

# WHAT IS COMMUNITY?

A Sociological Perspective  
By Phil Bartle, PhD

## Introduction:

A mobilizer, animator or activist is a person who tries to move (activate, animate) a community. But what is a community?

## The Nature of Communities:

Like most things in the social sciences, community does not fit into a nice neat package. We use the word a lot, but in this training it is important to ask more seriously what it is.

First, let us note that a "community" is a construct, a model. We cannot see a whole community, we cannot touch it, and we cannot directly experience it. Like the words "hill" or "snowflake," a community may come in one of many shapes, sizes, colours and locations, no two of which are alike.

More importantly, a community is not just the people who are in it. A community usually was already existing when all of its current residents were not yet born, and it will likely continue to exist when all of the people in it have left. It is something that is beyond its very components, its residents or community members. A community may have members who have temporarily moved to other locations. They may wish to eventually return, but not all do.

A "community" in some senses may not even have a physical location, but be demarcated by being a group of people with a common interest. For the purposes of our discussion here, however, the "community" which is the object of a mobilizer's attention, is usually one with a physical geographic location.

## A Community is a Sociological Construct:

Not only is the concept of a community a "construct" (model), it is a "sociological construct." It is a set of interactions, human behaviours that have meaning and expectations between its members. Not just action, but actions based on shared expectations, values, beliefs and meanings between individuals.

To understand how a community operates, and how it changes, it is necessary to learn a little bit about sociology the science. The mobilizer is an applied scientist; social scientist. While a pure scientist is interested in how things work, the applied scientist is interested in taking that knowledge and getting useful results.

## A Community has Fuzzy Boundaries:

When an identified community is a little village, separated by a few kilometres from other villages, in a rural area, its boundaries appear at first to be very simple. That pattern of human interaction

may be seen as consisting only of relations between the residents living inside that location, inside that village.

But its residents interact also with people outside the village. They marry persons from near and far, and may move or bring a spouse in to live with them. At any one time, those village residents may have sisters, brothers, cousins, parents and extended relatives living elsewhere. The boundary of that community is not so precise.

#### Communities Can be Within Communities:

There may be communities within larger communities, including districts, regions, ethnic groups, nations and other boundaries. There may be marriages and other interaction that link villages on both sides of national borders.

#### Communities May Move:

Furthermore, where technology is not based on local horticulture, the community residents may be physically mobile.

They may be nomadic herders walking long distances with their cattle. They may be mobile fishing groups who move from time to time as the fish are available. They may be hunters who move to follow the game. They may be hunters who move to follow the game.

#### Urban Communities are Special:

In urban areas, a community may be a small group of a few homesteads of people from a common origin. That community in turn, may be part of a neighbourhood community or a barrio or other local urban division.

As the boundaries become wider, there is more heterogeneity (differences in origin, language, religion or other features that can form a common identity). It may be in turn, a part of a wider municipality, which in turn may be part of a conglomeration comprising a large city.

In general (with exceptions) an urban community has more fuzzy boundaries, is more difficult to demarcate, is more heterogeneous (varied, mixed), more complex, and more difficult to organize using standard community development methods, and has more complex and sophisticated goals, than rural communities.

#### The Social Perspective of Human Settlements:

A human settlement, or community, is not merely a collection of houses. It is a human (social and cultural) organization. (The houses, which are cultural products of humanity, belong to one of the six dimensions of society or culture, the technological dimension, as explained below).

Also, it is not just a collection of human individuals; it is a socio-cultural system; it is socially organized. This means that you need to know some things about society – things learned in sociology.

The community has a life of its own which goes beyond the sum of all the lives of all its residents. As a social organization, a community is cultural. That means it is a system of systems, and that it is composed of things that are learned rather than transmitted by genes and chromosomes. All the social or cultural elements of a community, from its technology to its shared beliefs, are transmitted and stored by symbols.

Social Animation (promoting community participation or self-help) mobilizes and organizes a community. This means that the social organization of the community is changed, however slightly or greatly. The mobilizer or animator, therefore, is a social change agent, or catalyst. Understanding the nature of social change, its social nature, in a community, should be in the mobilizer's tool box.

#### An Animator Must Know About Society:

It may be dangerous to dabble in changing something about which you know nothing. It is therefore the responsibility of the mobilizer to learn something from the sciences of anthropology and sociology.

A mobilizer is an applied sociologist, so must know some important features of the subject. (While mobilizing is an applied social science, it is not the same thing as Social Engineering.

Although the science of sociology is usually taught at the university level, and a social scientist needs a PhD nowadays, you do not need all that formal education. Starting from here, perhaps doing a little private literature research on your own as well, you can learn what you need about sociology to understand the social nature of communities.

The most important thing to learn was mentioned already, that a social organism such as a community has a life of its own that goes beyond the lives of the residents in it. Those individuals have their own changes while they develop as human individuals. They are born, they get older, they become adults, they marry, they get jobs, some become recognized leaders, they have children, they die. All of these personal changes in individuals do not, in themselves, change society or a community. In fact, as they are recognized, they contribute to the stability of society, and to the continuation of the community.

The second thing to learn was briefly mentioned also. All things social and cultural are transmitted by symbols rather than by genes. Community development, which is a form of social change, requires changes in the messages of symbols rather than genetic surgery.

#### Keep the Essential Elements of Society in Mind:

While sociology in itself can be interesting, the mobilizer needs to know more about it so as to be a better mobilizer. Since the notion of "community" is a social construct, the nature of "social" is important to understand.

What, for example, is the "glue" that holds a community (or any social organization) together? How can individuals be interdependent upon each other, even while they believe they are independent organisms? Do such beliefs, even if they are not accurate, serve some purpose in sustaining or supporting social organization?

It is important for the animator to note the inter-connections between the cultural dimensions (described below) which comprise a community. While social scientists may disagree about the precise nature of those inter-connections, all will agree that the basic characteristic of society (and thus of the communities within a society) is that they are interconnected.

A community, like other social institutions, is not merely a collection of individual persons; it is a changing set of relationships, including the attitudes and behaviour of its members.

Remember that your goal is community empowerment. Knowing what a community is, and its social and cultural nature, will help you to know what it is that is becoming empowered by your efforts.

### Culture is Learned:

We mentioned above that a community is a cultural organism, and that it was something that went beyond those individual human beings that make it up. Culture in the social sciences is something far more than opera and ballet, so what is it?

Culture consists of all those things, including actions and beliefs which human beings (as physical animals) learn, which make them human. Culture includes learned behaviour, but not things which are determined genetically. Culture is stored and transmitted by symbols; never by chromosomes. While some culture is learned in childhood (like how to talk, for example), other culture is learned by adults.

When the animator is engaging in promoting social change, she or he is promoting the learning of new ideas and behaviour.

When culture is learned first, by a child, to become human, the process is called enculturation or socialization. When it is re-learned, as when a person moves to a different society, or when a community changes around the individual, it is called acculturation. Since you as a mobilizer are much involved in stimulating social change in a community, then you will come face to face with acculturation. Adult educating skills are therefore needed.

This sociological definition of "culture," which means "sociocultural system," which is society itself, is not the common everyday definition of culture, where people usually think only of drumming and dancing, or only the arts (those belong to only one of the six dimensions of culture, the aesthetic).

### Culture Transcends its Humans:

Culture is superorganic (and a community is cultural). Understanding this concept, "superorganic," is important in understanding a community.

Just as the organic level is based on inorganic (living cells are made up of non-living atoms, etc.; a dog or a tree is not a cell even though it is made up of cells), so the superorganic is based on the organic (society is not a human being even though it is made up of human beings). This means that, during animation (mobilization and organization) of a community, the animator must always be able to separate what is happening to the overall community itself, in contrast to what is happening to particular individuals.

We use the word "transcend" here to mean "go beyond." It does not have a religious connotation in this use.

Just as a tree, as a living organism, transcends its atoms, molecules and cells which make it up, so a community, or any social organization in culture, transcends the individual human beings which make it up. The tree or dog would not exist without its atoms or cells, nor would a community exist without its individual human beings.

The principles which affect an atom or a cell (in a dog or a tree), are not the same as those which affect the dog or tree. The forces which affect an individual human being (in a community) are not the forces which affect the development of a community.

A good mobilizer must understand the nature of social change in a community, and be able to distinguish that from the changes undergone by individuals in that community. To do that, you the mobilizer must develop a social perspective, and see how a community transcends its residents.

#### A Community is a Superorganic Organism or System:

A community can be seen as being something like an organism (ie it is organized; it has organs). It lives and functions even though its human members come and go, are born or die.

Just as a living cell, plant or animal, transcends its atoms, so an institution, a behaviour pattern, or a community, transcends its individual humans. The behaviour of an atom or the life cycle of a molecule happens according to a different set of forces than the living plant or animal in which the atom or molecule is found.

So, too, an individual human being is subject to a different set of forces than a social organization (such as a community) where it is found. A belief, for example, is believed by living persons, but that belief may live on through other persons long after the first ones die. The same with an institution such as marriage, an organization such as an air force, a town such as Kumasi, a custom such as shaking hands, a tool such as a hoe, or a system such as marketing. All of these transcend the individual human beings which carry them.

A society, then, is a system – not an inorganic system like an engine, not an organic system like a tree, but a superorganic system built up of learned ideas, expectations and behaviour of human beings. Think of three levels of organization: inorganic, organic and superorganic.

Although a community is a cultural system (in that it transcends its individual persons) do not assume that a community is a harmonious unity. It isn't. It is full of factions, struggles and conflicts, based upon differences in gender, religion, access to wealth, ethnicity, class, educational level, income, ownership of capital, language and many other factors.

In order to promote community participation and development, it is the task of the animator to bring these factions together, encourage tolerance and team spirit, and obtain consensus decisions. For you to promote social change in a community, it is necessary to know how that system operates, and therefore how it will respond to changes, and to your interventions. Just as an engineer (an applied physical scientist) must know how an engine operates, the community facilitator (an applied social scientist) must know how a community operates.

A community does not talk, does not think, cannot feel, and does not act like a human being. It is a superorganic entity, and therefore moves, responds, grows and behaves through different principles, forces and mechanisms than a human being does.

### Dimensions of Culture; Dimensions of Community:

When we say a community is not the same thing as a human being, we say it does not have emotions, a head, thoughts, legs, or a hobby. It does, however, have different parts to it, that apply to social organizations and culture rather than to individual human beings.

One important way to analyse a community, break it into different parts, is to use the six cultural "dimensions." We use "dimension" because these are analytical categories, made by us human beings, rather than being based upon observable parts (like parts of the body: head, arms, legs). In one of the training modules, Community Research, you will see that these six cultural dimensions (plus geography and demography) can be used as organizing categories for you to research, observe, and understand the community where you intend to work.

In mathematics, an object has three dimensions, such as height, width, and depth, four if you include time. No matter how small or in what ways you cut up that object, each piece will still have all four dimensions, so too a socio-cultural entity, like a community. No matter how small or in what ways you cut up a piece of culture, it will always have all six of its dimensions.

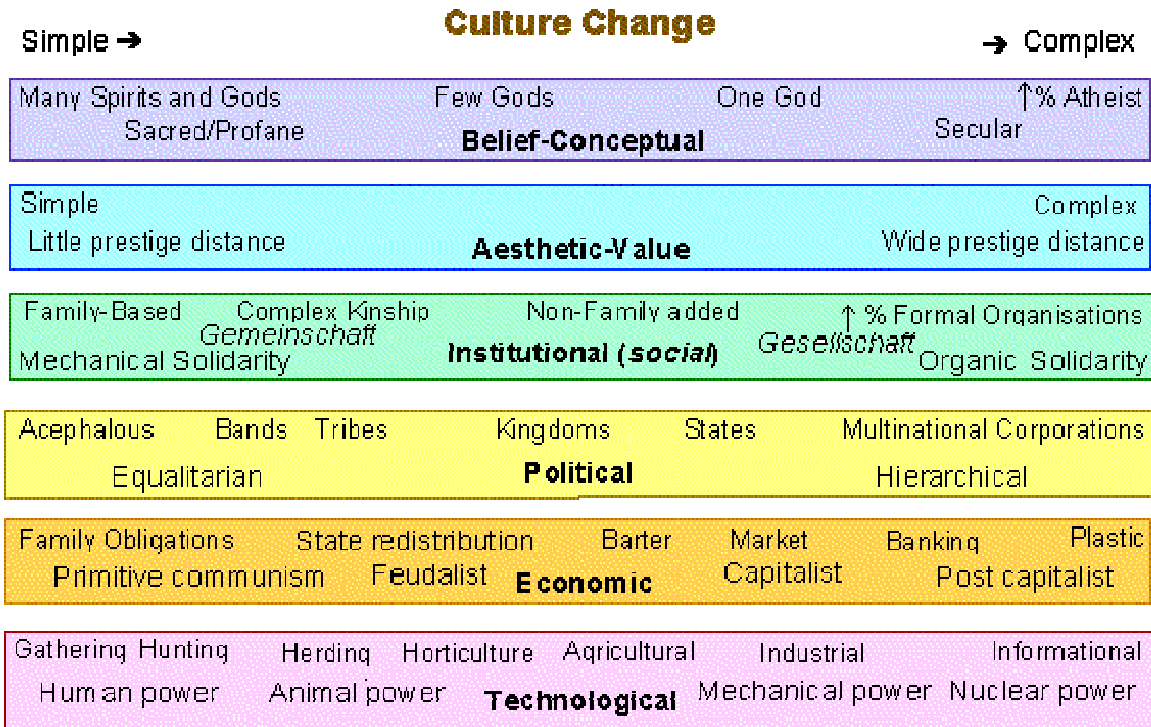
These dimensions of community include:

1. Technological,
2. Economic,
3. Political,
4. Institutional (social),
5. Aesthetic-value, and
6. Belief-conceptual.

Each of these dimensions of culture are transmitted by symbols (not genes) and consist of systems of learned ideas and behaviour. They are not "aspects" of culture; they are dimensions. Cultural dimensions may vary in size but, by definition, permeate the whole.

All of these are systems within every social (or cultural) system. They are based on learned behaviour, which transcends the individuals who each learned parts of them. If any one dimension of culture is missing, by definition, all are missing.

You cannot "see" a dimension of culture or society, as you can see an individual person. Every individual manifests each of the six dimensions of culture. To become socially aware, the animator must be able to analyse all six of the dimensions, and their interrelationships, even though s/he can only see individuals, not those dimensions.



The Technological Dimension of Community:

*The technological dimension of community is its capital, its tools and skills, and ways of dealing with the physical environment. It is the interface between humanity and nature.*

Remember, it is not the physical tools themselves which make up the technological dimension of culture, but it is the learned ideas and behaviour which allow humans to invent, use, and teach others about tools. Technology is much a cultural dimension as beliefs and patterns of interaction; it is symbolic. Technology is cultural.

This cultural dimension is what the economist may call "real capital" (in contrast to financial capital). It is something valuable that is not produced for direct consumption, but to be used to increase production (therefore more wealth) in the future; investment.

In capacity development, it is one of the sixteen elements of strength that changes (*increases*) as an organization or a community becomes stronger. In the war against poverty, technology provides an important set of weapons.

For an individual or a family, technology includes their house, furniture and household facilities, including kitchen appliances and utensils, doors, windows, beds and lamps. Language, which is one of the important features of being human, belongs to the technological dimension (it is a tool). This goes along with communication aids such as radio, telephones, TV, books and typewriters (now computers).

In an organization, technology includes desks, computers, paper, chairs, pens, office space, telephones, washrooms and lunch rooms. Some organizations have specific technology: footballs and uniforms for football clubs, blackboards desks and chalk for schools, alters and pews for churches, guns and sticks for police forces, transmitters and microphones for radio stations.

In a community, communal technology includes its facilities such as public latrines and water points, roads, markets, clinics, schools, road signs, parks, community centres, libraries, sports fields. Privately owned community technology may include shops, factories, houses and restaurants.

When a facilitator encourages a community build a latrine or well, new technology is introduced. A well (or latrine) is as much a tool (and an investment) as is a hammer or computer.

In general (ie there are exceptions) technology is perhaps the easiest of the six dimensions for introducing cultural and social change. It is easier to introduce a transistor radio than to introduce a new religious belief, new set of values or a new form of family. Paradoxically, however, introduction of new technology (by invention or borrowing) will lead to changes in all the other five dimensions of the culture.

Remember there are always exceptions; in Amish society, for example, there is a conscious communal decision to resist the introduction of new technology. They rely on the preservation of older technology (no tractors, no automobiles, no radios) such as horse drawn carts and plows, to reinforce their sense of cultural identity.

Those changes are not easily predicted, nor are they always in desired directions. After they happen, they may appear to be logical, even though they are not predicted earlier.

Through human history, technology has changed generally by becoming more complex, more sophisticated, and with a greater control over energy. One form does not immediately replace another (although horse whips have now gone out of fashion after the automobile replaced the horse over a century of change).

Usually changes are accumulative, with older tools and technologies dying out if they become relatively less useful, less efficient and more expensive. In the broad sweep of history, gathering and hunting gave way to agriculture (except in a few small pockets of residual groups). Likewise, agriculture has been giving way to industry. People still practising older less efficient technologies often find themselves marginalized and facing poverty. Where technology is highly advanced (eg in information technology, computers, the internet) it is practised by a very small proportion of the world population.

Technology that might be introduced by mobilizers may belong to medicine (clinics and medicine) and health (clean water, hygiene), school buildings or covered markets in rural areas. There the residents are not usually unaware of them; they simply did not have them, before mobilizing to obtain them. The facilitator must be prepared to understand the effects on other dimensions of culture by the introduction of a change in the technological dimension.



### The Economic Dimension of Community:

*The economic dimension of community is its various ways and means of production and allocation of scarce and useful goods and services (wealth), whether that is through gift giving, obligations, barter, market trade, or state allocations.*

It is not the physical items like cash which make up the economic dimension of culture, but the ideas and behaviour which give value to cash (and other items) by humans who have created the economic systems they use. Wealth is not merely money, just as poverty is not merely the absence of money.

Wealth is among the sixteen elements of community strength or organizational capacity. When the organization or community has more wealth (that it can control as an organization or community) then it has more power and more ability to achieve the things it wants to achieve.

Over the broad course of human history, the general trend in economic change has been from simple to more complex. One system did not immediately replace another, but new systems were added, and less useful ones slowly died out.

In simple small groups, wealth (anything that was scarce and useful) was distributed by simple family obligations. When someone came home with some food or clothing, it was allocated to the other members of the family with no expectations of immediate returns.

As society become more complex, and different groups came into contact with each other, simple trade through various forms of barter were acquired. Distribution within each family group remained more or less the same. As barter became more complex and extensive, new institutions were added to simplify the accounting: currency, accounts, banks, credit, credit cards, debit cards. This did not immediately remove earlier forms, but gift giving and family distribution eventually became relatively smaller among the wide range of distribution systems, and barter became less important.

Remember that currency (cash, money) itself has no intrinsic value. It has value only because society – the community; the culture – has ascribed some value to it. A hundred euro bill, for example, may be used to start a fire or to wrap tobacco into a cigarette, but its face value is worth much more than for those.

In any community, you will find various forms of wealth distribution. It is important for you to learn what they are, and what things can be given, what exchanged and what bought and sold. In many societies some kinds of wealth may not be allocated by purchase, such as sexual favours, spouses, hospitality, children, entertainment. It varies. Learning how they are distributed and under what conditions and between whom (because these differ) is part of the research you need to do.

When a community decides to allocate water on the basis of a flat rate for all residences, or to allocate it on the basis of a payment for each container of water when it is collected, then a choice is being made between two very different systems of economic distribution.

The animator should encourage the community to choose what it wants so as to be more consistent with prevailing values and attitudes. (A good mobilizer will not try to impose her or his notion of what would be the best system of distribution; the community members, all of them, must come to a consensus decision).

### The Political Dimension of Community:

*The political dimension of community is its various ways and means of allocating power, influence and decision making. It is not the same as ideology, which belongs to the values dimension. It includes, but is not limited to, types of governments and management systems. It also includes how people in small bands or informal groups make decisions when they do not have a recognized leader.*

Political power is among the sixteen elements of community power or organizational capacity. The more political power and influence it has, the more it can do the things it desires.

An animator must be able to identify the different types of leaders in a community. Some may have traditional or bureaucratic authority; others may have charismatic personal qualities. When working with a community, the animator must be able to help develop the existing power and decision making system to promote community unity and group decision making that benefits the whole community, not just vested interests.

In the broad sweep of human history, leadership (power and influence) at first was diffuse, temporary and minimal. In a small band of gatherers and hunters, a leader might be anyone who suggested and organized a hunt. In small bands, there were no chiefs, elders or kings, and these groups are named by anthropologists as "acephalous" (headless).

As history progresses, political systems become more complex, and power and influence increased and affected larger numbers of people. Levels of political sophistication, and hierarchy, ranged from acephalous, band, tribe, through kingdom to nation state.

In the simplest band, there is very little difference between the amount of power and influence of the leader and the lowest member of the band. Compare that with the difference in amount of power and influence of the President of the USA and some janitor cleaning toilets in a Washington slum hotel.

Communities, including the ones where you work, all have some political system, and some distance between the most and least levels of power between individuals and groups. It is your first task to understand how it works, how power and influence are distributed (not always the same way) and what changes are occurring.

You will have some influence on that power arrangement as you stimulate the formation of a development committee. And you will be responsible for encouraging an increase of political complexity if that is the first such committee in that community.

### The Institutional Dimension of Community:

*The social or institutional dimension of community is composed of the ways people act, interact between each other, react, and expect each other to act and interact. It includes such institutions as marriage or friendship, roles such as mother or police officer, status or class, and other patterns of human behaviour.*

The institutional dimension of society is what many non sociologists first think about when they hear "sociology." It is only one of six dimensions of social organization (culture), however.

The dimension has to do with how people act in relation to each other, their expectations, their assumptions, their judgements, their predictions, their responses and their reactions. It looks at patterns of relationships sometimes identified as roles and status, and the formation of groups and institutions that derive from those patterns.

A "mother-in-law," for example, is both a role (with a status) and an institution. In a community, the social organization of the community is the sum total of all those interrelationships and patterns.

The level of organization (or organizational complexity), the degree of division of labour, the extent of division of roles and functions, is another of the sixteen elements of community strength or organizational capacity. The more organized, and the more effectively organized, it is (and you can help it to become more so), the more capacity it has to achieve its communal or organizational objectives.

As with the other dimensions, over history, the general movement has been from simple to complex. In early simple societies, the family was the community, and was the society. The family defined all roles and status. As societies became more complex, first the families became more complex, then new non-familial relationships developed and were recognized. Later the family itself declined in relative importance among all the many other kinds of relationships.

Every time a new role is created, with its duties, responsibilities, rights, and expected behaviour patterns, then the society becomes more complex. If you encourage the formation of a new development committee, with its official positions and membership, then the community has become that much more complex.

A small rural community with no clinic or school is very likely composed of residents who are all related to each other through descent and/or marriage. If you stimulate that community to build a school or clinic, with paid teachers or health workers (usually outsiders), then you are increasing the social complexity of that community.

In that sense, perhaps the social dimension is similar to the technological dimension in being less difficult (than the other dimensions, especially the last two) in introducing social change. As with all six dimensions, a change in one such as the social dimension will have effects in each other the other five dimensions.

For the animator to be successful, she or he must know what are the local institutions, what different roles are played by men and women, and what are the main forms of social interaction.

### The Aesthetic-Values Dimension of Community:

*The aesthetic-value dimension of community is the structure of ideas, sometimes paradoxical, inconsistent, or contradictory, that people have about good and bad, about beautiful and ugly, and about right and wrong, which are the justifications that people cite to explain their actions.*

The three axes along which people make judgements are all dependent upon what they learn from childhood. These include judging between right and wrong, between good and bad, and between beautiful and ugly, all based upon social and community values. They are not acquired through our genes, but through our socialization. That implies that they can be relearned; that we could change our judgements.

Values, however, are incredibly difficult to change in a community, especially if residents perceive that an attempt is being made to change them. They do change, as community standards evolve, but that change can not be rushed or guided through outside influence or conscious manipulation.

Shared community standards are important in community and personal identity; who one is very much is a matter of what values one believes in. The degree to which community or organizational members share values, and/or respect each other's' values, is an important component among the sixteen elements of strength and capacity.

Values tend to change as the community grows more complex, more heterogeneous, more connected to the world. Changes in values tend to result from changes in technology, changes in social organization, and not by preaching or lecturing for direct changes.

It appears that there is no overall direction of change in human history, that judgements become more liberal, more tolerant, more catholic, more eclectic, – or less – as societies become more complex and sophisticated. Communities at either end of the social complexity spectrum display standards of various degrees of rigidity. In spite of that range, within any community there is usually a narrow range of values among residents. Urban and heterogeneous communities tend to have a wider variation in values and aesthetics.

It is not easy to predict the value standards of any community before you go to live there and to find out how to operate within the community. Because of their importance, however, it is necessary that you, the mobilizer learn as much as you can about community standards, and do not assume that they will be the same as your own.

While the introduction of new facilities and services in a community may eventually lead to changes in community standards, anything a mobilizer proposes must be seen to be within the prevailing sets of community values.

Whenever an animator introduces new ways of doing things in the community, prevailing values, however contradictory and varied, must be considered.

### The Beliefs-Conceptual Dimension of Community:

*The belief-conceptual dimension of community is another structure of ideas, also sometimes contradictory, that people have about the nature of the universe, the world around them, their role in it, cause and effect, and the nature of time, matter, and behaviour.*

This dimension is sometimes thought to be the religion of the people. It is a wider category, and also includes atheistic beliefs, for example, that man created God in his own image. It includes shared beliefs in how this universe came to be, how it operates, and what is reality. It is religion – and more.

When you drop a pencil onto the floor, you demonstrate your belief in gravity. When you say the sun comes up in the morning (it does not; the earth turns) you express your world view.

If you, the mobilizer, are seen to be someone who is attacking the beliefs of the people, you will find your work hindered, opposition to you and your goals, and failure as a mobilizer. Whether or not you want to oppose local beliefs, you must be seen to do not want to change them.

In the broad sweep of human existence, the general trend of change has been for a decrease in the number of deities, and a reduction from sacred-profane differences in space to secular space. From local polytheism with many gods, humans moved to a polytheism with fewer gods, from that humans moved to monotheism (one god) and from there an increase in the proportion of people who believe in no god.

In humankind experience, it appears that those groups with local traditional gods tend to be more tolerant of other gods than are the so-called "universal" religions which each say they alone have the true answer. Huge wars have been fought over religions (an irony in that most religions call for peace and tolerance), and this should be a warning to the mobilizer about the extent to which people fervently hold their beliefs.

The animator must learn, study and be aware of what the prevailing beliefs are in the community. To be an effective catalyst of social change, the animator must make suggestions and promote actions which do not offend those prevailing beliefs, and which are consistent with, or at least appropriate to, existing beliefs and concepts of how the universe works.

### All Six Dimensions Are in Each Bit of Culture:

The important thing to remember is that in any society, in any community, in any institution, in any interaction between individuals, there is an element of culture, and that includes something of each of those six cultural dimensions. All of these are learned from birth. The new-born child is like an animal, not yet a human being, but he or she begins learning culture (humanizing) immediately (for example, when drinking from the breast) by interacting with other humans, and thus starts becoming human. (Many say that this humanizing process begins in the womb).

This process of learning, and thus of becoming, continues until death. If you are not learning, you are dead.

When you are at a community meeting, when you are in a classroom, when you meet someone face to face, wherever you are, you are part of culture, part of the sociocultural system, and you can find all six dimensions. Sometimes, when we try to look objectively at culture in a scientific way, we forget that we are part of culture ourselves.

The tools we use, the interaction we are engaged in, the beliefs and values we hold, are all part of our culture, and part of our existence as social animals. If we do our work as a mobilizer in a community other than where we grew up, our culture will differ from that of the residents. See: Acculturation.

We are not free of that obligation if we are trying to mobilize our own community. A proverb that illustrates an anthropological principle is, "It is a strange fish that knows the existence of water."

Because our very existence, and our understanding of ourselves, is a product of our culture, and our socialization into it, we are not aware of the nature of that culture. Like a fish that has never been out of water (and able to compare it with its absence) we can not and do not exist outside of culture.

#### Interconnectedness Has a Practical Use:

For the mobilizer, and for anyone who is engaged in any development activities, the important part of all this is the variety of interconnections between those cultural dimensions. They may be causally and functionally inter-related. Technology (in contrast to popularly held ideas), for example, both the tools and the skills to use them, are as much a part of culture or social system as are beliefs, dances, and ways of allocating wealth.

To make changes in any one dimension has repercussions in each of the other dimensions. To introduce a new method of obtaining water, for example, requires the introduction of new institutions to maintain the new water system.

Learning any new ways of doing things will require the learning of both new values and new perceptions. Changes in any dimension will start changes, like the ripples of water on a calm lake when you throw a stone into it, and ultimately all six dimensions will change.

To ignore such interconnections while promoting technology transfer is to do so at your peril (unexpected and/or unwanted results may be produced). You need to carefully observe changes in the community where you may be working, and look for the repercussions in change in each dimension as they affect the other dimensions.

#### The Interconnectedness Affects Social Change:

To change something in one cultural dimension not only requires changes in other dimensions, it causes changes in other dimensions. That is why social impact assessment should be made of all projects, large and small.

As you become more experienced, you will begin to see some changes that follow as a result of introductions of new ways of doing things. The more you can predict such changes, the more you can be prepared for them. The more you can predict changes in each dimension, the more you can modify your actions so that the community might be more likely to change in ways you desire.

Remember, however, that you are not a social engineer, and cannot precisely determine how a community will respond to your work.

Conclusion; The Mobilizer Must Understand Community:

To be more effective as a mobilizer, to empower or strengthen communities, you need to know the nature of communities, and how they behave. Communities are social or cultural organizations, and, as such, are characterized by the six cultural dimensions. communities are not the same as human individuals, but grow and change by their own sets of principles.

The key to understanding these characteristics and principles is to recognize that six dimensions of culture, and their inter-relationships. The inter-connections between these cultural dimensions are neither simple nor easy to predict.

The animator must be aware that they exist, and continually encourage observation, analysis, sharing of ideas, reading, and attending lectures or seminars. By working with communities, the animator must learn more and more about their culture, and the dynamics of their cultural dimensions.

What is community? The answer is neither simple nor quickly defined. It is important, however, for every activist to understand.

Source: <http://www.scn.org/cmp/whatcom.htm>