
Community Developers for Community Empowerment

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This paper describes a research and action project involving training of lay carers of elderly people. It was done to help the South African National Council for the Aged (SANCAged) in Natal to plan their community development programme.

Research Approach and Methods

The direction and design of this project was influenced by the belief that research should, as far as possible, be useful to society by its support of welfare and community projects. The project looked at improving the ability and skills of people caring for the elderly in their homes in a context of scarce welfare resources. It involved working through existing community welfare organisations, and focused on both rural and urban areas.

We decided on this approach to the project, because of the limited resources available to welfare in South Africa, and also because we believe that community developers should not try to by-pass existing structures, but should strive to strengthen these. The rural focus was because the majority of black people in the region (that is, Natal/KwaZulu) we work in, live in rural rather than urban areas. These people are far from the main centres of welfare service.

We used a variety of research methods, starting with a literature review and visits to other regions to gain a comparative perspective. We then conducted interviews with various community service organisations, and with key decision-makers in health and welfare. We wanted to find out about policy affecting the

elderly, and about programmes being planned. This was to assess the compatibility of our programme with theirs. We interviewed the elderly themselves and the people providing them with care. We spoke to them individually and in groups at pension queues, selecting pay-points representing urban formal townships, informal townships and rural areas.

We sent postal questionnaires to people who were experienced in dealing with elderly people: the community nursing sisters employed by the Department of National Health, churches and voluntary welfare organisations.

People's Reaction

We received a very positive response to both the personal interviews and the postal questionnaires. It was quite clear that the need for some intervention was enormous. For example, the community health sisters themselves made extra copies of the questionnaire and distributed it to other people they thought would have useful information for us.

Another thing which reassured us was the consistency of the answers regarding the needs of people giving care to the aged. We would ask, 'If some kind of training or information could be provided, what would be most helpful to you?' The reply would tend to go something like this, 'We need information about the aging process. People need to understand all the things which happen when they get older; why they get shorter, why they lose their memory and why they become incontinent. We also need to know how to stop bedsores, how to keep the elderly mobile and the importance of doing so. We need more information about nutrition—the nutritional problems of the elderly and how to provide better nutrition for the elderly.' A lot of the project from this point onward focussed on these four "felt needs".

Intervention through Workshops

We then developed what is called a 'multiple-level intervention'. Backing this is a theory of learning which takes into account the needs of adult learners, and the outreach of training. The most effective vehicle for learning is through face-to-face contact between learner and trainer, in a workshop. So we developed a series of four workshops on the four main themes: the aging process, bedsores, mobility and nutrition.

We developed the design of the workshops and written materials with an urban group and a rural group of carers and health workers. We learned many things from them. The community health workers at Manguzi Hospital in Ingwavuma, for instance, showed us the necessity of building into our approach the needs of rural workers who, for example, had to walk great distances between one homestead and the next. The volunteer carers at urban Kwamashu's Christian Care Centre helped us to understand the difficulties that arise when most carers are women. They had to care for the elderly in addition to their other responsibilities at home.

Both urban and rural groups taught us how they needed to have a balance, in the workshops of structured 'lessons', time for discussion of their own experiences, and the need for practical skills. They gave helpful criticism on the notes we had prepared for them to take home. They advised us on the level of English. They were particularly helpful in advising us on the regional differences in terms used in Zulu, and about Zulu terms which might be seen as offensive. They advised us to use more illustrations in our training material.

It can be seen that these workshops were built on the participatory approach. Adult learners come into the learning situation with a lot of experience, which we tried to build on. We allowed a lot of time for feedback. We tested this approach through a series of newspaper articles giving lessons around the care of the aged in the form of stories. We find, however, that it is not such a good teaching medium, and although it reaches more people, it does not reach illiterate people or people in areas which do not receive newspapers.

The workshops have been included in the Resource File which we refer to in detail below.

Intervention through newspapers

Despite the value of workshops, however, there are too few community developers to reach many people in that way. So we decided to explore communicating with people through the written mass media. We developed a series of newspaper articles around the care of the aged, in the form of stories and 'lessons'. Newspapers on their own are not a very effective teaching medium, but they do reach a lot of people. In our area, there are too many illiterate people, and there are many rural areas where no newspapers get to at all, so we moved on to the next intervention.



Logo for the manual: *Caring for Elderly People: A Resource File*. *Graphic: Siven Maslamoney*

Communicating by Radio

The next approach in our multiple intervention, consequently, was communication through the medium of Radio Zulu. The level of radio listenership in South Africa is extremely high, even among the very poor. Doris Hlube of the Muthande Society for the Aged, ran a good programme for us on radio, and we also had two radio phone-ins. Although we were aware that one cannot teach very well on radio, the idea was to see if community developers could use radio to create a climate of awareness about a particular social problem.

To complete the project, we compiled a Resource File, which was given to SANCAged (Natal) in April 1991 for distribution and to encourage further action.

The Resource File is a training manual in English and Zulu and is made up of three sections; four complete workshop packages, a section on organisations, and a section on educational materials. We are pleased with the process of compiling the manual, but the test of its worth will show over time.

Some Important Lessons

A number of lessons can be identified from the project, such as:

- the urgent need for simple information in both rural and urban areas regarding all aspects of caring for the aged;
- people's desire for useful skills, which for them means real empowerment;
- the importance of working through existing groups where possible to avoid causing divisions in communities.
- the need to be sensitive, in seeking volunteers, to other commitments people might have, especially women who often carry the burden of caring for their own families.
- Finally, community development on its own can never do much about the serious plight of the elderly, poverty, poor welfare services and unemployment. So community developers, as well as organising at grassroots level, must also always be making a nuisance of themselves to those with more authority than themselves - National Councils, local authorities, Regional Welfare Boards and other policy makers. In addition to strengthening the role of the care-givers, community developers have much potential in terms of this sort of lobbying for the interests of the elderly and their carers.

For further information about the Resource File contact:

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