

1 What is a community profile?

At the time of publication of the first edition of this book **community profiling** was regarded very much as a tool for community development. This is still the case. However, in addition there has been an increasing emphasis by policy makers and practitioners on community profiling as a useful foundation for a wide range of policy and service delivery-related processes.

In this first chapter we briefly review the development of community profiling as an approach before discussing the similarities and differences between community profiling and other related types of community-based research. A definition of community profiling is then proposed and discussed and the remainder of the book then sketched out.

Development of community profiling

Community profiling as a tool of **community development** is not new (see Baldock 1974; Milson 1974; Henderson and Thomas 1987). Many people will remember the community self-surveys that were undertaken in the 1970s; others will be aware of similar work undertaken in the USA and the Netherlands as early as the 1950s. During the 1980s and 1990s, a group of related techniques – community profiling, **needs assessments**, **social audits** and **community consultations** – enjoyed a new lease of life. In particular the 1980s saw the widespread use of the term ‘social audit’ to describe studies that sought to demonstrate the impact on communities of changes in public policy or of major factory closures (see, for example, Merseyside County Council 1983; Newcastle City Council 1985). At about the same time, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Report, *Faith in the City* (1985), was published, which suggested that inner-city churches might undertake parish audits as a means of reassessing their role in urban communities.

The 1990s saw a series of central government initiatives aimed at local

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areas which required assessments of local needs or community consultations to be carried out. These included Community Care, City Challenge, Neighbourhood Renewal and Estate Action. These trends continued through the 1990s and into the 2000s with the Single Regeneration Budget, New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood Renewal Funding, Neighbourhood Management and the requirement on local authorities to produce Community Strategies. (Current and recent policy drivers for community profiles are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.)

At the same time many local authorities have harnessed new technology to produce statistical profiles and maps that identify areas with particular problems – high levels of crime, educational under-achievement, poverty or disadvantage – as a means of targeting resources more effectively. In addition some authorities have used, and continue to use, community profiles as an element in the development of strategies to devolve decision making and service delivery down to neighbourhood level. Others have recognized their use in developing baselines which can then be used in the monitoring, review and evaluation of policies and programmes. Most recently the Audit Commission has encouraged local authorities to construct **area profiles** which, it argues, ‘place strong emphasis on people and place and on issues that cut across service boundaries, for example a picture of the needs of specific sectors of the community, such as older citizens’ (Audit Commission 2006).

Increasingly, too, a wide range of statutory agencies have been interested in obtaining feedback from their ‘customers’, reflecting a changing emphasis on the needs of the customer as opposed to those of the service provider.

Communities, community groups and voluntary organizations have also initiated or conducted community profiling exercises as a means of demonstrating to statutory service providers that they are not receiving an adequate level of services, or that they have needs that are not currently being met, or to demonstrate opposition to initiatives that will adversely affect them. And, finally, community development workers and other patch-based front-line providers continue to use profiling exercises of various kinds as a means of ‘getting to know their patch’, and also to help build confidence and capacity within local communities. (These different uses of community profiling are discussed further in Chapter 2.)

Needs assessment, community consultation, social audit or community profile

Needs assessment, community consultation, social audit and community profile are all terms that can be found in the literature and in practice to refer to exercises that appear to share some common features. However, while there are some similarities between them there are also some important differences.

The answers to the following questions provide an indication of points of convergence or divergence.

- What is the purpose of the exercise?
- Who is initiating it?
- To what extent is the community involved?
- What is the scope of the exercise and who has determined this?

Needs assessment

In general, needs assessments tend to be initiated and/or carried out by a statutory agency, for example a Primary Care Trust (PCT) or local authority department, for policy planning purposes (Percy-Smith 1996: 1–9). Needs assessments generally make use of existing data (for example, population data), although this may be supplemented with additional sources that provide intelligence on attitudes to, and perceptions of, local needs on the part of those most likely to be affected by a service. An example of the needs assessment approach are the housing needs assessments that have to be carried out in most local areas. More recently local authorities have been required to undertake assessments of the needs of children living in the local area as part of the move towards the development of Children's Trust arrangements.

Communities are not always involved in the needs assessment process. Sometimes this is because the geographical or administrative area to be covered is too large for communities to be involved in any practical sense. Or it may be because the resources available for the needs assessment – including financial resources, time and expertise – are in short supply in the agencies concerned. Nevertheless, while needs assessments undertaken at the level of the wider administrative area may not include many opportunities for **primary research** (collecting new information) or **community involvement**, there have been a number of more local needs assessments undertaken by community practitioners wanting to develop services more attuned to the needs of people on their 'patch'. And, indeed, the whole area of **practitioner research** is increasing in part as a result of the requirement that practice is evidence-based (see Chapter 2).

Community consultations

Increasingly public bodies across a wide spectrum of policy areas are obliged, or are strongly advised, to carry out consultations with their local community. Such consultations have, in recent years, become increasingly sophisticated, making use of a variety of different techniques that go beyond the standard **survey** questionnaire to include: **focus groups**, online questionnaires, **citizens' panels** and **citizens' juries**, and **Planning for Real** exercises. Although

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many of these exercises have been criticized as being, in practice, perfunctory and not intended to bring about real change in the policies or programmes of the agencies carrying them out, there are, nonetheless, many examples of consultations that do constitute genuine attempts to seek out the views of local people.

Community consultations, unlike community profiles, social audits or needs assessments, typically take place in relation to a set of proposals, options or priorities that have already been developed by the initiating agency or to assess satisfaction with an existing service. They could, however, be used as one element in a broader community profiling, social auditing or needs assessment exercise.

Social audit

The term social audit has come to refer to a specific process that has been advocated and carried out by, in particular, the New Economics Foundation (2006). Social auditing (or **social accounting** as it is sometimes known) is a way of measuring and reporting on an organization's performance that takes account of social and ethical impacts. Just as a financial audit can reveal the financial health of an organization through an examination of its accounts, so, it is argued, a social audit can reveal the 'health' of a company or enterprise. And this approach can also be applied to an examination of the health of a community which results from the interplay of public services, housing, employment, the natural and social environment and many other factors.

Social audits may be conducted at a community level and involve the collection of new primary data about the perceptions of those living or working in that community, or at the city or district level where the focus tends to be more on identifying inequities between communities for the purpose of reallocating resources. In such cases, the information used to compile the audit is more likely to be data that is already in existence, for example health statistics, housing benefit data, unemployment data and information on service provision derived from service departments themselves.

Community profile

The term 'community profile' is the broadest of those under discussion in that it is typically used to refer to a range of projects undertaken or initiated by different organizations including communities themselves, statutory agencies and **voluntary organizations**. Community profiles are also potentially broadest in scope, covering both needs and resources and the whole range of issues affecting communities. What is perhaps distinctive about community profiles is the extent to which the community is involved. Whereas needs assessments

and social audits may benefit from the active involvement of the community, in practice this does not always occur. However, a good community profile, in our view, does require active community involvement.

Because 'community profile' is the term which has the broadest application and because it is most likely to conform to certain principles of community development described in the next section, this is the term that we will generally use throughout this book, except where approaches or techniques are discussed that relate particularly to needs assessment, community consultation or social audit.

A community profile might, then, be defined as follows:

A comprehensive description of the needs of a population that is defined, or defines itself, as a community, and the resources that exist within that community, carried out with the active involvement of the community itself, for the purpose of developing an action plan or other means of improving the quality of life of the community.

The component parts of this definition are justified and explained further in the next section.

Elements of a community profile

Our proposed definition suggests that a community profile should be *comprehensive* in coverage. We are not suggesting that all community profiles are, in practice, comprehensive; rather that in planning a community profile consideration needs to be given to how different aspects of the life of the community are interrelated. The totality of individuals' and communities' lives do not conform to departmental, agency, service or policy boundaries. The issues which people experience in their everyday lives cannot, typically, be defined as 'housing problems' or 'health' or 'social isolation'. Rather, issues often interact in such a way that the whole is greater than the sum of the constituent parts. Of course, social researchers and those charged with meeting needs and providing services know about the relationship between, for example, poor housing and ill health or unemployment and depression. However, practice has often been slow to reflect this reality. So policies designed to combat poor housing, ill health, unemployment and mental health problems are still, often, formulated and implemented in isolation from each other. Community profiles that are comprehensive in their coverage will help challenge bureaucratic departmentalism as well as more accurately reflecting the reality of people's lives. Christakopoulou *et al.* (2001) suggest that a comprehensive community profile ought to address the following aspects of people's lives:

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- *the area as a place to live* – including the quality of the physical environment and people's attitudes to living there; the extent to which needs are matched with resources; and the extent to which local facilities meet people's goals and aspirations;
- *the area as a social community* – including residents' involvement in the social life of the community; the extent to which the community is supportive; formal and informal networks;
- *the area as an economic community* – including income levels and employment prospects of local residents; prosperity and viability of local shops;
- *the area as a political community* – including systems and structures of political representation and local area management; the extent to which local people can influence decisions that affect them; the degree of involvement in local decision making; participation in **community organizations**;
- *the area as a personal space* – the degree of attachment that people have to the local area; memories and life experiences of local people;
- *the area as part of its city* – infrastructural, economic and social linkages between the local area and the city or district of which it is a part; the specific local identity that differentiates the community from the rest of the area/district.

Our definition refers to *needs* and *resources*, both of which are important for a full understanding of a community. By resources we mean assets held in the area and put to use for the benefit of the community. These might include, for example, the housing stock, parks, hospitals and clinics, community centres, places of worship and schools as well as people's time and expertise made available to others, or the employment opportunities within a given area and their product, service or wealth-distributing function. In any community there are also under-utilized resources; it may be important to find out why they are under-utilized and how they might be utilized more effectively. There are also likely to be potential resources, for example derelict buildings or vacant land which, while they serve no useful purpose at the moment, could be put to the use of the community if they were appropriately developed.

When we talk about resources we also mean those intangible resources that are a source of strength and potential within the community. These might include such things as the skills – both formal and informal – of members of the community; networks of informal support such as families, households and neighbours; more formal support such as self-help and community organizations; and qualities and characteristics that exist within the community such as resilience, determination, trust, community-mindedness and the extent of volunteering or active citizenship. Many of these characteristics have come to be summed up by the term '**social capital**'. It is important to

document the existence of social capital since to focus solely on what is needy about a community can not only be disheartening, perhaps reinforcing a negative image which community members are trying to change, but is also likely to be only a partial picture.

Resources are often seen simply in terms of money and this is, of course, an important resource for any community. Social audits have, in particular, been used to show how much money is deployed in the running of services in an area and to reveal whether there is a just distribution of public resources in terms of the needs of particular communities (see, for example, London Borough of Southwark 1987). The injection of extra money is often seen to be the only way of addressing unmet needs; however, this may not always be the most appropriate or effective approach. There might be different ways of using existing resources or delivering existing services. The neighbourhood management approach is aiming to achieve this by bringing the management of local services closer to the neighbourhood level and, in doing so, 'bending' mainstream provision to meet local needs better. A social audit could point to new ways of employing local people in the delivery of local services and retaining resources within the area.

The concept of *need* features prominently in community profiles. Although it is a contested concept (Doyal and Gough 1991), there is, nonetheless, an acceptance that need is a legitimate basis on which to make at least some decisions about the allocation of resources. As such it is an important component of a community profile. However, community profiles differ from needs assessments because of their focus on resources as well as needs, their emphasis on a participative approach and their action orientation.

In Chapter 3 we discuss at some length some of the different meanings attached to the term community. In this introductory chapter we simply draw attention to some of the different ways of thinking about community. Perhaps the most common idea is that of a group of people who live or work in the same geographical location, for example a housing estate, village or neighbourhood. For some purposes we might want to define a community in terms of an administrative area such as a school catchment area, social services area or PCT area; however, in most cases these areas would be too large to permit active community involvement in a community profiling exercise.

A different way of thinking about a community is in terms of a group of people with a shared or common interest or set of characteristics. For example, people working in the same industry might be assumed for certain purposes to share common interests even though they do not live in the same geographical area. Similarly, women, a minority ethnic group, children or people with disabilities might all be considered as communities of interest for certain purposes. However, it should be noted that this approach can be problematic since it may assign to a particular group a communality of interest that does not, in reality, exist. For example, minority ethnic communities may share

some interests and experiences but nonetheless be deeply divided along lines of gender or generation. This may not invalidate the notion of a minority ethnic 'community' but should simply alert us to the possibility or even likelihood of 'communities within communities'. This is, of course, also true of geographically located communities. The diversity and divisions that exist within all communities have important implications for the kinds of community profiling methods that are used (see Chapters 5 and 7).

Our definition of a community profile includes the notion of *active community involvement*. While it is possible to profile a community without the active involvement of local people, we would argue that important information and insights will be lost if this is the case. A profile that is undertaken with the full cooperation and involvement of the community is likely to result in a fuller, more comprehensive and accurate description of that community and, as such, form a better basis on which to build an action plan. Involvement in producing a community profile can also be one way in which a community can become empowered through the development of skills, confidence and awareness of issues (Skinner 1997). Active involvement in the production of a community profile can, therefore, be an important part of a wider process of community development (see also Packham 1998). Chapter 3 includes a discussion of ways of encouraging active involvement of the community including harder to reach groups.

The final part of our definition refers to the idea of the community profile leading to the development of an *action plan* or other means of improving the quality of life of the community. The emphasis, here, is on the importance of community profiling exercises being purposeful and action-oriented (see also Twelvetrees 1991). Producing a description of a community at one point in time will simply add to the archives of the local history group and will achieve very little except a sense of cynicism that time, energy and enthusiasm have been expended for no reason. The aim of the community profile must be to act as a catalyst for the improvement of the quality of life of members of that community. Moving from the identification of needs and resources through the community profiling process to the production of a local action plan which identifies issues, priorities and actions to be taken, sets goals and targets and proposes a means of monitoring their achievement is an important next step.

An important early task in the community profiling process is determining who the audience for the finished product is likely to be. This, in turn, will influence how the final profile is produced: a written report, a glossy pamphlet, an exhibition, a DVD, CD-Rom or some other means of conveying the information. The key to effective communication is to ensure that the methods and approach used are appropriate to the audience and the kinds of impact that are being sought. We examine this issue in greater detail in Chapter 9.

As important as the constituent elements of our definition of a community profile are the values that underpin the approach. The best community profiles are those which not only efficiently and accurately collect, analyse and present information, but which do so in a way that reflects adherence to, and practical implementation of, a set of values. The first of these is respect for the community being profiled. The practical impact of this is that, as far as possible, members of the community are involved in the profiling process in such a way that they gain something positive from the experience beyond the information being collected and that they do not feel that the profile is something that is being 'done to them'. The benefits could include greater confidence in themselves as a community, the building of skills and capacities and a better sense of their own potential. It also means that members of the community must be listened to and their views incorporated at an early stage in the profiling process so that the design of the project reflects their concerns. At the fieldwork stage the implication is that information is collected with sensitivity and confidentiality is respected. It also means that the process adheres to the basic principles of equality by not giving undue weight to any particular views and, conversely, does not exclude or undervalue the views of certain groups.

Structure of the book

The rest of this book is intended to take the reader through the various stages in the community profiling process, beginning with a chapter entitled 'Why do a community profile?', which puts community profiling into the current policy context and examines the relevance of community profiling to that context. Chapter 3 takes readers through the important process of planning a community profile. Chapter 4 examines the range of stakeholders who might be involved in aspects of the community profiling process and ways of involving them. Chapter 5 helps the reader select the methods best suited to the kind of profile they want to produce, and Chapters 6 and 7 discuss particular methods in more detail. Chapter 8 provides advice on how to analyse data in order to turn it into useful information. Chapter 9 examines the issue of what to do with the profile once it has been completed, and ways of maximizing its impact. Finally, Chapter 10 will draw together the key issues raised throughout the book.

At the end of each chapter a list of references can be found. In addition, at the end of the book, you can find an annotated list of further reading and resources. A glossary of key terms used throughout the book can be found in an appendix; where a word or phrase that appears in the glossary is mentioned for the first time it appears in bold in the text. In addition there is also an

appendix which provides further detail on some of the more technical aspects of the research methods referred to in the text.

Summary of key issues

Needs assessments, social audits, community consultations and community profiles all share some common characteristics in that they involve obtaining information from and about communities. However, they can also be distinguished from each other in terms of the agencies that are typically involved, the scope and purpose of the exercise and the extent of community involvement.

Community profiling is the broadest of these terms and is the main focus of this book. A community profile can be defined as:

A comprehensive description of the needs of a population that is defined, or defines itself, as a community, and the resources that exist within that community, carried out with the active involvement of the community itself, for the purpose of developing an action plan or other means of improving the quality of life of the community.

The key words in this definition are: comprehensive, needs, resources, community, active involvement and action plan.

Community profiles are undertaken by a range of different agencies for different purposes. For example, statutory agencies may be required by central government to assess local needs; they may use community profiles as a means of obtaining accurate information of relevance to policy planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Alternatively voluntary or community organizations may initiate a community profile as a means of demonstrating the existence of unmet needs or inadequate resources, or as a part of a community campaign. They may also use community profiles as a means of providing baseline information to be used as a benchmark for assessing future development. Community profiles, if they conform to certain important criteria, can also be used as part of a broader community development strategy.

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