

Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk

An international journal rooted in South Africa

Vol. 62, No. 1, 2026, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15270/62-1-1791>

Book review

Marquin E. Smith

University of the Western Cape, Department of Social Service Professions, Bellville, South Africa

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8447-3619>  mesmith@uwc.ac.za

De Beer, F., & De Beer, A. (Eds). (2024). Community development in the 21st century: Empowerment for breaking the cycle of poverty (7th ed.). Juta. ISBN: 978 1 48513 247 9. Pages: 654. https://juta.co.za/catalogue-details/community-development-in-the-21st-century-empowerment-for-breaking-the-cycle-of-poverty_9

The realisation of the social development approach in South Africa and beyond requires the strengthening of community development practice as a structured, participatory and justice-oriented response to persistent poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. Community development occupies a critical position within the social services landscape, because it operates at the interface where structural deprivation is most acutely experienced – within communities themselves, particularly historically marginalised communities. The White Paper for Social Welfare positions developmental social welfare as a strategy for integrating economic participation, social protection and empowerment-based service delivery (Republic of South Africa, 1997). Within this policy framework, community development practice becomes foundational to achieving inclusive development outcomes.

In South Africa community development must be understood as part of a broader historical project aimed at addressing structural inequalities produced by colonialism and apartheid (National Planning Commission, 2012). Persistent spatial inequality, labour market exclusion and intergenerational poverty continue to shape development realities. Within this context, *Community development in the 21st century* remains an important pedagogical and professional text. Its sustained use across universities and training institutions reflects its influence in shaping community development practitioners.

This edition provides a valuable overview of practitioner competencies and situates community development within the local government and policy environment. The expanded discussion on professionalisation reflects broader government efforts to formalise community development practice within occupational frameworks. This aligns with broader public sector transformation objectives and the recognition of community development as a professionalised field within a developmental state.

The inclusion of South African case studies contributes to the Africanisation of curricula. However, Africanisation must move beyond contextual representation toward epistemological transformation. Decolonial scholars argue that development knowledge systems have historically privileged Western epistemologies while marginalising indigenous knowledge systems and African philosophical traditions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). While the text demonstrates contextual sensitivity, deeper engagement with African-centred development theories and approaches would strengthen its intellectual contribution.

Section A provides a structured overview of development environments and appropriately distinguishes between poverty, deprivation and development. The use of measurement tools such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) provides useful conceptual entry points for students and practitioners.

The systemic framing of poverty aligns with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, which recognises poverty as multidimensional and structurally embedded (Scoones, 1998). This is particularly relevant in South Africa, where inequality remains among the highest globally. The section's emphasis on stakeholder coordination reflects systems-based development thinking. The inclusion of practical tools such as stakeholder matrices and power-interest grids would enhance practitioner usability.

Section B provides a discussion around the community development process and its key approaches. The inclusion of the Capability Approach and Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is conceptually appropriate. Adding more in-depth discussion around these approaches would help with the theoretical understanding of community development – thus grounding the student and practitioner. Additionally, adding the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach would add great value to this section. The section further articulates that community development is integrated in its approach, fosters collective action and is an intentional action at grassroots level – promoting democracy. In this spirit, it argues for the community to be the main actor in the community development process – informed by principles such as participation, ownership, simplicity, adaptiveness and sustainability

In section C, the focus on practitioner competency is a strong feature of the book. Communication, facilitation, mobilisation and project implementation skills are essential for community development practice. However, contemporary community development practice increasingly requires reflexive practitioners capable of navigating complex power dynamics. Thus, adding critical reflexivity as a key skill would enable practitioners to recognise how institutional power, funding structures and policy priorities shape development outcomes (Fook, 2016). The discussion on technology use is commendable, but could be expanded to include digital inequality. Digital transformation is reshaping labour markets, service delivery and community participation, yet access remains uneven across socio-economic groups (World Bank, 2016).

Section D of the book is centred on project management. The project management framework is technically strong and aligns with results-based development programming. The emphasis on sustainability and integration reflects global development best practice. The inclusion of

Participatory Rapid Appraisal and Planning (PRAP) methodologies reinforces participatory development principles.

Section E provides an overview of training, through workshop planning and facilitation, for development. The emphasis on interactive training methods aligns with adult learning theory and participatory pedagogy. It equips the reader with interactive workshop techniques and teaching aids such as games, role play and case studies.

The book concludes with Section F – providing an overview of the community development professionalisation context. The policy and legislative overview is valuable, particularly within the South African context. The discussion of sector challenges highlights institutional constraints facing community development practitioners. A discussion on how to innovatively navigate these constraints would add value to this section.

The crux of the book and its empowerment orientation aligns with local, regional and global frameworks. The Sustainable Development Goals emphasise poverty reduction, inequality reduction and inclusive economic growth (United Nations, 2015). Agenda 2063 similarly prioritises inclusive growth, social justice and human development across Africa (African Union, 2015). The National Development Plan highlights poverty reduction, employment creation and social inclusion as central development goals (National Planning Commission, 2012).

Community development in the 21st century (7th ed.) remains a significant contribution to community development education and practice in South Africa. It is not only a useful resource for community development, but can be used in Social Work, Development Studies and Sociology.

While the text provides strong foundational and applied guidance, contemporary development realities require deeper theoretical and critical engagement. Strengthening these dimensions would ensure the contents remain relevant within an evolving local, regional and global development landscape as the contemporary development landscape is increasingly shaped by digital transformation, climate vulnerability, financial precarity, migration and labour market restructuring. Furthermore, the rise of decolonial and African-centred scholarship necessitates deeper epistemological engagement on these everchanging dimensions.

REFERENCES

- African Union. (2015). *Agenda 2063: The Africa we want*. African Union Commission.
- Fook, J. (2016). *Social work: A critical approach to practice* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- National Planning Commission. (2012). *National Development Plan 2030*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2015). Decoloniality as the future of Africa. *History Compass*, 13(10), 485–496.
- Republic of South Africa. (1997). *White Paper for Social Welfare*. Notice 1008 of 1997. Government Gazette, Vol. 368, No. 18166. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Scoones, I. (1998). Sustainable rural livelihoods: A framework for analysis. *IDS Working Paper 72*. Institute of Development Studies.

United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations.

World Bank. (2016). *World development report 2016: Digital dividends*. World Bank.