Poverty, pathology and pills

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Re-centering Power and Control in work with Communities experiencing poverty & disadvantage

Jennie Popay
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The presentation

• What is community empowerment and how can it help reduce social (and health) inequalities?

• The limits of contemporary community approaches

• What can professionals do to support community empowerment?
What is Community empowerment?

- **Communities**: people sharing common interests - can be spatially connected, local, national or international.

- **Empowerment**: more than the engagement, involvement or participation of communities in action set by the agenda of others. Rather it:
  
  - A process enabling the relatively powerless to release/gain capabilities to exercise **collective control** over decisions/actions impacting on them
  
  - Focuses on social transformation and political change for social justice
How can it enhance social and health equality?

At its best community empowerment initiatives can:

• Enable experiential knowledge of ‘poverty and disadvantage’ to be utilised to create more appropriate and acceptable services and policies

• Reduce social isolation and increase social support and cohesion

• Improve proximal social, economic and material conditions for living

• Increase political understanding, potentially increasing civil society action to shift the political system towards more socially just policies
What’s wrong with contemporary community approaches

• Community empowerment is mainstream – SDG, International and National strategies – new governance models in all policy sectors and all communities

• But many initiatives adopt an ‘inward gaze’ on internal dynamics of communities and proximal ‘problems’ – e.g. behaviors and lifestyle – risk widening inequalities by increasing control “better off” communities have over decisions impacting on them whilst potentially undermining capabilities in disadvantaged communities.

• Meanwhile, **outward gaze** on social transformation and political change for greater social justice embedded in foundational statements on community empowerment is neglected

• Urgent needs to ‘return’ to this outward gaze of community empowerment initiatives - ‘re-centre’ power and collective control in their design, delivery and evaluation
What can external agents/governments do?

1. Catalyse, facilitate or "accompany" a community in acquiring power by:

   - Reducing structural barriers to empowerment e.g. protecting/promoting human rights, access to quality services including welfare support, living and working conditions etc.

   - Supporting empowerment processes arising spontaneously in response to threats e.g. using planning and licensing regulations to improve quality of environments.
2. Use organizational/professional power to challenge stigmatization of people/places e.g. in policies and practices, media, etc

Professional discourse on health inequalities threaten positive moral and social identities

Royal Society for Public Health UK
3. Support/design community initiatives able to develop collective control by adopting a power lens e.g. map power dynamics in spaces and how to address these; not descriptive maps of assets in communities!
1. Recognise the value experiential knowledge The story of Fish head soup