

1

Community Organisation: Concepts and Principles

** Suresh Pathare*

Introduction

In social work profession there are three basic methods of working with people (individuals, groups and communities). We have already studied the two methods namely, social casework and social group work. The third basic method is community organisation. As we are aware, social casework is aimed at helping individuals on one-to-one basis and social group work seeks to facilitate the development of individuals through group activities. The aim of community organisation is 'developing capacity' in the community 'by making it more organised' to handle its own needs or problems. Community organisation is a well-established method in social work. It has value orientation and the practice is guided by a set of general principles.

Meaning and Definition of Community Organisation

Meaning

Before we get to know more about community organisation as a method of social work, let us first understand the meaning of the term we use. The term community organisation has several meanings. It is being often used synonymous to community

** Dr. Suresh Pathare, TISS, Tuljapur*

work, community development and community mobilization. In general, community organisation means helping the community to solve its problems. In the context of social work profession in India, the term is used to denote a method of social work to intervene in the life of a community.

In sociology we learn that society and social institutions are more than just a collection of individuals. It includes how those individuals are linked to each other. These are sets of systems such as economy, political organisation, value, ideas, belief systems, technology, and patterns of expected behaviours (social interaction). It means that just a collection of individuals living at a common place are not necessarily organised. To call them organised they need to have a set of common ideas and expectations. This gives them a social structure and some social processes that make the organisation something (social). It goes beyond the individuals that compose the community.

Further it is important to note that just forming various groups in community having some structure or form (e.g. having a president, treasurer, secretary, etc.) does not make the community organised. It is not the multiplicity of institutions, interest groups or set of activities, which make an organised community. Actually it may create more conflicts and disrupt normal life. Thus the important determining factors of community organisation are interaction, integration and co-ordination of the existing institutions, interest groups and activities, and evolving new groups and institutions if necessary, to meet the changing conditions and needs of the community.

Definition

To study and to be able to engage in community organisation practice it is necessary to have a clear definition. There are several definitions available in literature, which have been put forth at different times and in differing context. The common element in most of them is matching resources to needs. We will discuss here two most widely accepted definitions of community organisation.

Murray G. Ross (1967) defines community organisation as a “process by which a community identifies its needs or objectives, gives priority to them, develops confidence and will to work at them, finds resources (internal and external) to deal with them, and in doing so, extends and develops cooperative and collaborative attitudes and practices in the community”.

In this definition by “process” he meant a movement from identification of a problem or objective to solution of the problem or attainment of the objective in the community. There are other processes for dealing with community problems, but here he called the community organisation process as one by which the capacity of the community to function as an integrated unit grows as it deals with one or more community problems. The task of the professional worker in community organisation is to help, initiate, nourish, and develop this process. His task is also to make this process conscious, deliberative, and understood.

“Community,” in the sense in which it is used here, refers to two major groupings of people. Firstly it may be all the people in a specific geographic area, i.e., a village, a town, a city, a neighbourhood, or a district in a city. In the same manner it could

refer also to all the people in a province or a state, a nation, or in the world. Secondly, it is used to include groups of people who share some common interest or function, such as welfare, agriculture, education, or religion. In this context community organisation may be involved in bringing these persons together to develop some awareness of, and feeling for their “community” and to work at common problems arising out of the interest or function they have in common.

The second definition we will discuss here is by Kramer and Specht (1975), which is in more technical terms. They defined that “Community organisation refers to various methods of intervention whereby a professional change agent helps a community action system composed of individuals, groups or organisations to engage in planned collective action in order to deal with special problems within the democratic system of values.”

According to their explanations, it involves two major interrelated concerns: (a) the interaction process of working with an action system which includes identifying, recruiting and working with the members and developing organisational and interpersonal relationships among them which facilitates their efforts; and (b) the technical tasks involved in identifying problem areas, analyzing causes, formulating plans, developing strategies and mobilizing the resources necessary to have effective action.

The analysis of both these definitions reveals that they cover the “Need-Resources Adjustment” approach, “the Social Relationships” approach and a combination of the two ideas of meeting needs and development of co-operative attitudes.

The distinguishing features of community organisation practice are derived largely from the three dimensions. (1) The nature of its setting and focus– the community and its problems, 2) from the nature of its goals – enhanced functional capacity of the community and its ability to influence the social welfare policy, and 3) from the techniques it employs towards effecting the inter-personal and inter-group relationships of the members of the community. The statements defining community organisation method, stress individually or in combination the above three factors and also refer to clientele and the total process and the way in which the method is applied.

Community Work and Community Organisation in Social Work

Having discussed the meaning and definition of Community organisation let us now try to compare it in the context of community work and social work profession. In social work the term “community work” is often used with different meanings. In social work literature we find that the term “community work”, “community development”, “community organisation” and “community empowerment” are at times interchangeably used for the work with communities. Some authors have used these terms for the same types of work whereas others use them to refer to different types of work with communities.

Community work has a long history as an aspect of social work. It has passed through various phases. All over the world it has been recognized as an integral part of social work practice. History shows that community work even preceded social work education. In UK and USA community work in social

work began in the 1800 with the charity organisation movement and the settlement house movement. During the initial phase in UK, community work was primarily seen as a method of social work, trying to help individuals to enhance their social adjustment. The main thrust was to act as a means to coordinate the work of voluntary agencies.

In India the experience of working with slum community in the city of Mumbai lead to the establishment of the first institution of social work education in 1936. Community work as a method of social work in India is largely seen as a process of developing local initiatives, particularly in the areas of education, health and agricultural development. The focus of the work is, to encourage people to express their needs, and enable them to avail the existing resources, in order to meet these needs.

There are several ways in which social work practitioners and others work in the community. In social work we find three main approaches namely, Community Development, Community Organisation and Community Relations/Services. While these approaches represent different situations or areas of community work, there are fundamental similarities in what is being attempted. Their components are often interlinked and at times overlapping.

What is important for us here is to understand that the community work is one of the basic social work processes. It is being used to attain the same basic objectives, as casework and groupwork. As you may be aware all the social work methods are concerned with removal of the blocks to growth of individual, group, or community, release of their potentials,

full use of internal resources, development of capacity to manage one's own affairs and their ability to function as an integrated unit. In community organisation, social work is concerned with the initiation of that process which enables a community to overcome those blocks (apathy, vested interests, discrimination) which prevent the community from working together; and facilitate release of potentials, use of indigenous resources and growth of cooperative attitude and skills which make possible achievement of even increasingly difficult objectives.

Thus, community organisation started more as a product of the maturation process than as the beginnings of a profession. The increasingly complex and interdependent nature of modern society makes community organisation almost a pre-requisite for smooth functioning of any society.

Value Orientation of Community Organisation

From the discussion above we understand that community organisation is an integral part of social work practice. In the practice of community organisation some questions do arise as to, how it should be done? Are there value orientations and general principles that may guide us in deciding as to what is sound or socially desirable in community organisation process? How to improve the chances of success in achieving the objectives of community organisation? We will deal with such questions in this section.

Community organisation derives from a unique frame of reference, the nature of which is based on a

particular value orientation. In social work, the focus of community organisation practice is influenced by a system of personal and professional values. These values affect worker's style of intervention and the skills they use in working with community members. Values are beliefs that delineate preferences about how one ought or ought not to behave. Such formulations of values obviously have some subjective element. Values differ between groups and between individuals within the same group. Moreover, there has been no explicit, comprehensive, or generally accepted formulation of basic ethical and social values by any representative group of community organisation practitioners.

The value orientation of community organisation as of all social work methods, derives from acceptance of certain basic concepts and principles as a foundation for work with people. Among these are the essential dignity and worth of the individual, the possession by each individual of potentials and resources for managing one's own life. The importance of freedom to express one's individuality, the capacity for growth within all social beings, the right of the individual to these basic physical necessities (food, shelter and clothing) without which fulfillment of life is often blocked, the need for the individual to struggle and strive to improve own life and environment, the right of the individual for help in time of need and crisis, the importance of a social organisation for which the individual feels responsible are very basic. The need for social climate which encourages individual growth and development, the right and responsibility of the individual to participate in the affairs of own community, the practicability of discussion, conference, and consultation as methods for the solution of individual and social problems,

and “self help” as the essential base for community organisation are some of the value orientations which constitute the basis of community organisation process.

Principles of Community Organisation

Principles of community organisation, in the sense in which the term is used here, are generalized guiding rules for sound practice. Principles are expressions of value judgments. The principles of community organisation, which are being discussed here, are within the frame of reference, and in harmony with the spirit and purpose of social work in a democratic society. We are concerned with the dignity and worth, the freedom, the security, the participation, and the wholesome and abundant life of every individual. This implies practice of following principles of democracy, such as betterment of the marginalized, transparency, honesty, sustainability, self-reliance, partnerships, cooperation, etc.

In the literature of community organisation we find various sets of principles. Dunham (1958) has presented a statement of 28 suggested principles of community organisation. He grouped them under seven headings.

- i) Democracy and social welfare,
- ii) Community roots for community programmes,
- iii) Citizen understanding, support, and participation and professional service,
- iv) Cooperation,
- v) Social Welfare Programmes,
- vi) Adequacy, distribution, and organisation of social welfare services, and
- vii) Prevention.

Ross (1967) outlined specific principles – the elementary or fundamental ideas regarding initiation and continuation of community organisation processes. These principles have been discussed in terms of the nature of the organisation or association and the role of the professional worker. The twelve principles identified by Ross are:

- 1) Discontent with existing conditions in the community must initiate and/or nourish development of the association.
- 2) Discontent must be focussed and channeled into organisation, planning, and action in respect to specific problems.
- 3) Discontent which initiates or sustains community organisation must be widely shared in the community.
- 4) The association must involve leaders (both formal and informal) identified with, and accepted by, major sub-groups in the community.
- 5) The association must have goals and methods and procedures of high acceptability.
- 6) The programmes of the association should include some activities with an emotional content.
- 7) The association should seek to utilize the manifest and latent goodwill which exists in the community.
- 8) The association must develop active and effective lines of communication both within the association and between the association and the community.

- 9) The association should seek to support and strengthen groups which it brings together in cooperative work.
- 10) The association should develop a pace of work in line with existing conditions in the community.
- 11) The association should seek to develop effective leaders.
- 12) The association must develop strength, stability and prestige in the community.

Keeping in mind the actual practice situations in India Siddiqui (1997) has worked out a set of 8 principles.

- 1) The Principle of Specific Objectives
- 2) The Principle of Planning
- 3) The Principle of People's Participation
- 4) The Principle of Inter-group Approach
- 5) The Principle of Democratic Functioning
- 6) The Principle of Flexible Organisation
- 7) The Principle of Optimum Utilisation of Indigenous Resources
- 8) The Principle of Cultural orientation

We are trying to interpret some of the principles from the available sets of principles for guiding our practice community organisation in Indian context.

- 1) **Community Organisation is means and not an end:** As discussed earlier the community organisation is a process by which the capacity

of the community to function as an integrated unit is being enhanced. In this sense it is a method or a means to enable people to live a happy and fully developed life. It refers to a method of intervention whereby a community consisting of individuals, groups or organisations are helped to engage in planned collective action in order to deal with their needs and problems.

- 2) **Community Organisation is to promote community solidarity and the practice of democracy:** It should seek to overcome disruptive influences, which threaten the well being of the community and the vitality of democratic institutions. In community organisation discrimination and segregation or exclusion should be avoided and integration and mutual acceptance should be promoted.
- 3) **The clear identification of the Community:** Since the community is the client of the community organisation worker, it must be clearly identified. It is likely that there are several communities with which he/she deals at the same time. Further it is important that once the community is identified the entire community must be the concern of the practitioner. No programme can be isolated from the social welfare needs and resources of the community as a whole. The welfare of the whole community is always more important than the interest or the well being of any one agency/group in the community.
- 4) **Fact-finding and needs assessment:** Community organisation programmes should have its roots in the community. Proper fact-finding and assessment of the community needs is the pre-requisite for starting any programme in the

community. It is generally desirable for local community services to be indigenous, grass-roots developments rather than imported from outside. Whenever possible, then, community organisation should have its origin in a need felt by the community or by substantial number of persons in the community. There should be vital community participation, and essential community control, of its development.

While facilitating the process of community organisation, the programmes should be initiated, developed, modified, and terminated on the basis of the needs of the community and on the basis of the availability of other comparable services. When the particular need for a service is met, the programme should be modified or terminated.

- 5) **Identification, mobilization and utilization of the available resources:** The fullest possible use should be made of existing social welfare resources, before creating new resources or services. In the absence of resources/services the worker has to mobilize the resources from various sources such as community, government, non-government agencies, etc. While utilizing the indigenous resources it must be recognised that these resources may sometimes need extensive overhauling before they will meet certain needs. Apart from mobilizing physical resources, indigenous human resources should be put to optimum use.
- 6) **Participatory planning:** The community organisation worker must accept the need for participatory planning throughout the process of community organisation. It is important that the practitioner prepares a blue print in the beginning

of what he/she intends to do with the community. This is done with the community taking into consideration the needs of the community, available resources, agency objectives, etc. Planning in community organisation is a continuous process as it follows the cycle of implementation and evaluation. The planning should be on the basis of ascertained facts, rather than an expression of guesswork, "hunches," or mere trial and error methods.

In order to foster greater participation it is necessary to analyse the impeding factors and take timely steps to remove them. Instead of forcing people to participate in all the issues, they should be encouraged to participate at a level, and about issues, in accordance with their capacities. It must be noted that the people will participate if they are convinced of the benefits of the programme.

- 7) **Active and vital participation:** The concept of self-help is the core of community organisation. The community members' participation throughout the process of community organisation should be encouraged from the standpoint both of democratic principle and of feasibility— that is, the direct involvement in the programme of those who have the primary stake in it's results. "Self-help" by citizen or clientele groups should be encouraged and fostered.
- 8) **Community right of self determination should be respected:** The Role of the community organisation worker is to provide professional skill, assistance, and creative leadership in

enabling people's groups and organisations to achieve social welfare objectives. The community members should make basic decisions regarding programme and policy. While the community organisation worker plays a variety of roles in different situations, he is basically concerned with enabling people's expression and leadership to achieve community organisation goals, and not try to have control, domination, or manipulation.

- 9) **Voluntary cooperation:** Community organisation must be based upon mutual understanding, voluntary acceptance, and mutual agreement. Community organisation, if it is to be in harmony with democratic principles, cannot be through regimentation. It should not be imposed from above or outside, but must be derived from the inner freedom and will to unite all those who practice it.
- 10) **The spirit of cooperation rather than competition, and the practice of coordination of effort:** Community organisation practice should be based on the spirit of cooperation rather than competition. The community organisation practice has proved that the most effective advances are made through cooperative effort. It is by the coordinated and sustained programmes attacking major problems rather than through sporadic efforts by different groups.

The emphasis on collaborative and cooperative attitudes and practices does not imply elimination of differences, of tension, or of conflict. In fact we have to recognize that these latter forces

give life and vitality to a movement. It must be understood that such conflict can be disruptive and destructive, or it can be positive and creative. What is important for the community organisation worker is that he/she identifies such forces and appropriately modifies them to what is beneficial to community as a whole.

- 11) **Recognition and involvement of indigenous leadership:** Community organisation as it has been described requires the participation of the people belonging to the community. However everyone in the community cannot be involved in face-to-face contact with all others in the community; therefore it is important to identify and recognize the leaders (both formal and informal) accepted by various groups and subgroups in the community. Inclusion of the respected and accepted leaders with whom the major subgroups identify provides a major step in integrating the community. This further makes possible initiation of a process of communication which, if it becomes effective, will nourish and sustain the process of community organisation.
- 12) **Limited use of authority or compulsion:** Invoking the application of authority or compulsion may sometimes be necessary in community organisation. But it should be used as little as possible, for as short a time as possible, and only as a last resort. When compulsion must be applied, it should be followed as soon as possible, by resumption of the cooperative process.
- 13) **The dynamic and flexible nature of programmes and services:** This principle is basic to sound

community organisation. Social welfare agencies and programmes must be responsive to the changing conditions, problems, and needs of community life. Community is a dynamic phenomenon, which constantly changes and thus the needs and problems also keep changing. Therefore it is necessary that the programmes and services are flexible enough.

- 14) **Continuing participatory evaluation:** As programmes are developed to meet community needs, some time must be set aside for evaluation of the process. Regular feedback from the community is important. Criteria must be set up for evaluation of the programmes, to see how effective the action has been and what has been accomplished.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to provide you guidelines to understand the basic concept of community organisation as a method of social work practice. We have discussed in detail the meaning of community organisation and also provided the definitions with explanations. Now you will be able to explain the meaning and definition of community organisation. Being aware that community work and community organisation are integral part of social work, you will be able to situate them in the context of social work. We have discussed the value orientation and some of the important principles guiding the community organisation practice. You are now in a position to recognize the importance of the values and principles and will be able to follow them while practicing community organisation in the field.

References

Gangrade, K.D. (1971) "*Community Organisation in India*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay.

Harper E.B. and Dunham Arthur (1959), "*Community Organisation in Action*" Association Press, New York.

Ross, M.G. (1967), "*Community Organisation*", Harper and Row, New York.

Siddiqui H.Y. (1997), "*Working with Communities*", Hira Publications, New Delhi.

Journal of Community Practice: Organising, Planning, Development and Change, The Haworth Social Work Practice Press.