

6 UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNITY

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Structure



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Learning Objectives



After going through Unit 6, it is expected that you would be able to

- ❖ Analyze your community
- ❖ Identify the diversity in community in which you work
- ❖ Apply your understanding and analysis in your practice and become more effective in your work as adult educators
- ❖ Recognize your own status/role in the community and its significance to your work in the community.

6.1 Introduction

Purpose of Unit 6 is firstly to engage you in the notion of community that is dynamic and diverse in every aspect: class, religion, age, gender, language, and caste and secondly to provide some tools and strategies to be more effective in your role as adult educators. Section

6.2 to section 6.3 cover the first objective of the lesson and section 6.4 and Section 6.5 introduce tools and strategies to apply the concept of ‘community’ to your work as an adult educator.

6.2 What is Community?

Please examine the following definitions/descriptions of community and see the degree to which they apply to your specific community. You may find that they may not apply to your situation in their entirety.

- ❖ Community is a concept to describe a social organization that is considered fundamental to traditional to Indian society such as *jati*, village or religious sect. Such communities are often regarded as natural grouping based on ties of shared blood, language, history, territory and above all, culture. (Upadhyaya, 2006)
- ❖ In their edited book, *Lives in Context: the Art of Life History Research*, Coles and Knowles (2001: 11) define community as ‘Clusters of individual lives make-up communities, societies and cultures. To understand some of the complexities, complications, and confusions within the life of just one member of a community is to gain insights into the collective’.
- ❖ Bill Lee (1992) defines community, simply as a group of people who have something in common.
- ❖ In Greek language it means “fellowship” or a group of people who come together for mutual support and to fulfill their basic needs.
- ❖ For Boothroyd (1990) a community is ‘A Human system of more than two people in which the members interact personally over time, in which behavior and activity are guided by collectively- evolved norms or collective decisions, and from which members may freely secede’.

- ❖ Roberts (1979) sees a community as ‘a collection of people who have become aware of some problem or some broad goal, who have gone through a process of learning about themselves and about their environment, and have formulated a group objective’.

As we can see from a sample above, community as a concept connotes a wide range of meanings. It is popular in several academic disciplines as well as in everyday usage. While for some, it takes a long time for individuals to form a community, for others it is possible to create easily and fast: such is the case when real state developers use it to describe new buildings in terms of community “a community coming near you”. They use community as a product or a commodity to be bought, sold or exchanged in the market. Often it is used to describe an organization or institution such a workplace, a school or a college or university to imply a common spatial bond. At other times we use it to talk about people who have share a common characteristic such as religion. caste or language.

You will also discover that the concepts of community, identity, and culture are used interchangeably in literature. The literature on nature and function of Community can be divided into roughly two opposing views. While some believe that it is natural and key to human welfare, others argue that communities are non-democratic and stifle individual growth and freedom. Our objective is to become familiar with these debates. Several scholars have examined the complex and fluid nature of community as a concept because it and lends itself to quite varied interpretations. More

recently it has become prominent in the field of International Development, reconstruction of war torn countries by the west, either as a suffix or a prefix, building communities for example. One thing is certain; it stands for something good and desirable. You might have come across phrases such as: community development, community capacity building, community economic development etc.

However, we can't assume that community is always benign and supportive. Just like many families, it can be oppressive too. A community may hold on to value system that is patriarchal, repressive, exclusive and undemocratic. In short, it may mirror all the ills in the larger society. Individuals have may have no choice in their affiliation to a community/ culture or how they are perceived by the world outside. Furthermore, it is assumed that individuals have a choice about their

belonging; that they willingly join a community similar to joining an organization such as a trade union or a social club. This assumption can be false as individuals may not be conscious of their "membership" to a particular community with which they are assumed to feel an affinity. In fact, at times we might be quite upset and horrified when we get seen as part of a certain community. For example because of my Muslim name, I am seen as having sympathy with "terrorist" and assumed to be pro Pakistan, resulting in my being isolated from the larger community. It is not only those "ignorant" people out there who make assumptions about people they know nothing about, we (educators) too carry stereotypes and prejudices and being aware of and being conscious of our own baggage is a good place to start. Let us now look at the various types of community.

6.3 Types of Community

Before we move on to the types of communities, it is worth mentioning that all communities are dynamic in nature. They act, interact, evolve and change as a result of larger political and economic forces as well as internal and external forces.

Broadly speaking there are three types of communities. These are not mutually exclusive as we all are members of these types concurrently. For example: I am an older woman who likes to walk in the park in Shahadra. As I live in Shahadra, it makes me a member of that geographic community. As I meet other older women in the park, it makes me a member of a community of interest as well as identify. You will find that all of us have several interests and

identities and therefore belong to many communities simultaneously. At the same time our interests change and so do identity. We will develop these ideas in some detail.

6.3.1 Geographic Community or a Neighborhood

It is the only type of community about which there is agreement amongst scholars. It has physical boundaries by which make it distinct or separate, such as a river, a street. In a town there might be several neighborhoods, each with some special attributes: caste, religion, rich and poor. In addition, a neighborhood usually has a diverse population with individuals and groups occupying different physical space. It is

important to observe who in a village or a section of a city or town, lives in a cleaner part, and who lives near an open sewer, or who has more space and who has less; how far or close they are from

the centre of the village; how much they have to walk to get water etc. It can be instructive in seeing certain patterns of physical exclusion and marginalization.

Activity 6.1

Conduct a mapping exercise of your geographical community. All you need to do is to walk and observe. Plan to spend a couple of hours to complete a walk about. You may want to return at different times of the day. Given below is a checklist for the community observation exercise.

- ❖ What are the natural features of the area such as trees, hills, rivers etc?
- ❖ Are there any key landmarks or points of reference such as a community centre, parks, places of worship, historic buildings?
- ❖ What is the population density? Are there a lot of people in a small space.
- ❖ What groups of people live there? Not their caste, religion, language, ages and other diversities that you notice?
- ❖ What level of activity do you notice on the street? Do people sit out on front steps, public benches, sit under trees? Where do children play?
- ❖ Where do people gather? Bus stop, places of worship, grocery shops etc
- ❖ Are there schools, post office, grocers, banks, medical/health facilities, and parks?
- ❖ What transportation options are available? Are there adequate roads, bus and train connection? How do residents get around?
- ❖ Do residents have access to adequate food and shelter? What kind of housing do people have?
- ❖ What does the community look like? Is it clean or dirty, old or new, well maintained or does it need repair?

Within a geographic community, you will find both communities of identity and community of interest as well as examples of intentional community.

6.3.2 Community of Identity

It implies common identifiable characteristics or attributes such as having in common a culture. By culture we mean: language, music, religion, customs, etc. Identity can be based on age, gender, and sexuality. It does not mean that an individual necessarily

identifies with the community to which s/he is perceived to belong. A woman may not feel any thing in common with other women except that all women are female.

Community of identity may or may not be geographically bound. For example, I as a woman identify with women in my immediate location but may not feel an affinity with women in Russia, partly because I do not know them or their culture.

Activity 6.2

You could begin with yourself. Examine your identity in terms of your gender, class, age, sexuality, education, religion, caste, politics, and language. You might discover that depending on the context one or more of these elements get more importance than others. Make a note of situations where you are most comfortable and where you are least comfortable.

6.3.3 Community of Interest or Solidarity

It incorporates social movements such as women's rights, political party, peace, and environment, saving trees or public education. A community of interest is present concurrently in different geographical spaces. Individuals may be connected to their interest community at the local, and or global level.

Community of interest can be formal or informal or both. In all cases, individuals become a part of this community voluntarily. Individual level on involvement may vary from being very active to being sporadic or passive. See Box 6.1 about what you need to consider while thinking about your community of interest.

Box 6.1 Your Community of Interest

- Do you have a group of people you meet, see, speak to, e-mail, share information, or phone on a regular basis?
- What do you get out of these contacts?
- What do you give in return?
- How long have you been part of this group?

6.3.4 Intentional Community

In addition to the above three types of community, there is, what observers call an intentional community. In this type of community, individuals come together voluntarily and are supportive of each

other. Members may share interests as well as identity and or a geographical location. For example mothers of young children get together once a week or student form a study group or retired seniors meet in a local park.

Activity 6.3

After going through Section 6.3 on the different types of community think of two examples of each type and write a short note of 200 words on each of your example.

6. 4 How to Work Effectively in the Community?

Adult educators need to get a thorough understanding of the physical, socio-economic and political dimensions of the community. They need to understand that individuals and groups in a given community have different level of power based on caste, gender, age, education, religion etc. Adult educators need to consider all these differences when they engage with learners. It is your professional obligation to understand your community, yourself and your

relation to the community.

6. 4.1 Begin by Posing Questions

While working with a community, you would like to begin your understanding of the community by asking some of the following questions relating to the program you are carrying out.

What are the reasons for the Program?

Who is funding it and for how long?

What is expected of you?

6. 4. 2 Ask Within

After clarifying the situation about the program you are dealing with, you need to do a bit of introspection and ask yourself the following questions.

What do I expect of myself?

What are my reasons for taking up this job?

What are my hopes?

What are my fears?

It is very normal and natural to feel nervous and apprehensive. The predominant emotion amongst community developers/activists when they first start working in a community is that of fear: fear of not being accepted by community members. How do you overcome or manage this fear? See Box 6.2 for a few suggestions

Box 6.2 Suggestions to Overcome Fear

- ❖ Learn as much as you can about the village/town, about its demography, politics, economy, values, cultures, and local power structure. Here, get a feel for important issues such as young men leaving the village or lack of access to clean water.
- ❖ Talk to people who have either worked there before or are currently working.
- ❖ Identify a couple of local leaders who are willing to help you with outreach.
- ❖ Listen.
- ❖ Attend gatherings, events, meetings, celebrations, festivals
- ❖ Keep a journal of your observations and your own feelings.

In case you do not have an opportunity to learn about the community before you start your job, you can do it after you start. Don't worry. Knowing and understanding a community is a life long process. Communities are dynamic and are always changing, just like us. It is not unusual to feel overwhelmed when

you first meet or enter a new community. You will want to solve all the problems and feel frustrated because you are unable to make much or any perceptible difference. At such times, patience and passion will see you through.

6. 5 Community Needs Assessment and Community Assets Mapping

It is very normal to focus on “what is wrong” or “they don't have this or that”. However, it is important to remember that while communities have needs, they also have assets. It is much harder to get at the assets as these are usually not visible and self evident. In these situations adult educator can play

a crucial by facilitating the process of community discovering its strengths and riches in skills and resources. In order to obtain a map of community assets, it will be helpful if you complete Activity 6.4 on community analysis that will facilitate your obtaining a list of community assets.

Activity 6.4

Carry out a Community Analysis of your neighborhood/ section of your town/ a small village. Here is a sample of topics to cover in your exercise. You may include more topics if necessary. This exercise is different from the community walk that you conducted to understand your geographical community. This exercise builds on the observations gathered during your community walk. It gives you a more in depth look at the community.

- ❖ Geographic, corporate, jurisdictional boundaries
- ❖ Demographics, statistics, subgroups
- ❖ History, community strengths
- ❖ Political structure, governance
- ❖ Economic structure, major or key employers
- ❖ Community action organizations
- ❖ Civic and service problems

6. 5.1 Creating Community Space

You can create a welcoming and inclusive space if you were to keep in mind two principles: beauty and order. By beauty, we mean that the physical space is aesthetically pleasing. You can invite participants for ideas. You are bound to find people who are really artistic and creative. The second principle, order means that the space is kept tidy and orderly. When participants leave, they should ensure that their space is clean, all the things are in their proper place. In order that it is experienced as a community space, invite participants to take turns to organize the space every time you meet. You are trying to develop a sense of ownership amongst participants as well as conveying to them that their ideas/ opinions matter at every step. Sometimes getting space itself is a challenge. Obviously, you will not be able to solve such issues alone. You will also need to consider such issues of access, suitability and appropriateness of space. Here, your community analysis will be of great asset, as it will help you identify spaces that are most inclusive, where most participants can come without hesitation. Issue of safety, not only physical safety but psychological safety is a key issue. A site that is not

associated with a particular, for example, an upper caste land owner, or a religion, is worth exploring.

6.5.2 Diversity

It is really important to understand and appreciate diversity of participants in your programs. By diversity we mean, aspects such as different caste, religion, gender, age, access to resources, ways in which people make a living, ability, proximity to people with influence in the community etc. You will need to develop effective strategies to reach out to those who individuals and groups who are usually left out of decision-making, or have very little say in the life of the community. In most cases, these individuals or groups are women, the poor, and people with disabilities. A few concepts will greatly help in understanding the socio-psychology of such individuals and groups.

6.5.3 Power Structure

In most known societies and communities there is inequality amongst its members. This inequality is based on unequal distribution of wealth and resources. Quite often you will find that individuals with money dominate those

individuals and groups who do not have access to wealth. However, wealth is only one of several indicators of power; other being, male, and upper caste, When all three elements come together, we have a situation of absolute power. In order to maintain power, these individuals and groups need to keep others in their place. They do so by systemically oppressing and exploiting them. Oppression is generally understood as the domination of subordinate groups in society by a powerful group. Oppression occurs when one group in a society owns most of the land and businesses because of their dominant status accrued to them by their social location such as their caste, religion, ethnicity gender, family history, education etc. They make decisions on behalf of others, occupy political offices and are able to exclude individuals and groups from participating in the life of their community/ society and country. If and when the excluded groups raise their voice to correct the wrongs done to them, the dominant group resorts to direct and indirect violence to maintain their power.

Over time oppression and exclusion can lead to internalized oppression amongst the oppressed groups. In *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Michael Reich (1976) pointed out that “ what has to be explained is not the fact the man who is hungry steals or the fact that who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry don’t steal and why majority of those who

are exploited do not strike.” What one needs to ask is why majority of oppressed accept the rule of minority elite, even when it is clear that it is against their interest to do so.

We are sure you will be able to find plenty of examples of this phenomenon in your community. You may want to record these instances of manifest internalized oppression. Here is an example for you to consider: a worker in a factory does not get paid wages for two weeks. His employer tells him, “I have no money. I will pay you in a few weeks”. Another few weeks go by and there is still no money. Often, you will find the worker sympathizing with the employer with sentiments such as, “He is a good man. He is really hard up. I am sure he will pay as soon as he has money etc”. Meanwhile the worker is falling behind on his rent while the employer may be stressed but continues to live his life as always.

We need be aware of the every day consequences of internalized oppression. Internalized oppression often leads to affected people’s alienation from their environment. It may manifest itself in many forms: mistrust of people from their own group, apathy, anger, sullenness etc. Obviously, these behaviors can be very challenging for adult educator when she is trying to get a program started. We hope that this insight into the socio psycho dimension of marginal and subordinated groups, will allow you to be persistent and creative.

6.6 Community Participation

Active community participation is the key to building an empowered community. In any innovative programme not only participation of

community is a requirement but also it is critical to the success of that programme. Studies show that communities with high rates of

participation apply for and receive, more funding than communities with less participation. In addition, participating communities achieve greater citizen satisfaction with their community. Adult literacy and education programs as such require greater participation by local communities without which the programme stands to lose its ground. The National Policy on Education (1986) also emphasized greater participation of local communities.

Community participation also involves democratic decentralization of power and responsibilities. In participating communities all groups are involved and responsibilities are divided to ensure engagement of special talents and interests of contributing organizations. Participating communities have many centers of activity and community action engages the natural enthusiasm and talents of citizens. This type of community involvement also got publicized easily as they conduct their work more openly. Here citizens are well informed about the community's work and about their opportunities for personal involvement in meaningful roles. Participating communities encourage citizens to offer their best for the common good. All ideas are treated with respect and welcomed as a source of inspirations with potential value for the entire community.

6.7 Conclusion

After explaining the concept of community, we discussed different types of community and prepared the ground for working effectively in the community. Lastly we elaborated on carrying out the processes of assessing community needs and mapping community assets. Unit 9 has thus explained how you can analyze your

Furthermore, in community participation everybody are welcomed regardless of color, age, race, prior community involvement, level of education, occupation, personal relation, handicap, religion or any other factor. In this process, as the people relies that discrimination and other factors would stop other people to participate, they actively reach out to all citizens to encourage their participation. Here leaders are not ego-driven but focused on operating a high-quality, open decision-making process. Hence, they are not carried away by any single organization, group or philosophy and their leadership is supposed to facilitate divergent viewpoints and ideas. In adult education programs where area-wise and local-specific ideas needs to be encouraged, community participation is a must and it has to be inter-woven in the philosophy and methodology of implementation. But for this, inclusive participation has to be built in to create and support meaningful volunteer opportunities. We have many examples and instances in the implementation of adult education programs all over India where volunteers were so self-motivated with enthusiasm and dedication that after the successful completion of that phase it was difficult to canalize their creativity. Of all the empowerment principles, perhaps, community participation is the best method to follow.

ground for working effectively in the community. Lastly we elaborated on carrying out the processes of assessing community needs and mapping community assets. Unit 9 has thus explained how you can analyze your

community and identify the elements of diversity in your work situation. This process is to facilitate your understanding the way of making your work more effective and efficient. It

would also make possible for you to define your own status and role in the community and in turn you can view its significance to your work in the community.

6.8 Apply What You Have Learnt

Unit 5 has dealt with very important aspects of the work of adult educators and very simply it has provided you in practical terms some tools and strategies to make your performance more effective. To take advantage of this learning we suggest that you carry out

an exercise to discuss in 600 words the power structure of the community that you are working with and also explain how your understanding of the power structure facilitates your work as adult educator.

