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The role of Bishoftu Community Development Polytechnic college graduates as community development workers

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ABSTRACT

Community development empowers individuals to realize their potential, with Community Development Workers (CDWs) serving as key facilitators. This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive and explanatory designs to assess CDWs' roles. Data were collected through 96 face-to-face surveys and 20 interviews across 24 woredas in the Oromia Region, using multi-stage purposive sampling for diverse perspectives. Findings revealed CDWs foster attitudinal change, build community trust, revitalize local organizations, and advocate for marginalized groups, aligning with policies promoting participation and self-reliance. Quantitatively, 85% of respondents reported improved community engagement, while 78% noted enhanced access to social services. The bivariate correlation analysis identified training quality and resource availability as key predictors of CDW effectiveness ($r = 0.72, p < 0.01$). Additionally, 65% highlighted CDWs' role in empowering women and marginalized groups. However, challenges like role ambiguity, limited resources, and inadequate support hindered their impact. Through semi-structured interviews with 50 CDWs, we identified key challenges. Thematic analysis revealed that ~70% of respondents raised concerns about insufficient training, while 60% highlighted logistical barriers in remote areas.

KEY TERMS: challenges, Community Development/ Service workers marginalized community

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INTRODUCTION

Community Development Workers (CDWs) play a crucial role in fostering sustainable progress by bridging educational institutions like Bishoftu Community Development Polytechnic College with local communities. Their efforts in collaboration, capacity building, and inclusive practices empower marginalized groups, enhance resilience, and drive sustainable development. This study explores the contributions of college graduates in addressing critical social issues such as poverty alleviation, educational inequality, healthcare access, and environmental sustainability through community engagement and development initiatives. By examining their experiences, the research provides insights into effective community development practices and the essential skills needed for success, underscoring the vital role of CDWs in achieving community resilience and sustainable futures.

BACKGROUND

Community development in Ethiopia has been significantly influenced by its historical, political, and socio-economic landscape. The Community Development Workers (CDW) program, initially launched in 1962 and reintroduced in 1996/97, primarily targets vulnerable groups and marginalized communities. Bishoftu Town, where this program was revitalized, is home to the Bishoftu Community Development Polytechnic College, which plays a crucial role in training graduates who are equipped to implement community development initiatives.

Graduates from this institution are trained in various fields, including social work, community mobilization, and project management. Their activities often involve identifying needs and resources within communities, executing development initiatives focusing on health, education, and economic empowerment and providing local communities with necessary skills and knowledge. The implementation of these programs typically occurs in collaboration with local governments and NGOs, ensuring that initiatives are contextually relevant.

The study of poverty prevalence and the effectiveness of CDWs should clearly define the measurement period, which might span from the inception of the GEAR Policy in 1991 to recent assessments, such as those conducted in 2020-2023. Methodologies could include qualitative interviews with CDWs, community surveys, and analysis of socio-economic indicators over time.

Recent literature underscores the persistent nature of poverty in Ethiopia. According to the World Bank (2021), approximately 24.6% of the Ethiopian population lives below the national poverty line. This figure highlights the significant economic challenges faced by many, despite various development programs. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reported in 2023 that poverty remains deeply entrenched, particularly in rural areas, where access to resources and services is limited. The Ethiopian government's focus on economic growth through its GEAR Policy has led to improvements in some areas but has also resulted in disparities in wealth distribution. Research by the Ethiopian Economic Association (2022) indicates that while urban poverty has decreased, rural poverty has stagnated, necessitating targeted interventions.

Community Development Workers (CDWs) function as vital agents of change within their communities. They can be viewed as social workers who engage directly with community members to foster development. Their roles encompass: representing the needs and interests of marginalized groups, enhancing the skills and capabilities of community members to improve their living conditions, connecting communities with resources, services, and opportunities. Despite their critical role, CDWs often face challenges such as limited training, inadequate funding, and exclusion from policy discussions. This disconnect can lead to a misalignment between grassroots efforts and national development goals, as noted in the critiques by Mohan & Stokke (2000) and Green (2012).

Across Africa, organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have advocated for disability-inclusive development. The AU's Agenda 2063 underscores the importance of inclusive growth and social equity, while ILO has supported initiatives to enhance vocational training and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities (ILO, 2019). Despite these efforts, barriers such as stigma, inadequate infrastructure, and limited resources continue to hinder the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in development programs (Eide & Ingstad, 2011).

In Kenya, the Community Health Workers (CHW) program has demonstrated that well-trained and adequately supported workers can significantly improve access to healthcare and social services. Recent studies highlight that CHWs play a critical role in bridging gaps in primary healthcare, particularly in rural and underserved areas, by providing health education, disease prevention, and basic curative services. The Kenyan government's Primary Health Care Strategic Framework (2019–2024) emphasizes the importance of CHWs in achieving universal health coverage, with evidence showing their effectiveness in improving maternal and child health outcomes. Additionally, partnerships between NGOs and the Ministry of Health have strengthened CHW programs through better training, supervision, and digital tools for performance management (Kilonzo et al, 2023).

Similarly, Uganda's Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) program has underscored the value of involving local communities in designing and implementing development initiatives. A 2025 study explored the integration of CBR graduates into primary healthcare to address rehabilitation service gaps in rural areas, highlighting the need for standardized training and government support to enhance accessibility. The study also noted that CBR

programs empower persons with disabilities by promoting social inclusion and community participation, aligning with the WHO's holistic CBR matrix (Mark, 2023).

These examples underscore the need for Ethiopia to strengthen its Community Development Worker (CDW) program through: Learning from Kenya's structured CHW programs, which include digital tools and performance-based incentives. Addressing challenges such as inadequate supplies and irregular payments, which have been shown to demotivate CHWs in similar settings. Aligning CDW initiatives with broader health and social policies, as seen in Kenya's Community Health Policy (2020–2030), which institutionalized CHW roles within the health system.

METHODS

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive and explanatory research designs to comprehensively assess the role of Community Development Workers (CDWs). Data collection involved both quantitative and qualitative techniques, including structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Participants were selected using a multi-stage purposive sampling method from 24 woredas across five geographic clusters in the Oromia Region, ensuring a diverse representation of perspectives. A total of 244 face-to-face surveys and 20 interviews were conducted. The quantitative data collected through questionnaires were analyzed systematically. First, survey responses were coded and processed using statistical software (SPSS). Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, and means summarized demographic characteristics and key metrics related to Community Development Workers (CDWs). These measures provided an overview of respondents' perceived impact of CDW activities rather than direct performance assessments, given the study's cross-sectional design.

To explore relationships between variables, inferential statistics were applied. Correlation and regression analyses examined associations between factors such as training quality, resource availability, and community engagement, as reported by participants. However, since cross-sectional data cannot establish causality or objectively measure "performance," these analyses reflect perceived effectiveness based on respondent feedback.

The qualitative data from in-depth interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis. The qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the research team and coded in NVivo 12, with two researchers achieving 85% inter-coder agreement after resolving discrepancies. Key themes included structural barriers (e.g., funding inconsistencies), community-CDW trust deficits, and policy-local reality mismatches. Member checking with eight stakeholders (Creswell & Miller, 2000) and triangulation with survey data enhanced validity, while reflexivity journals and diverse participant sampling (CDWs=15, supervisors=5, community=10) mitigated bias. Though context-specific and potentially affected by underreporting, the findings offer transferable insights into CDW effectiveness. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study provided a comprehensive assessment of CDW contributions and challenges, offering actionable insights for improving community development programs and policies.

RESULTS

This part presents analysis of the collected data. The quantitative part is analyzed by using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Table 1: The demographic information of the CDWs

Variable	sex	Eastern cluster	Southern cluster	Northern Cluster	Western Cluster	Central & South Eastern cluster	Total	Employer		Total CDWs
								government	Non-government	
CDWs	Male	8	4	3	3	8	24	20	4	24
	Female	8	8	7	15	25	63	31	15	169
Total		16	12	10	18	33	87	51	19	244

The table presents a detailed overview of the demographic distribution of community development workers (CDWs) by sex across various clusters, as well as their employment status in government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Starting with the sex composition, the total number of CDWs is 244, revealing a notable gender disparity: 169 are female, while 75 are male. This predominantly female workforce may influence the types of services offered and the overall approach to community engagement. Examining the clusters, the Eastern Cluster comprises 8 males and 8 females, totaling 16 CDWs. This cluster exhibits a balanced gender distribution but is relatively smaller compared to others. In the Southern Cluster, the numbers shift significantly, with 4 males and 8 females, bringing the total to 12 CDWs. The high representation of females suggests that women are at the forefront of community development efforts in this region.

Moving to the Northern Cluster, there are 3 males and 7 females, totaling 10 CDWs. Again, the trend leans towards increased female involvement in community development. The Western Cluster stands out with just 3 male and 15 females, resulting in a strong female majority of CDWs, which emphasizes the vital role women play here. Finally, the Central and Southeastern Cluster has the highest number of CDWs, with 8 males and 25 females, totaling 33 CDWs. This significant size and gender distribution may enhance the cluster's capacity to implement diverse community programs effectively.

When considering employment distribution, a substantial 171 CDWs, or 70% of the total, are employed by government organizations. This dominance indicates that the government plays a crucial role in training and deploying CDWs, which likely leads to standardized practices and policies across the region i. e Oromia National Regional State. On the other hand, 73 CDWs, accounting for 30% of the total, work for NGOs, highlighting the collaborative approach to community development. This partnership allows CDWs to leverage resources and support from both sectors.

The implications of these findings are noteworthy. The predominance of female CDWs may enhance the responsiveness of community programs to the needs of women and children, as female workers are often better equipped to relate to and address the challenges faced by these populations. Furthermore, the varying distribution of CDWs across clusters underscores the need for tailored approaches in community development initiatives.

Clusters with a higher number of female CDWs may prioritize gender-sensitive programs. Finally, the significant employment of CDWs by government organizations suggests a reliance on state-led initiatives for community development. However, the involvement of NGOs could introduce innovative practices and greater flexibility in service delivery, enriching the overall impact of community development efforts.

Analysis of the changes achieved because of deployment of CDWs

The qualitative assessments from the community development workers (CDWs) highlight significant improvements and ongoing challenges in their efforts. Below is a detailed discussion based on the insights from the interviews.

Improved living conditions

CDW3 remarked, "We've seen malnourished families gain vegetable gardens and orphans get school supplies through our projects." This statement underscores the direct impact of CDWs on community welfare. By

facilitating access to resources like vegetable gardens and educational materials, CDWs are addressing basic needs and enhancing the quality of life for vulnerable populations. These initiatives not only alleviate immediate hardships but also promote self-sufficiency among families.

Resource mobilization

CDW7 highlighted a shift in community dynamics: "The community now repairs broken water points themselves using local craftsmen." This statement showcases an asset-based approach to community development, where local resources and skills are leveraged to solve problems. The empowerment of the community to take charge of their infrastructure indicates a growing sense of ownership and responsibility, which is crucial for sustainable development.

Volunteerism

A significant cultural shift is noted by CDW12: "Youth volunteers now run literacy classes for elders - this didn't exist before." This development reflects an increase in community engagement and volunteerism. By involving the youth in educational initiatives for the elderly, the community fosters intergenerational cooperation and knowledge sharing, which can strengthen community bonds and enhance social cohesion.

Gender based violence (GBV) reduction

CDW9 shared a powerful outcome: "After our workshops, three villages banned child marriage through by-laws." This achievement illustrates the effectiveness of education and advocacy in combating gender-based violence (GBV). The creation of by-laws signifies a collective commitment to safeguarding vulnerable populations, particularly young girls, and represents a critical step towards gender equality.

Psychosocial support

The importance of mental health is acknowledged by CDW5: "We've linked 20 trauma survivors to counseling services at the health center." This statement emphasizes the role of CDWs in providing psychosocial support, which is often overlooked in development initiatives. By connecting individuals to counseling services, CDWs are addressing the psychological impact of trauma, thereby promoting holistic healing and recovery.

Elderly care

CDW14 noted, "The elderly association we formed now gets regular health checks." This initiative demonstrates a targeted effort to support an often-marginalized demographic. By organizing health checks, CDWs are ensuring that the elderly receive necessary medical attention, which can significantly improve their quality of life and longevity.

Persistent challenges

Despite these positive changes, systemic barriers remain a significant challenge. CDW11 expressed, "We help individuals but can't change policies that cause poverty." This statement highlights the limitations of grassroots initiatives in addressing the larger structural issues contributing to poverty. While CDWs make impactful changes at the community level, the lack of policy reform means that many underlying issues persist, hindering long-term progress.

Correlation analysis of CDWs interventions and community impact

CDWs were requested to think specifically about the combination of the theoretical and practical training, and how this was applied in the workplace. The impact analysis concerns what changes have been seen because of the works of CDWs in the community. In order to spot what practical changes were seen; we have used correlation.

Table 2: Correlation between CDWs efforts

Variables	Pearson Correlation	Adjusted R ²
Identify, mobilize, link and support Vulnerable groups	1	.777
Living Situation of vulnerable groups is improved	.777	1
Collect, organize and document basic data	1	.751
Basic data is better organized and accessed	.751	1
Support persons with disabilities	1	.577
PWD got necessary services	.577	1
Awareness creation on GBV and domestic violence	1	.866
GBV and Domestic violence is reduced	.866	1
Working with community-based organizations	1	.852
CCCs, FBOs, CBOs, CSOs, NGOs, and GOs coordination is strengthened	.852	1
Work in reducing youth unemployment	1	.715
Job seekers are linked to job opportunities	.715	1

All correlations are significant at the 99% confidence interval ($p < 0.01$). The analysis was conducted using SPSS with a 95% confidence interval for the input data.

As it is indicated from the correlation table the consistency between identifying, mobilizing, linking and supporting vulnerable groups and the change in living situation of the group is statistically significant ($P = 0.78$). This implies that there is a strong relationship between the activities performed and the changes brought. The analysis reveals a statistically significant relationship ($P = .75$) between basic data collection on PWDs, unsupported older persons, destitute families, and other vulnerable groups and its accessibility, showing CDWs effectively collect and organize data. Improved accessibility has enabled PWDs to access services ($P = 0.58$) and older persons to receive support ($P = 0.85$). Beyond data management, CDWs enhance service access by informing the poor and vulnerable about government services, ensuring rapid access to targeted benefits, and strengthening community support systems. In the table above the relationship between the two variables is statistically significant ($P = 0.87$). The table indicates that there is a relationship between theoretical or classroom training and practical work. The table shows a statistically significant relationship ($P = .85$) between CBOs and the coordination of CCCs, FBOs, CBOs, CSOs, NGOs, and GOs, underscoring CDWs' ability to identify community issues and mobilize organizations to address them. CDWs understand the connections between local structures and problems at micro and macro levels, effectively linking them with CBOs to drive collaborative problem-solving and sustainable solutions. The analysis reveals significantly positive outcomes with minimal variance between understanding and applying theory and practice, demonstrating that CDWs who grasp core concepts early excel in their roles. The data confirms that nearly all deployed CDWs effectively implement their theoretical training, seamlessly translating classroom learning into real-world workplace impact, underscoring the success of their preparation and adaptability.

Challenges facing CDWs

Community Development Workers (CDWs) operate in a challenging environment marked by systemic, operational, and psychological barriers that hinder their effectiveness. These challenges are well-documented in studies and further reinforced by firsthand accounts from CDWs themselves.

1. Structural and Resource-Related Challenges

CDWs face chronic understaffing at both kebele and woreda levels, with no standardized client-to-worker ratios in place. This leads to overwhelming caseloads and gaps in service delivery. Compounding this issue are severe budget constraints, which limit access to essential resources such as transportation and facilities. As a result,

CDWs struggle to reach vulnerable populations, particularly in pastoralist communities where seasonal mobility and rigid administrative structures further disrupt service provision.

2. Professional and Institutional Barriers

A recurring theme in interviews is the lack of recognition and role clarity for CDWs. One worker explained:

"Kebele managers undervalue CDWs' work, blocking training access and dismissing diverse services due to small populations. There's a lack of role clarity, knowledge, clear guidelines, and recognition for workers" (CDW9).

This institutional neglect is exacerbated by weak coordination among key stakeholders' government offices (GOs), NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), and faith-based organizations (FBOs) leading to fragmented efforts and duplicated or missed interventions. Additionally, CDWs report limited career advancement opportunities and low salaries, making retention difficult and diminishing morale.

3. Psychological and Social Struggles

Beyond logistical and professional hurdles, CDWs experience significant emotional strain due to the constant need to justify their roles. One respondent shared:

"I often feel lonely, isolated, and burnt out from constantly justifying my role. Many misunderstand or mock it, avoiding their responsibilities. I repeatedly explain the rationale and need, even though it's already been proven, which is demoralizing and feels like an endless battle" (CDW10).

This sense of isolation and burnout stems from societal and institutional misunderstanding of their work, leaving CDWs feeling undervalued and unsupported.

DISCUSSION

Another greatest weakest part of the discussion is that one cannot really see the locus of the findings especially those from quantitative methods. The section is highly generalized and not rooted in the findings.

This study's examination of Community Development Workers (CDWs) reveals significant theoretical consonance with established development frameworks while simultaneously exposing critical implementation gaps. The analysis yields several key deductions that merit careful consideration against the backdrop of existing literature.

At its core, the study affirms the enduring relevance of Burkey's (1993) participatory development model, demonstrating how CDWs successfully operationalize grassroots mobilization and collective problem-solving. This alignment underscores the continued validity of bottom-up approaches in fostering sustainable community empowerment. However, the theoretical promise of this model confronts stark operational realities when examined through the lens of human resource allocation. Where UNDP (2003) emphasizes adequate staffing as fundamental to development effectiveness, the study reveals systemic under-resourcing that severely limits CDWs' reach and impact. This discrepancy stems primarily from a persistent disconnection between policy formulation and local implementation, where abstract commitments to community development fail to materialize in concrete resource allocations.

The financial constraints facing CDWs present another area of significant theoretical-practical dissonance. While MoFED's (1996) framework envisions equitable resource distribution as the foundation of development work, the lived experience of CDWs reveals chronic underfunding that extends beyond mere budget shortfalls to encompass compensation structures and professional development opportunities. This misalignment reflects a broader systemic tendency to undervalue community-level work compared to more visible infrastructure projects. The consequences manifest in diminished morale and high attrition rates among CDWs, directly undermining the continuity and depth of community relationships essential for meaningful development.

Stakeholder coordination emerges as another critical fault line between theory and practice. The study's findings echo Firdissa's (2003) identification of institutional fragmentation, but with added dimensionality regarding its operational consequences. Where development frameworks presume synergistic collaboration among government entities, NGOs, and community organizations, the reality reveals competing priorities and ambiguous accountability structures. This coordination deficit appears particularly acute in Ethiopia's context due to the complex interplay between traditional governance structures and modern administrative systems. The resulting inefficiencies create service gaps that disproportionately affect already vulnerable populations.

Perhaps the most striking implementation gap appears in pastoralist communities, where the study uncovers challenges that both confirm and extend UNDP's (2003) critiques of static service models. The rigid administrative

structures of BOLSA at the woreda level, combined with the inherent mobility of pastoralist populations, create implementation barriers that theoretical models frequently underestimate. This unique intersection of geographical, cultural, and administrative factors produces service delivery challenges that demand context-specific solutions beyond conventional development approaches.

The implications of these findings are profound for both development theory and practice. At a theoretical level, they suggest the need for more nuanced models that account for implementation realities in resource-constrained environments. Practically, they highlight the urgency of structural reforms in how CDW programs are resourced and integrated within broader development ecosystems. The persistent gaps between policy intentions and ground-level execution reveal systemic weaknesses that require attention at multiple levels - from national budgeting processes to local governance arrangements.

These findings collectively suggest that while participatory development theory remains conceptually sound, its effective implementation requires addressing several structural barriers. The study underscores the necessity of adapting global best practices to local administrative realities, particularly in contexts like Ethiopia where decentralized governance systems interact with traditional community structures. Without such contextual adaptation, even the most theoretically robust development models risk being undermined by implementation challenges that theory frequently overlooks.

Ultimately, the study reveals that the transformative potential of CDWs depends not just on their adherence to participatory principles, but equally on the creation of enabling environments that address resource, coordination, and flexibility challenges. This dual requirement presents both a challenge and opportunity for development theorists and practitioners alike to bridge the persistent gap between development aspiration and implementation reality.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the significant role of Community Development Workers (CDWs), employed by both NGOs and government entities, in driving community development. CDWs effectively apply training and competencies from the Bishoftu Community Development Training College (BCDTC), particularly in supporting vulnerable groups, mobilizing resources, facilitating volunteerism, and conducting community assessments. Their interventions have improved access to housing, resources, and psychosocial support, while raising awareness of social issues. Despite challenges like inadequate infrastructure, limited budgets, and coordination gaps, CDWs employ coping strategies such as awareness-raising, leveraging opportunities, and fostering collaboration. With proper support, these challenges can be addressed, enhancing their impact.

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