

# ORGANIZATION FOR BREAKING THE POVERTY CYCLE IN RURAL AREAS

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The variables in the culture of poverty are complex—the people, the changing social and governmental systems, the vast numbers of governmental and private agencies concerned with the economy and the community. The approaches themselves are complex. Yet we must find positive ways of dealing with these problems rather than continuing the mistakes we have made in the past.

## **FOUNDATIONS OF THE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM**

Back in the early 1960's the "Gray Area" program of the Ford Foundation placed its faith in solving the problems of the urban slums *not by more planning and research, but by doing something about people*. The assumptions and principles that underlay that program are the basic foundation of the Community Action Program. Of course, the first basic assumption is that in this democracy we respect the dignity and freedom of the individual. We have to find ways to order our affairs to insure that people have equal opportunity and a chance for equal rewards for the same endeavor.

The Community Action Program was framed around four points:

1. The answer to poverty lies not in the continuation of a paternalistic approach to the poor but in treating them as adult individuals and insuring that they have opportunities. The assumption is that given the opportunity, they can break out of the cycle of poverty.

2. There are always two aspects to opportunity. On the one hand, we cannot provide continuing opportunities if we do not provide jobs and a decent level of income for those who want to work. On the other hand, even if we do provide jobs, the poor are precisely those who are least able to take advantage of existing opportunities because of dislocation, lack of education, poor health, and all of the factors that are involved in the culture of poverty. This is particularly so for members of minority groups.

3. Communities—local, state, and even national—can more effectively coordinate the resources at hand in education, in health, in housing, in employment, and in all of the things that have a bearing on the conditions of the poor. I have often thought that in making available all the resources of the school system, of welfare and health

departments, of home demonstration agents, etc., in so many cases, we actually depend on the client—the poor person—to be the sophisticated coordinator of all the resources available to him, when the systems that reach out to him should be coordinating those resources.

The continuing assumption in so many of our professions is that we are doing a good job, and all we need to do the job better is more money and more personnel. We are not prepared to admit that perhaps we are not doing a good job because our approach is wrong. In short, we are not ready to admit that our institutions need change if we are to reach the poor more effectively.

4. Self-respect and self-responsibility cannot be passed down from above; we cannot expect the poor to believe that we respect them as individuals or that our intentions are good if we do not understand them, and if we do not look at their problems, their opportunities, and the roadblocks to opportunity from their point of view. There must be a real effort—with all the risks involved—to enlist the poor in the attempt to define their own problems, to seek their own solutions, and in the process to stimulate institutional change and enter into full citizenship. Without this we cannot expect to produce real motivation.

Obviously, those who are caught in the culture of poverty do lack the skills of citizenship that are required to move about in our society and the motivation that we expect from our children and our middle-class colleagues. They have become disadvantaged because we did not intervene when they were young. On the other hand, if we do not help the parents to order their own lives better, they cannot effectively support the effort to prepare their own children. Without their support we run the terrible risk that all we do will run down the drain for lack of a means to implement it.

#### **THE NORTH CAROLINA FUND PROGRAM**

Now I would like to tell you about some of the projects in which we of the North Carolina Fund have been engaged and how they relate to some of the problems of the poor. North Carolina was the first state to go to a foundation for help in an action program aimed at the problems of poverty. The approach was made as a state because we had so many different situations—the Appalachian mountains, the urban Piedmont with its slums that are just as real as the slums in Chicago, and the coastal plains in the east, primarily a tenant farming economy. The basic idea was that we would select a number of communities in the state in which to support Community

Action Programs, giving financial assistance for experimental and demonstration programs.

When the Economic Opportunity Act was passed, we decided to go ahead with our support of these programs, but to limit our support to (1) giving money to these nonprofit corporations to strengthen their programs, (2) conducting demonstration programs which the federal government for some reason could not undertake, and (3) providing technical services not otherwise available in the state.

So we have been working with eleven Community Action Programs involving twenty counties. These programs range from a little mountain county out in the far western edge of North Carolina to a four-county project in the northeastern part of the state where the majority of the population are Negro tenant farmers whose level of income is generally \$1,000 to \$2,000.

As we have gone along we have learned several things.

### **Involving the Poor**

We have learned that it is traumatic in the extreme to try to persuade community leaders to involve the poor on Community Action Program boards. This experience came at a time when the poor—and primarily the Negro poor—were wrapped up in the civil rights movement. But we have learned that representation on those boards has given the poor a confidence in the objectives of the programs that they simply did not have before. Only after they were represented were they prepared to participate.

We also learned that the poor cannot participate on boards unless their representatives have some leadership capacity. In one community the Negro members of the board have a very powerful impact on the policy of the CAP, on the program of the CAP, and on the outreach of the CAP, but this impact all depends on the confidence of the Negro community. In turn, the unity of this community depends on a 65-year-old man who can die any moment from heart trouble, and there is no one to replace him. Developing adults who are poor—Negro, Indian, or white—into people who can serve effectively on these boards is a serious problem.

From the very beginning most of our Community Action Programs have taken the point of view that the people who can best reach, communicate with, and have an impact on the poor are those who come from that same culture. Where these people have worked with the community action agency, the participation has increased.

In the initial days, I remember the question was, "How do we get people enrolled in adult education?" Fortunately, our North Carolina Department of Community Colleges takes the view that we should provide a teacher and teach wherever there are ten or fifteen who want a class, and the result is astounding. North Carolina soon had 10,000 rural, urban, and mountain people enrolled in adult education classes. They not only enrolled, but they came and stayed; they stayed to learn.

Our only problem in North Carolina now is how to get enough money to meet the needs of the people who want to learn. There is a general feeling that "if we can learn, if we can get educated, we will have a chance." It takes a long time and a lot of work with a 55-year-old mother or a 50-year-old man who has been a day laborer. It is a lot easier with a boy who is in the Neighborhood Youth Corps, and it is still easier with a young child. But there is motivation to learn at all ages.

### **Indigenous Workers, Key to Success**

We used indigenous people as field workers to go out and talk with the families to find out what their problems were, what their desires and motivation for an education were. One thing the field workers discovered is that an astounding proportion of these people who live in isolation back off the paved roads do not know what assistance is available to them today. We refer these people to welfare departments, the surplus food program, health departments, home demonstration programs, education programs. We have made many more referrals of people who did not qualify for training but who were eligible for help under existing programs than we have for placement and training programs.

The field worker finds needy people and what does he do? Somebody has to say to employers, "Have you got a job in which you will train a man to be a service station attendant, to be a shoe repair assistant, to work in a small industry, to work in a retail store? We will reimburse you for part of the expenses. He does not have an education, he has always worked on a farm, and he is a Negro." It takes a lot of convincing. These people are getting placed, they are working. Then some employer will say, "The man was here; he worked fine for three days, but he hasn't shown up for two days." So the field worker goes back and finds that there are problems, and the support that the field worker gives to the person in getting adjusted to employment is almost as important as finding the training itself.

Understanding the problems is basic to the success of the program as an experiment: a child is sick at home and the wife wants him to stay, or he lives twenty-five miles from work and he cannot find a ride, or it is the day to pick up surplus food from the welfare warehouse which is fifteen miles away. The field worker is in a manpower program but he has to adapt to the problems that these unskilled and uneducated people have, understand them, and help solve the problems to keep the man on the job.

So, the indigenous field worker who understands and relates to the poor is beginning to be a very important part of the program.

We have also experimented in the same counties with helping people who are unemployed and who are willing to move to the Piedmont area where there are jobs. Again, we have to find field workers who can relate to the people, who are from that community. They can identify people and get them to understand what is involved in leaving the farm and moving into the Piedmont. Then we have to get the employers to understand that this is not like employing a person who comes through the employment service. The employment service frequently has had no contact with these people. But finally we place them and find a home for them, and we advance them money to live on until their pay check comes in three weeks; we help them find the school, the stores, the doctor; and it works—imperfectly, to be sure.

One of our projects is a survey of 13,000 low-income families in our target areas, including a state-wide sample, financed by a substantial grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity. The questionnaire, incidentally, was administered, and very well too, by people from the community trained by the Research Triangle Institute. We tried to find out what people know about the facilities available to them. For example, of the farmers interviewed throughout the state, 72 percent knew there was a home demonstration agent, 33 percent knew what services were available from the home demonstration agent, but only 9 percent had received help.

### **The Homemaker Service Program**

With the help of the school home economics departments, we developed a program—again using nonprofessional personnel—for homemakers' services. We tried it in the mountains, we tried it in the Piedmont, and we tried it in the east; and those nonprofessionals are making an impact. In many cases these workers are the only contact between the family and the outside world. The family finds a friend. Not only is she there to help the mother with the care of the chil-

dren, to encourage the mother to get the children into school and to get medical services; she is also often the only contact with the rest of the world.

### **Community Development**

Reaching people with services is not the most important thing. The problem is how to involve these people in their own problems—how to bring them together to define their common needs, how to help them develop the capacity to operate within the community, to communicate needs to the community and the agencies in the community, and how to create a feeling that they are playing an important part in their own welfare.

Here, after many false starts, we have gone back to training people to work in neighborhood centers, to work with representatives of the indigenous communities to help them move along one step at a time in defining and solving their problems. Congress is disturbed by this; it is risky, it has political overtones, it is a long process. But look where the riots are today. People are not rioting in the communities that have had a history of real involvement and real organization because they have come to grips with their problems. They have not solved all the problems, but they have come to grips with them, and they have a sense of responsibility. They may demonstrate and protest, but they are not so overcome with frustration that they riot aimlessly.

Let me give you an example. There are about fifteen ladies in a little community in Durham. Every one of them is the head of a family; there is no husband in the block. They all receive AFDC assistance; they average five children each; they are between 30 and 45 years of age. A sensitive young Negro neighborhood worker went down and began working with these women. They were interested, first of all, in housing. They were paying exorbitant rents to their landlord for houses with no steps, plumbing facilities that were not working, and kitchens that were a crime. So he helped them survey their homes and discuss the alternatives. They went down to city hall and got a copy of the minimum housing code, and they compared it with the results of their survey. Thus, they built up a little bundle of facts. They called the city housing inspector in, and he said, "This is a terrible situation and we will do something about it."

Well, you know how city councils are about enforcing a minimum housing code. Time went on and nothing happened, so the women met again. They had a number of alternatives, and they chose. "We can't get anywhere at city hall, we can't get anywhere

with the landlord, we will go to the community.” So they picked up their children and went across town to the home of the landlord and picketed. Everybody was horrified. For ten days there were big headlines in the newspaper. The mayor became very upset about what was happening. Finally, the landlord gave in. He not only agreed to the repairs they were asking for to bring their houses up to minimum standards, but he decided maybe he needed to repair several dozen other houses he had in the community.

Those ladies have not only helped solve their housing problems, but they have all their children in day-care centers, and some of them are working there as assistants. Those who cannot read and write are attending adult literacy classes—and some may get good employment. They have not solved all their problems, but they have had the satisfaction of some small but definite success. You can go into that community today and see the difference on their faces and the faces of their children.

We are encouraging this approach in all our CAPs. All of our CAPs are being evaluated, and two of the standards are not on program but on process: First, how have you brought the community together to determine what program is needed? Second, are citizenship and education built into every program, and does the CAP render, not leadership, but *full support* to indigenous leadership?

### **Demonstration Projects**

Among our several demonstration projects is one to establish a state-wide nonprofit corporation for technical assistance in developing low-income housing projects under FHA's 221(d)(3) program. We hope to encourage builders to build more houses for low-income people and also to involve low-income groups in some construction of their own, a very important step in Negro communities. We are supporting an experimental and developmental learning institute in North Carolina, in cooperation with the University of North Carolina, Duke University, and the State Board of Education, to encourage more experimental programs in education, particularly childhood education. We have a public information program in which we are trying to help the people of the state understand the poor and their problems. We have a training program which is now phasing out as the University of North Carolina phases in their training program supported by federal funds.

### **Studies to Guide Future Programs**

Finally, we have organized five study committees to examine the systems within the state which are associated most with the prob-

lem of poverty. For example, we have an economic development study committee which is pointing out the myths about economic development in North Carolina. Much good research has been done in economic development, but it either has limited circulation or its interpretation is questionable. As evidence of this, we have created 175,000 new jobs in North Carolina in a ten-year period, but only 8,000 could be said to have improved the wage structure. All the remainder were below the average wage in manufacturing in the state during that period. Also, we have created many jobs for white women, but the percentage of jobs for Negro men has dropped 40 percent. We have discovered that the reason our average manufacturing wage ranks 50th in the country is that the new jobs are all in the textile and furniture industries where wages are traditionally low.

In another study we are looking at the cost of the minimum food basket in North Carolina using U.S. Department of Labor procedures. Our initial results indicate that the minimum food basket in most communities in North Carolina costs more than in the North and takes a greater portion of income. But, it is said that living costs are lower in the South; so we hope to face the state with some facts.

### **SOME GENERALIZATIONS**

I do not think the Community Action Program is a cure-all, but it is introducing more resources, some planning, and some leverage. This is our primary need at this time. We must find ways of helping the communities and assisting the poor to organize themselves to define their own problems, to communicate these problems to community agencies, and to provide the criticism that is necessary for institutional change, and we must help to develop motivation. If this process works, eventually the poor will have some political impact. It seems to me this is what we need for producing a better functioning community. So within the community we must encourage efforts to improve distribution and use of our resources to reach people effectively. We must involve the poor in the way this can best be done, the way they can contribute, and the way they can speak to the community at large.

There is one other point. In the rural areas we have more people than we will ever employ. This raises the question of organization for economic development in rural communities. I think this must be handled on a regional, state, or national basis. Neighborhoods, counties, or communities cannot handle the problem alone. You know the impact research and extension have had on the in-



crease in agricultural productivity in comparison with industrial productivity. We must transfer that emphasis and that impact to the production of communities. Where those communities are to be located I am not enough of an economist to say. But our goal has to be bringing the rural poor not into the ghettos of the North but into viable communities where jobs and the total resources to develop a decent community are available. When we send them into the ghettos of the North, we intensify an already insolvable problem.

What are the alternatives for creating opportunities for employment and decent living for the children that are growing up on the farms, for helping the adult who can no longer earn a productive living on the farm? What can we do to help him earn a decent income for work where he is if he cannot be transferred to an urban job or to some other job in the community in which he lives? In short, we have to find new ways, new systems of planning and acting to provide the economic opportunities that are essential if we are to meet the expectations of the poor as they see a glimmer of hope and, through their own efforts and the efforts of the community at large, reach for a handhold that will enable them and their families to break away from the cycle of poverty.

PART V

*Helping People Solve  
Public Problems*

