoc* training to develop their capacity to care for *inter alia* orphaned and vulnerable children, older people, people living with HIV and AIDS and people with disabilities. Most provided their services as volunteers or, at best, received a small stipend (Boesten et al., 2011; De Wet, 2012). Thus, volunteers recruited to provide community home-based care for severely ill people with HIV and AIDS, for example, frequently experienced health and financial issues similar to those for whom they were caring (De Wet, 2012). For Boesten et al. (2011), deploying community volunteers amounted to 'patchy and ineffective ... service delivery on the cheap' (p. 42) rather than sustainable community development, since most projects were short term and few produced lasting structural change, with most evaporating when funding ran out (De Wet, 2012; Luka & Maistry, 2012; Marais & Botes, 2006). Further, volunteerism fit the community development ethos of drawing on local human capital, largely untrained community members, with success measured in terms of the degree of community participation in local programmes. It also fit community development's self-help ethos that dovetailed with local *ubuntu* principles of mutual aid and cooperative community engagement, while participation and empowerment became synonymous with civic responsibility. *Ubuntu* became politicised when used as a vehicle to build unity among the citizenry and social solidarity between the state and civil society (Gray & Lombard, 2023b; Gray & Mubangizi, 2010). Thus, the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) claimed *ubuntu* accorded every citizen rights and responsibilities to promote the well-being of individuals and communities. Further, as was the case in other southern African countries, like Zimbabwe, it tied *ubuntu* to African humanism as a resilient traditional religious belief system (De Wet, 2012; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013).

Developing the Community Development Infrastructure

At the outset, the government tasked the DSD and COGTA, formerly the Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG), with implementing community development as laid out in the White Papers for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) and Local Government (RSA, 1998a), respectively. These policies provided the institutional mechanisms for programme implementation, making DSD and COGTA key employers of CDPs in the public sector (RSA, 2003). Although the change in nomenclature from CDWs to CDPs is relatively recent, we have chosen to use the latter except when referring to the Community Development Workers Programme (CDWP) relating to local government and NQF Level 4 qualification for the former (see discussion on education below).

Department of Social Development

Developed by the DSD, through a consultative policy-making process, the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) envisaged broadened welfare coverage that included professional CDPs as an occupational category within the Council for Social Service Professions (RSA, 1978), hereafter the Council. Among other things, it spelled out the government's envisaged approach to developmental welfare with CDPs part of an inclusive system of integrated service delivery addressing basic material, physical and psychosocial needs at the local level, by linking people to services and resources. It provided a perspective on the origins of community development policy and its future directions, claiming that citizens would play an active role in improving their well-being and contributing to national growth and development, with CDPs trained to facilitate participation. It foresaw an intersectoral response, within which the government and civil society would work together to address past disparities and service fragmentation. It described community development as multisectoral—working across national, provincial and local government structures and NGOs—with CDPs in disadvantaged communities promoting empowerment, capacity-building and self-help through *inter alia* cooperative, micro-enterprise and small business development, access to credit and skill training. As Baatjes and Hamilton (2015) observed, 'the provision of a variety of formal and non-formal programmes for community development workers has been a focus of government policy, programmes and strategies' (p. 4). Although these programmes have trained thousands of these workers 'to support a relatively new and under-resourced field of practice ... formal employment for most remains precarious' (Baatjes & Hamilton, 2015, p. 4).

The DSD (2011) National Skills Audit of CDPs and managers [$n = 805$ CDPs and $n = 110$ managers participated in the audit) in its provincial offices ($n = 25$) revealed that 22% of managers had social science or social work degrees; 14% had degrees in community development; 8% had an education or teaching degree; and 4% did not have a post-school qualification. CDPs had social science degrees (28%) and diplomas (20%), while 13% had no tertiary qualifications. The report concluded that, since CDPs and their managers, overall, lacked knowledge and skills of, and training in, community development, the 'National Department has to play a significant role in ensuring that processes for capacity building are standardized and community development is professionalized to ensure uniformity in practicing community development' (DSD, 2011, p. 50).

Thus, the Draft Comprehensive Strategy for Community Development (DSD, 2014a) sought to provide a guiding framework for CDPs in the DSD. Its goal was to create an enabling environment for the facilitation and implementation of 'community development programmes and interventions using common, standardised and uniform approaches and methodologies' (p.

10). The strategy highlighted the DSD's three service-delivery pillars institutionalised by the White Paper (RSA, 1997): social protection (pensions, grants and emergency relief), social welfare (services) and community development. It listed several community development approaches: sustainable livelihoods embracing asset-based community development; family-based community development, including household support and psychosocial intervention; social transformation involving collective action; and dialogical and rights-based community development. Within the DSD's community development sub-directorate, CDPs did household and community profiling to determine local community service needs (DSD, 2009). They also 'developed new, and supported existing, non-profit organisations, with some focused on early childcare development centres; and used community-based planning processes based on the sustainable livelihoods approach to develop initiatives like community-based cooperatives and community gardens' (Westoby, 2014, p. 12). The latter's main focus was income generation, food security and social relief. As Luka and Maistry (2012) observed:

The fact that the focus has been on projects dominated by the income/economic perspective is an indication of the failure to empower communities as almost all projects were state-led and funded, operating as non-profit organizations. Consequently, most of these projects could not survive without continued state-funding and were unable to achieve the intended purpose of reducing poverty and unemployment ... [Likewise] the need-based and service delivery approach to community development does not empower communities to re-think issues, improve their networks and their overall capacity to mobilize existing skills and put innovative ideas into action. (p. 21)

Further, though the DSD aimed at service integration, in practice, there was a separation of statutory social work services and the developmental work of CDPs: 'The former focused on individuals and the latter on communities, with a particular emphasis on livelihood development' (Westoby & Botes, 2013, p. 1297). Sithole (2017) criticised this separation and questioned whether it was ethical to teach social workers community development when the government locked them into statutory work and shut them out of this area of practice, while Dithlake (2022) believed a lack of overall clarity on the developmental approach meant it had *never* 'adequately informed intervention at the community level' (p. 184).

The Community Development Professionalisation Steering Committee—hereafter the Steering Committee—had 4,596 CDPs on its database in 2014 (Hart & De Beer, 2022), while the DSD (2016) reported that there were 2,329 CDPs (constituting 7% of the social service profession workforce) in its employ. Comparing these databases suggested there were 2,265 CDPs employed outside the government sector, though most available data relates to those in the public service.

Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA)

The constitution (RSA, 1996a) made local government an independent sphere as part of its decentralisation thrust effectively shifting 'responsibility for policies to address poverty from the national to the local level' (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 117). Having adopted the concept of 'developmental local government' (RSA, 1998a), the government developed an elaborate statutory framework with attendant obligations for its operationalisation, conferring the developmental role onto municipalities (Masiya et al., 2021; RSA, 1998b). As Masiya et al. (2021) explained, 'developmental local government means that a local government should be committed to work with citizens and groups within the community to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve the quality of their lives' (p. 98).

Thus, in South Africa, local government is responsible for the provision of basic services and the promotion of social and economic development and a safe and healthy environment, and importantly, its brief is to do so with the involvement of local communities and community organisations (RSA, 1996a). To understand the role of CDWs in local government, it is necessary to explain the policy-driven structure of local governance within South Africa's 257 metropolitan ($n = 8$), district ($n = 44$) and local municipalities ($n = 205$).

- The constitution (RSA, 1996a) mandates municipalities to provide sustainable services to local communities, and the Bill of Rights accords these communities the fundamental right of access to social services.
- The White Paper on Local Government (RSA, 1998a) compels local government institutions to work with the citizenry focusing 'on the provision of sustainable household infrastructure and services and ... liveable and integrated local areas' (Masiya et al., 2021, p. 98).
- The Local Government: Municipal Systems Act (RSA, 2000) makes municipalities responsible for promoting 'access to affordable services' and encouraging 'local community participation in municipal affairs' (Masiya et al., 2021, p. 98), while the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (RSA, 1997) makes provision for open and transparent municipalities providing optimal services in consultation with local citizens.
- The Local Government: Municipal Structures Act (RSA, 1988) mandates the creation of ward committees 'to facilitate community participation and enhance communication between the municipal council and local communities ... to accommodate local circumstances and interests' (Masiya et al., 2021, p. 99).

Thus, municipalities are ultimately responsible for the following:

1. Providing citizens access to quality services through investment in infrastructure, including housing, health, education, sanitation, roads and electricity
2. Boosting the local economy and reducing unemployment by promoting job creation (RSA, 1998a, 1998b, 2000)

Initially small-scale within an undeveloped, uncoordinated policy environment [Khanya-African Institute for Community Driven Development (Khanya-AICDD), 2007], in time, the government bolstered these programmes through various frameworks to support service provision and local economic development. For example, it introduced Municipal Infrastructure Grants to support the implementation of provincial and municipal projects to eradicate service backlogs in sanitation, roads and lighting provision in poor communities (DPLG, 2004; Raga et al., 2012; Tshishonga & Mafema, 2010).

COGTA also housed the presidential *Imbizo* initiative to promote cooperative governance. Taking its name from the Zulu word *imbizo*, meaning a gathering usually called by a king or traditional leader, South Africa's Presidential Public Participation Programme (*Imbizo*) advocated a deliberative participatory policy-making model (Hartslief, 2008). At the launch of the 2003 presidential *Imbizo*, President Mbeki highlighted the shortcomings of government service delivery to poor and disadvantaged communities (RSA, 2003). During his State of the Nation address, he promised further investment in essential infrastructure, along with necessary mechanisms for policy implementation (RSA, 2003). He announced a pivotal initiative to boost service delivery, namely the CDWP. Crystallising the government's vision of a developmental system to target the poor, President Mbeki noted that, among other things, multi-skilled CDWs would 'help to increase the effectiveness of our system of local government, strengthening its awareness of and capacity to respond to the needs of the people at the local level' (Mbeki,

2003, p. 2). They would do this by assisting the government to bring services closer to the people:

We are determined to ensure that government goes to the people so that we sharply improve the quality of the outcomes of public expenditures intended to raise the standards of living of our people. It is wrong that government should oblige people to come to government even in circumstances in which people do not know what services the government offers and have no means to pay for ... transport to reach government offices. (RSA, 2003)

In this way, he highlighted the need for CDWs to accelerate social and economic inclusion by helping the government fulfil its constitutional responsibilities to provide access to quality services, with 'at least one CDW in each economically vulnerable ward and municipality in the country' [Department of Public Service Administration (DPSA), 2007]. Though, as already described, volunteer community-based workers had long contributed to plugging service gaps, the new 'public service echelon of multi-skilled CDWs' (Mbeki, 2003) would now receive short-term informal training to enhance their ability to render quality services (Khanya-AICDD, 2007; RSA, 2022).

As a top-down policy initiative, the CDWP turned community development on its head, instituting a complex bureaucracy to engage in what was essentially a bottom-up activity. In so doing, it proved to be an unwieldy undertaking, due to the multiple layers of responsibility for its implementation and administration (Gray & Mubangizi, 2010). COGTA and the Department of Public Service Administration (DPSA) were responsible for its coordination at the national level, while it fell to provincial administrations to employ CDWs and local municipalities to provide workplaces for them. It required multisectoral coordination and cooperation at these various levels to facilitate the work of CDWs as public service liaison officers bringing services closer to the people (Gray & Mubangizi, 2010). To help CDWs fulfil their role, provincial and local government structures responsible for promoting participatory development and improving service delivery all had a part to play in implementing the CDWP. Provincial Premiers had to fulfil their role of providing political oversight. They did this by delegating responsibility for the programme to Members of the Executive Council (MECs) comprising members drawn from the Provincial Legislature and appointed by the Provincial Premier. However, municipalities were the 'engine for local development and central to service delivery' (Masiya et al., 2021, p. 98). Thus, the cooperation of local municipal councils comprising mayors, councillors, ward committees and local government officials was crucial to the success of the CDWP. However, rather than champion their contribution, they made the work of CDWs extremely difficult (Buccus et al., 2008; Mdhluli, 2006; Raga et al., 2012). Ward councillors had scant awareness of their role and local government affiliation, while beneficiaries saw them as an extension of the state (Buccus et al., 2008; Mdhluli, 2006; Raga et al., 2012). Lack of clarity about their tasks and reporting structure and tensions between salaried CDWs and unpaid ward committee members bred ongoing frustration and resentment that undermined 'meaningful cooperation' (Buccus et al., 2008, p. 307). Most were acting as welfare officials helping individuals with the necessary documentation to access social grants and other government benefits (De Beer, 2011; De Beer & Swanepoel, 2012). Thus, they were not delivering on their mandate to 'bring government closer to the people and improve the delivery of services' (Mashaba, 2011, p. iii). Mashaba (2011) questioned their importance in the political landscape, noting many did not have the skills and capacity to fulfil their mandated responsibilities.

Due to the complex and unwieldy nature of the CDWP, the DPSA embarked on a process of stakeholder consultation in 2009 to develop a coordinated CDW policy (DPSA, 2009; DPSA & COGTA, 2009). It recognised the need for improved collaboration to maximise CDWs' effectiveness. However, there was little improvement. Successive reports on municipalities' poor performance in meeting planned targets and failures in delivering on their developmental mandate only made matters worse (COGTA, 2009a, 2009b; DPSA, 2007; Ruiters, 2007). Nevertheless, again in 2011, President Jacob Zuma (RSA, 2011) stuck to the same songbook as his predecessor, affirming community development's crucial role in building a developmental welfare system that linked social grants with economic activity, so short-term beneficiaries would become self-supporting in the long term. Though averring a welfare state, in effect, the CDWP primarily became a social protection initiative to supplement people's grants with a small wage to support them in their search for full- or part-time employment. It served as a job safety net linking economically active unemployed people to services, welfare payments and local economic development programmes. Thus, CDWs mainly encouraged local people to participate in cooperative income-generating projects and sustainable development initiatives (Westoby, 2014), which were rare, given most community enterprises did not survive beyond the grant-driven phase (Luka & Maistry, 2012; Marais & Botes, 2006).

Martin (2014) reported that CDWs in the Western Cape experienced isolation and frustration, with a lack of resources, finances, support and cooperation hampering their progress. They experienced political interference from ward councillors and local politicians; a lack of understanding, appreciation, cooperation and support from local government; and a lack of sense of belonging at the local municipal level. In their study of CDWs' role in linking local people to social grants, Mundau and Tanga (2017) found that the politicisation of the CDWP and lack of awareness of, and resources to support, community programmes hindered their effectiveness. They argued for: (a) a clear policy framework to align community development services across all sectors and levels of government, (b) increased financial support and resourcing and (c) the depoliticisation of the CDWP to enhance its effectiveness. However, with many local governments in disarray, local community development was in serious jeopardy.

Masiya et al.'s (2021) study of stakeholders' perspectives on the performance of municipal officials revealed myriad problems exacerbating protests about inadequate provision of basic municipal services. They found several inter-related factors were responsible for the lack of performance:

An unsupportive institutional environment, negative power struggles, over-regulation, political interference, a tense and bureaucratic environment, lack of coherent management systems, absence of a culture of excellence, poor skill utilisation, poor oversight mechanisms, weak capacity to engage in collaborations, and lack of trust between councillors from different political parties. (p. 97)

Successive audit reports attested municipalities' poor performance with the most recent stating:

Of the 257 audited municipalities, only 38 (15%) had received clean audits, and 21 of those were in the Western Cape. Six municipalities (2%) had received adverse audits, 15 municipalities (6%) had received disclaimers, and 16 audits (7%) remained outstanding. However, 91% of auditees had submitted their financial statements timeously, an improvement from 81% in the prior audit period. The Auditor-General had identified 268 material irregularities, accounting for an estimated R5.19 billion in material financial losses, and had

recorded a further R4.74 billion in fruitless and wasteful expenditure. (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2023)

Thus, while CDWs were in a position to assist people in communities to access a range of public services and convey feedback to government on community needs and services provided, broader problems in local municipalities, an unsupportive institutional environment, poor role understanding and a lack of intergovernmental coordination hampered their work and their progress towards professionalisation, discussed below. Others have documented the complexity of this undertaking (Ditlhake, 2022; Hart, 2012, 2018; Hart & De Beer, 2022). By the time the professionalisation process began in earnest in 2010, the community development sector was in dire need of regulation and guidance.

Progress Towards Professionalisation

In South Africa, the DSD is responsible for legislation relating to social service practitioners. The Council is a statutory body with the exclusive mandate to regulate social service practitioners, as outlined in the Social Service Practitioners Draft Bill, 2019 (DSD, 2020). As Gray and Lombard (2023a) explained:

The Bill called for the establishment of the South African Council for Social Service Practitioners, heralding a change in nomenclature once again—from social service professionals to social service practitioners. Like its predecessor, the renamed Council would comprise constituent professional boards that determined registration requirements and disciplinary procedures for their respective social service professions. The Bill defined the categories of practitioners requiring registration for practice and the Council's powers in relation to professional registration, and education, training, and development. (pp. 2–3)

The Bill makes provision for the establishment of the Professional Board for Community Development Practice—hereafter the Board—with the DSD working in partnership with the Council (DSD, 2023a). As a statutory professional body, the purpose of the Board is to establish CDP as a professional title by ensuring standardised education and practice through the development of regulations on norms, standards and professional conduct (code of ethics). The following discussion examines progress in establishing quality-assured education and professional structures.

Education

As already discussed, the policy-driven demand for CDWs, fuelled by the CDWP, led to the rapid training learnership programme in 2004 (Geber & Motlhake, 2009; SAMDI, 2005). As Geber and Motlhake (2009) explained, CDWs received 'training in learnerships within the National Skills Development Strategy to ensure access to and spending of local government poverty alleviation funding allocated for housing, childcare grants, and pensions and other services' (p. 177). Based on a workplace-learning model, learnerships usually involved a year of practical community-based experience and the study of community development theory in a classroom setting with mandatory mentoring following training. Criteria for entry included living in the community, being trusted and respected by community members, having their best interests at heart and being 'able to work effectively with the local political structure' (DPSA, 2007, p. 34). The programme had variable success. Geber and Motlhake's (2009) study of two large municipalities found that, despite legislative requirements, CDWs received patchy and

uneven career development mentoring and psychosocial support noting that access to government services and grants would likely ‘take longer than anticipated if CDWs are not adequately mentored during their training and in workplace learning’ (p. 77). The Khanya-AICDD (2007) found these short-term learnerships were merely a way to train CDWs ‘cheaply and quickly’ (p. xiii) and pay them ‘less ... so there can be many more of them’ (p. xiii). It also led to resource wastage, as there was no guarantee of employment following training (DPSA, 2007). In the long term, this rapid training programme fit the government’s agenda to plug service gaps, rather than the social service professions’ professionalising interests.

The CDP survey (DSD, 2014b) affirmed the enormous challenges for professionalisation *vis-à-vis* education, given that, based on 2014 data, though just more than three quarters of CDPs had a post-school qualification, only 8% had a qualification in community development. Ten percent had qualifications in the social sciences, 3% in public administration and management and only 2% in social work. Given social workers were qualified for community work, many engaged in community development changed their professional title to CDPs. Specialist practitioners qualified in specific areas of community development practice with tertiary and postgraduate qualifications were rare (DSD, 2014b; Hart & De Beer, 2022).

The introduction of legislation under the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) in 2010 began a process of qualification development for all social service professions that allowed for recognition of prior learning and progression along a career path. Developed by the DSD in partnership with education providers and other stakeholders, the latest qualifications for community development are as follows:

- NQF Level 4: Occupational certificate—community development worker (CDW)
- NQF Level 5: Occupational certificate—assistant community development practitioner (ASCDP)
- NQF Level 8: Bachelor of community development—professional community development practitioner (PCDP). Professionals with postgraduate qualifications in other professions can register as PCDPs.
- NQF Level 8: Postgraduate diploma (or honours for social work)—PCDP and postgraduate diploma: social service professions (SSPs) supervision (DSD, 2023c).

Student registration applies to students studying towards these qualifications.

A small National Task Team (NTT) has been working closely with the Council and education institutions to progress the establishment of the professional board. Once established, the Board would approve educational providers and take over the responsibilities of the NTT in partnership with other relevant government bodies responsible for quality assurance and overseeing the design, accreditation, implementation, assessment and certification of occupational qualifications, part-qualifications and skills programmes.

Professional Structures

In July 2011, the DSD hosted a community development stakeholder meeting to discuss the higher education qualification framework and establish a Steering Committee to prepare the application for the professionalisation of community development in consultation with key stakeholders. The Steering Committee established the South African Association for Community Development as a registered non-profit organisation in 2012 to begin to compile a CDP database (DSD, 2014b). In 2015, on fulfilment of its terms of reference, the Association ceased its activities, though the Board, once established, would have the discretionary power

to reactivate it, if it deemed it necessary to do so. The Council approved the Steering Committee's application in March 2017 and agreed to lead the professionalisation process going forward in consultation with the DSD and other stakeholders. The Council's approval of the application kick started the process of developing the Regulations for the Establishment of the Professional Board for Community Development (DSD, 2023a), 'as the final milestone for professionalisation' (Hart & De Beer, 2022, p. 505).

In 2019, Hart and De Beer (2022) noted the only outstanding matters were the election of board members and practitioner registration with the Council. Early in 2020, in preparation for the election, the Council began compiling a voters' roll and developed the nomination form. However, the COVID-19 pandemic derailed progress until 2022 when the Council issued General Notice 6 detailing progress on readying the online CDP database to prepare the requisite voters' roll for the board nomination and election process, noting those who had not yet done so would have the opportunity to register on the online database. In partnership with the Council and the Community Development Practice Professionalisation Working Group, the DSD conducted several outreach sessions to develop the national CDP database ($n = 6,155$) (DSD, 2023c). The next steps would involve further validation of the online data (personal information of CDPs on the database), preparation of the voter's roll and call for nominations, election process and inauguration of the professional board in March 2024 with registration beginning in April 2026 (DSD, 2023b). Thereafter, the Board's next crucial step would be the drafting of regulations to guide CDPs in effective service delivery.

Government recognition of the importance of community development, and dedicated education and training programmes and professional structures, augur well for community development. However, it still has to overcome numerous obstacles on its path to professionalisation. Describing the history of community development as one of political rhetoric, government cooptation and marginalisation of the poor, De Beer (2011) noted CDPs worked in environments over which they had little control and within which they faced myriad challenges. These included political interpretations of community development informing policy-led objectives that made CDPs an arm of the public service in contexts where there was little understanding of their role and where a lack of coordination hampered their efforts. These environments faced budgetary constraints that left them unsupported and unsupervised (Baatjes & Hamilton, 2015; DSD, 2016; Geber & Motlhake, 2009). A key consideration for Baatjes and Hamilton (2015) is the precarious nature of work across multiple sectors, noting without stable employment opportunities, it was unlikely that enrolments in education programmes would increase. Thus, professional regulations and practice frameworks needed to address not only individual practice guidelines but also the need for, and obligations of, employers to provide stable paid employment for qualified CDPs.

Conclusion

Though policy promised an enabling approach, having lost its focus on collaboration and partnership, the government soon embedded community development as an arm of public service rather than an empowering force for social transformation, effectively creating an employment programme for civil servants rather than providing a funding plan or budget for grassroots project implementation (De Beer, 2011). This article showed the strategic, institutional approach the government took in creating and professionalising an occupational group—CDPs—to resource its community development programmes, with funding through the national budget to local municipalities that, in turn, had to budget and plan for the operation and delivery of services in partnership with international, private and community-based NGOs

(RSA, 2023b). In short, the government initiative to train and appoint more CDPs was part of its human resource planning for the social development sector workforce for which it then had to secure funding and this remained an ongoing challenge.

This article highlighted the ongoing influence of politics—and government policy—and the way in which the politicisation of CDPs—by deploying them to fulfil its political objectives rather than facilitate local empowerment projects—made them the government’s responsibility (Masiya et al., 2021; Mundau & Tanga, 2017). Essentially, the government instituted community development programmes staffed by CDPs to bring its services closer to the people. De Beer and Swanepoel (1994) foresaw this move as misguided, since most nongovernment funding initiatives funded community activities that supported and enhanced human enterprise and local initiative and promoted empowering self-development and local ownership. As De Beer (2011) observed, community development is not about providing services and benefits to passive recipients. Thus, pigeonholing CDPs into a welfare-assistant role is not community development. Community development facilitates and enables ‘empowerment so that communities gain more and more control over their own future’ (De Beer, 2011, p. 414). Besides its misuse of CDPs, the government’s failure to work in close consultation with organisations, groups and stakeholders representing community interests has not helped its cause. Its poor achievement record shows that, despite its good intentions, the government cannot deliver social services without the support of a strong civil society and backing of a well-established nongovernment sector. The consequent backlash to the state’s failings sees local community organisations and businesses working with other—nongovernment—stakeholders to save their communities from collapse.

The White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) envisaged professional CDPs empowering local communities, not plugging gaps in government service delivery. It saw the need for professional CDPs working with local communities rather than imposing services onto them. Recent developments highlight the urgent need for the government to take the enabling approach it promised at the outset by, *inter alia*, entering into contracts with community organisations and business groups employing unemployed people to clean up public spaces. This business social responsibility approach has led to spontaneous local employment initiatives to which the government could harness its resources. It is but one example of local ingenuity proving far more successful than government-led interventions. Rather than position CDPs solely within its infrastructure, the government could fund CDP positions in strategic areas of civil society to broaden employment opportunities for qualified CDPs. The apartheid government legitimised the social work profession through subsidised positions in nongovernment welfare agencies and the government could do the same for community development, while also encouraging the private business and nongovernment sector to employ them in its projects. Engagement in public private partnerships was only one way of improving community service delivery. The government also needed *inter alia* to address funding issues, improve revenue collection and financial management strategies, make loans for local development projects available and tackle corruption, nepotism and poor managerial expertise sapping limited budgeted resources for community development (Ditlhake, 2022; Shava & Thakhathi, 2016). These issues created disgruntled communities that, in turn, posed problems for CDPs endeavouring to instil trust, gain recognition and encourage engagement in government programmes.

In conclusion, while there have been positive changes and advancements in the professionalisation of CDPs, there remains a dire need for a well-developed practice framework to guide community development to fulfil its promises of empowerment and social

transformation through participatory programmes. A comprehensive practice framework would provide definitional clarification within a demarcated practice domain and address not only individual practice standards but also the obligations of employers to create paid employment positions for qualified CDPs and an environment conducive to empowering, transformative community development in partnership with communities, relevant stakeholders and local organisations.

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