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TOWARD A WORKING MODEL FOR
COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN THE 1970's

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ABSTRACT

The authors critique the service delivery model for solving community problems and stress the value of citizens developing their capabilities to attack the source of problems. A model for grass roots, autonomous, multi-issue citizens organizations is presented.

As public funds for the community organization of indigenous citizens have become increasingly scarce, community development efforts have been focused on community-wide social planning and the development and coordination of human services. The goal of helping a community to develop the capability to solve its own problems has oftentimes been sacrificed. It has been assumed that professionals have the expertise to solve best a community's problems and that agency-sponsored services are an adequate substitute for indigenous decision-making and problem-solving capabilities.

Admittedly, human service programming and planning are necessary in any community. However, such an approach fails to meet all community needs in several ways. First, reliance on professionally-provided services to deal with a community's problems overlooks the fact that people derive pride and self-respect from dealing actively with their own problems. This process is perhaps most essential for low-income citizens who have often been made to feel that they must rely on professionals to make decisions for them. The professional-client relationship has often made such persons feel like "objects" in any attacks on social problems rather than as effective "subjects." Some have even internalized the "blaming the victim" ideology¹ which pervades our society, to the point where they totally blame themselves for the problems which beset them.

A second problem with an exclusive emphasis on professionally-provided services is that only a problem's symptoms may be treated rather than its source. Services are provided to meet a particular "felt need." Yet, it is necessary to attack the underlying conditions which cause the "hurt." In turn, citizens who live with the problems are generally better able to attack their source than professionals can. The organizer's function then is to mobilize the people who hurt and to help them to analyze and to attack the sources of their community's problems. The outcome is that people will view themselves as competent to initiate plans for their needs rather than as only the recipients of professional services.

An example of how the organizer needs to mobilize people to deal with the problem's source occurred when one of the authors was working with a citizen action group

in rural Kentucky. This group was concerned about high school drop-outs. The typical service approach would have been to provide tutoring or other remedial services to potential drop-outs. After studying the problem, the citizen group determined that the attitudes and practices of teachers and school officials were a basic reason for the high drop-out rate, especially among poor white and black students. The organization was then in a position to use its political power to bring about major changes within the school system itself. This type of action would not be likely under an exclusively service-oriented model which attacks only the symptoms of problems. Indeed, if a social worker attempted to initiate such action, he/she might be dismissed for "not doing his/her job."

A third difficulty with the service-oriented model arises from the scarcity of institutionalized social services. It has become increasingly apparent that formalized social services will never be fully adequate to meet all the needs of people. In addition, formalized services are often not demanded, especially among citizens who tend to be self-reliant. The strategical question is whether to attempt to "sell" social services in areas where they do not exist and are not demanded or whether to organize citizens to use effectively informal noninstitutionalized mechanisms to meet their needs. Even the smallest communities have usually developed some kinds of problem-solving mechanisms. For example, a town in northern Minnesota with a population of 650 does not have a regular doctor in residence. While a doctor delivers services in the town two to three days per month, a large sphere of the town's medical needs are met by an informal network of "lay experts." This network centers on a man who is skilled in first-aid and who founded the local ambulance squad. It includes several ex-medical corpsmen who do minor suturing and make some preliminary diagnoses. A group of women also visit daily every elderly person. These efforts are informal, but are very effectively organized in this small, rather isolated community.² The authors propose that the necessary change strategy is to facilitate the extension of such indigenous problem-solving efforts rather than replacing them with agency-sponsored services. In a time of scarce resources, such a strategy makes sense economically as well as philosophically.

A fourth problem with the service delivery approach is that the organizer and citizens have oftentimes worked in isolation from, and occasionally in conflict with, professionals, such as caseworkers, human service planners, and researchers; this has produced a fragmented approach toward community problems. Many times professionals have taken the side of established institutions against community groups and organizers. When professionals have provided their skills to community groups, it has generally been in a paternalistic manner. As a result, citizen organizations have often mobilized against bureaucratic systems and their professional representatives. Communication has broken down, with professionals and citizens working against each other. Such conflict is particularly unfortunate since the two groups often share the same goals and could benefit from cooperation. In contrast to an agency-sponsored, single-discipline approach to problem-solving, the authors propose a strategy by which social service agencies can help to organize grass roots, autonomous, multi-issue citizen organizations. Citizens would define the issues they want to act upon, while the organizer would link citizens with the necessary resources of human service planners, researchers, economists and so on to solve complex technical problems. Such a process is intended to maximize the citizens' problem-solving capacities and to minimize over time the

need for professional services.

The Theoretical Rationale for Citizen Organizations:

An underlying assumption of developing citizen organizations is that citizens can make certain decisions and perform certain tasks better than professionals can. The theoretical rationale is the balance theory of change developed by Litwak and Meyer.³ The balance approach assumes that both professionals and citizens have legitimate spheres of influence and are ideally suited to perform certain tasks. However, where knowledge is equal, citizen groups are structurally more efficient, because they can make decisions faster, more flexibly, and at a lower cost.⁴ The implication is that citizens must first mobilize their resources to achieve their own objectives rather than rely upon experts to do things for them. The citizen organization would seek professional advice and assistance only when they could not solve their own problems. The authors are not proposing a total shift of responsibility for tackling social problems from professionals to indigenous people. Instead, a partnership focus is suggested as useful in efforts to improve a community.

While the authors do not advocate that citizens take over professionals' jobs, citizens are assumed to have the capabilities to carry out tasks which do not necessarily require trained expertise or large scale resources: to identify community needs, to set goals and standards for community achievement, to participate in formulating public policy, to gather information on community issues, to be involved in overseeing the performance of community institutions and to delegate to government and other community institutions the authority to perform the tasks best accomplished by them. In other words, citizens can oftentimes decide what is to be done; professionals can then be charged with the responsibility for deciding how it will be done.

In addition to using indigenous resources to solve problems, a citizen organization can serve a watch dog function, finding out about potential issues, researching them before they occur, and taking appropriate action before it is too late. In turn, once a citizen organization is ongoing and stable, it can be the bargaining agent for a neighborhood in its interactions with agencies at the city, county or state level. Thus, instead of citizens, oftentimes angrily, seeking out professionals, professionals would know where to turn to an ongoing citizen organization and citizens would have the organizational base to initiate cooperative problem-solving.

The multi-issue approach of a citizen organization is concerned with improving the quality of life as defined by a wide range of citizens. Quality of life refers to the fact that problems in varied substantive areas are so interrelated that solutions in one area cannot be pursued without taking into account their effect on the community as a whole. A multi-issue organization thus might act on housing, health, employment, youth services - whatever people perceive as in their self-interest. The organizer's effort is to help local citizens establish organizations that will be able to be constructively involved in a wide variety of issues, depending on the needs and perceptions of the individuals involved.

Within this general context, the approach is problem-centered. Rather than focus on long-range objectives, the organizer works with the citizens to resolve specific, definable problems in the community, one at a time. But instead of providing services to those affected by the problem, s/he organizes people in the affected community to work toward eradicating the source of that problem. In this way, close accountability can be kept, as the program's ability to alleviate certain community problems is evaluated and compared with the results of conventional programs.

As a grass roots strategy, the focus is to involve ordinary citizens at a neighborhood level. Social service agencies have often attempted to involve representative cross-sections of an entire community in planning for local needs. However such attempts have failed to take account of class differences in people's ability and willingness to become involved in problem-solving and in the interests that motivate them to act. Since resources are inevitably limited, low-income, oftentimes alienated people need to have as much ability to pursue their interests as do higher income, oftentimes organizationally sophisticated citizens. In turn, this requires that an organizer work intensely with small groups of low-income people to increase their skills, involvement and influence within a community. After this has been achieved, low-income people will be ready to join on an equal footing with other groups to see that community-wide needs are met.

To maintain a citizen organization's autonomy, indigenous leadership must be developed. In order for citizens to develop confidence in their own problem-solving capabilities, they need to be able to relate in an easy, relaxed manner to indigenous leaders whom they trust. Likewise, the balance theory suggests the need to build stable organizations before citizens attempt to cooperate in problem-solving with professionals. It is assumed that as citizens gain power through organization, they will be able to bargain on a more equal basis with professionals in formulating and implementing solutions to the problems which they face.

The sponsorship and funding of the citizens organization is, of course, critical. While the OEO and Model Cities experiences point to the difficulty of organizational efforts being legislated or mandated by officials, they can be facilitated by government representatives. And in many cases, officials want to develop new mechanisms to involve citizens, but do not know how. They recognize that the present professional-citizen conflicts are undesirable and want to reduce citizen alienation. In a period of increasingly scarce governmental funds, practitioners need to identify and turn toward private sources for funding citizen participation efforts. Likewise, Grosser has suggested funding neighborhood organizations as demonstration projects or experimental programs through private foundations or churches.⁵ Examples of such projects are the Heights Community Congress in Cleveland Heights, Ohio; the Organization of People Engaged in the Neighborhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and the Elmwood Committee for an Organized Neighborhood, Kansas City, Kansas.⁶ In these apparently successful citizen organizations, citizens, not the funding units, are making decisions for their neighborhood.

In order to maintain funding, tangible evidence must exist that specific needs are being met. However, in efforts to meet immediate needs, the danger of treating

only the symptoms of problems must be avoided. Likewise, the choice of the problem to be resolved is extremely crucial. The sponsors may think that they have the "right" and the "expertise" to make that decision. However, their choice may not meet the community's needs. Instead, meaningful community participation implies that the citizen organization decides its own priorities for action. In one of the authors' experience, this conflict between professionals and citizens resulted in the programs' demise, since the sponsoring agency insisted upon absolute adherence to its list of priority problems. Recognizing the inherent contradictions of such a program, the citizens withdrew from participation. However, agency officials who recognize the undesirability of citizens' feeling powerless might be willing to set only broadly defined objectives to allow the citizen group to set its specific targets within these broad areas. Perhaps a governing council which includes some professionals could be established to set broad parameters for problem-solving.

As professionals, we must be willing to move away from our traditional emphasis on services and be willing to work with people toward what they consider an improvement in "quality of life." In the past, government has found the idea of citizen autonomy in setting priorities for action as threatening their own political power. Social agencies have seen this as a competing approach to social problems, different from the traditional "services" approach. Social service professionals should be particularly attuned to the extremely beneficial results of people mobilizing their own resources to attack the problems which confront them. It is for this reason that the authors are hopeful that social service agencies can take up the slack in sponsoring citizen participation projects that are no longer being funded by government agencies.

FOOTNOTES

1. William Ryan, Blaming the Victim. (New York: Random House, 1971)
2. The authors are indebted to members of the class in Rural Development at the University of Minnesota - Duluth (spring, 1975) for providing this example.
3. Eugene Litwak, "An Approach to Linkage in Grass Roots Community Organization", in Cox, Erlich, Rothman, Tropman, Strategies of Community Organization. (Itasca, Illinois: F. E. Peacock Publishers, 1974), pp. 131-144.
4. Ibid, p. 134.
5. Charles Grosser, New Directions in Community Organization: From Enabling to Advocacy. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. 167.
6. "Citizen Involvement Network: A Description of a Nationwide Experiment to Strengthen and Improve Citizen Involvement in Community Decision-Making and Achievement;" January 10, 1975 (draft, mimeo).