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COMMENTARY



## COVID-19: Are community development scientists missing in action or missing the action?

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### ABSTRACT

While the world waits in anticipation for a vaccine against the Covid-19 virus, controlling the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic is all about managing the movement of people. The lockdown principle introduced in many countries aims to keep people in their respective communities, which also means the closure of many formal to the informal local economies. During these times, politicians all over the world rely heavily on the input of scientists when making decisions. Amongst the scientists who seem to play a central role in this process are epidemiologists and economists. But, if this change process is also about communities and communal life, where are the community development experts? Everybody talks about moving to a “new normal” in our societies. If this is to be true, why are the community development specialists so quiet whilst it is all about restoring our communal life?

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## Introduction

The result of the Covid-19 pandemic was that social movement restrictions that vary from full lockdown to social distance regulations on six of the seven continents. It is an unprecedented turn of events that was described by some as the first major pandemic that struck the earth since the Spanish Flu epidemic during 1918 and 1919 (Trouillard, 2020) with three exceptions: this time there is no Great War; we have a World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) that acts as a global health communication, research, and assistance hub; and it happened in a world where electronic, and especially social communication could spread news faster than the virus itself.

Much is said about the possible impact of the virus and those experts who dare to make projections on how the virus is going to spread, what the economic impact would be, to what the impact thereof would be on our human behavior in future, often close their wise words with some reference to the effect that: *we do not know*. However, most scientists and news commentators seem to agree on one aspect of this pandemic, namely that in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic with its lockdown and movement restrictions, it is going to be a continuous and slow recalibration process to, what some commentators so elegantly call, the “new normal” in human interaction patterns all over the world. Different cultures and communities will inevitably respond differently to the challenges they are confronted with.

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We have seen how the most fundamental and traditional religious traditions had to adapt their practices during Passover and Ramadan (Ebrahimji, 2020; Kershner, 2020).

### **Community development missing in action**

The central role players in dealing with the cause, effect, and the disruption of the Covid-19 virus on economies and social traits all over the globe seem to be politicians, a large spectrum of specialized medical scientists, and economists. The decisions of these experts are backed by the law enforcement and security sector. But, where are the community development scientists? Are we still in a reactionary mode assisting with various projects aimed to reduce the impact of Covid-19 on the poor and most vulnerable people in communities, or are we in the engine room playing an active role in giving scientific community development inputs on the way to the so-called “new normal” in our communities? Surely, the development (revitalization/reinvention) of our communities in the post Covid-19 era is central to the field of community development theorists and practitioners. We should move beyond spreading only the much-needed messages of what we should do to be safe from the virus, and become active role-players in the reconstruction of our communal fabric and quality of life.

Because of the uniqueness of all communities, there would be no blueprint for the way to “communal recovery” that is applicable to communities in a single country, let alone across countries, as there was no blueprint on how to combat the Covid-19 virus across countries and/or communities. Though the basic principles to slow down the exponential increase in the spread of the virus was the central message from the World Health Organization and epidemiologists in general, different countries employed different measures as a means to the same end, i.e. Sweden, New Zealand and South Africa (Gunia, 2020; Mogoatlhe, 2020; Rolander, 2020).

### **Community development contribution**

Community development specialists must prove their worth by giving sound scientific inputs based upon good scientific theory, of which one of the characteristics is that it makes some prediction of outcomes possible (Mouton & Marais, 1996), and in the process limits the outcomes of unintended consequences to a minimum. One such theory is the basic needs community development theory that includes the Priority Index (P-Index), a basic needs assessment technique (Schutte, 2015). From all over the world, we have seen extraordinary examples of community resilience during the various mutations of Covid-19 lockdowns, of which the individual initiative of Captain Tom, the retired British World War II veteran, was probably the most heroic and influential beyond the barriers of his own community (Lock, 2020). The community development specialists’ part is to (i) detect, (ii) tap into, and (iii) “piggyback” on the different forms of resilience that manifest in communities, and to usher them to an improved quality of life during the recalibration process as the lockdowns ease. This can only be done if the community development specialists’ input is based upon proactive scientific data and not just reactively orchestrating aid and charity services to the destitute during these times. If we accept that all communities have unique characteristics, we need to dissect the current resilience (Paton & Johnston, 2006, p. 309) that exist in the various communities if we want to play a role in the management

of the re-calibration process during the post Covid-19 times. As an information and monitoring instrument, the P-Index community needs prioritization technique has that proven potential to serve as a continuous community development input to the multi-disciplinary teams that orchestrate the nurturing of societies out of the Covid-19 lockdown into the post-Covid-19 world.

## Conclusion

What the new lists of priorities in communities would look like is too soon to say, but speculation of “life after the virus” is rife and borders on science fiction. However, community development specialists should position them in the forefront giving inputs based upon the world as seen and experienced through the eyes of the people in our communities. That means we need to prove our worth in making a constructive scientific contribution during the planning, execution, and monitoring of the various processes enacted to put “nuts and bolts,” as well as “hearts and souls” back into our communities. Our worth will be judged against the value of our scientific inputs to politicians and other decision-makers on how we can translate the various manifestations of community resilience into action plans designed to put the “human” back in our post-Covid-19 communities. After all, community development is our business, but we should deserve our place around the planning table during, but also after the post-Covid-19 lockdown, and not only in reactionary relief projects in our communities, though such projects should also be part of our business. The question remains, are we missing in action or just missing the action? This article suggests that the more proactive and scientific community development specialists are in their respective contributions, the closer we will be to “the action” in ushering our communities out of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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