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Shimon S. Gottschalk
Florida State University

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PLANNING RADICAL CHANGE AT THE GRASS ROOTS:
THE STORY OF NEW COMMUNITIES INC.*

Shimon S. Gottschalk
Florida State University
School of Social Work

ABSTRACT

The author, a social scientist in the role activist, analyzes and evaluates his practice as a planner and advocate, working with poor rural black people in the development of an alternative community. Over New Community Inc.'s more than eight years of constant struggle, radically new insights have been gained by the author concerning the efficacy of ideology and the feasibility of centrally planned change. Planning becomes mutual learning and the only real change worthy of note is not some quantifiable output, but rather the new strength and understanding which emerges from the thoughts and experiences of the people as they struggle to survive.

Agents of radical social change have a choice among three primary modes of action: confrontation, infiltration, or people's advocacy. Yet none of these approaches seems to be fully capable of accomplishing the task. Confrontation tends to alienate precisely those whom the activist needs as allies (Thorne, 1975). Infiltration readily leads to cooptation and the abandonment of radical objectives. Advocacy is likely to be politically opportunist and ideologically noncommittal. It, too, readily lends itself to cooptation because the people demand quick, tangible results (Peattie, 1968; Piven, 1970).

The founders of New Communities, Inc. (NCI), an experimental rural new town in Southwest Georgia, have attempted to steer an eclectic course which seeks to avoid these pitfalls. We have tried to learn how to work within, yet separate from the "system". Our aim has been to use the "system" against itself, as it were, to achieve our, not its valued goals. When we have been in direct confrontation we have tried to confront non-violently. We have identified as the target of our change efforts not only the society and its institutions, but also ourselves. By attempting to redefine the relationship between leaders and followers, between professional and lay persons, between those who think that they know and those who think that they don't know, it has been our goal to sow the seeds of a "new world."

*Portions of this paper have been published previously, in somewhat different form, in Bernard Ross and S.K. Khinduka, eds., *Social Work in Practice*, Washington, NASW, 1976.

We are convinced that this new social order cannot simply be invented and then imposed from above by a self-selected, even if well intentioned, elite. Neither will it emerge *ex nihilo* following the next presidential election or as a wonderful new program made possible by next year's federal budget. Rather, (and this is our fundamental faith) the foundations of the new world must be created at the roots, together with those who are most consistently excluded and victimized by the existing social order.

NCI constitutes an effort to create an attractive, feasible alternative to urbanization for marginal, rural, black families. Located in Lee County, Georgia, NCI is in nominal possession of some 6000 acres of (heavily mortgaged) farm and woodland. It lays claim to being the largest landholding controlled by a black community group anywhere in America. Its annual operating budget exceeds half a million dollars. Some 35 families are currently earning their livelihood from NCI, though most of these families do not yet physically live on the land. The major operation is agricultural, growing peanuts, corn, soybeans, cattle, hogs, and some vegetables. NCI also operates a roadside farmers' market/grocery store, a daycare and remedial education program and, in its alliance with the Southwest Georgia Project¹, conducts a variety of community organizing efforts, and political and cultural events.

On its surface, NCI will appear to be but another ambitious, idealistic, liberal effort to help rural poor people. But that is only a small part of the truth. We believe that it is a radically ambitious, experimenting, ever changing, potentially history making dream. . . And let none be fooled into thinking that it is arms, rather than dreams that make for social revolutions.

For the author, the story of NCI is a very personal tale, a long, often joyful, and sometimes stressful series of experiences in which he was able to take part over the past eight years. Therefore, the account which follows is both analytical and subjective. Its aim is both to enlighten and to bear witness. There is no other way to write about NCI and its and our unique romance with social revolution.

Origins

The origins of NCI can be traced to two entirely separate and distinct sources. The first is primarily intellectual and ideological and the second is uniquely individual. In 1967-68, while liberal forces in the nation were perceptively beginning to disengage themselves from the

euphoria of "we shall overcome", while the forces of opposition to the war in Vietnam were beginning to gain momentum, a small group (including the author), representing a variety of academic and professional disciplines, began to gather in Exeter, N.H., under the leadership of eighty-year old Ralph Borsodi. Borsodi had been active in the back-to-land movement of the Great Depression. He, and others in the group, were influenced by the economic theories of Henry George (1880). Another ideological strain which contributed to the thinking of the group was the Gandhian notion of "constructive program". Gandhi taught that satyagraha, (Sanskrit for truth force) is to be given expression not simply as a method of protest, but also in the creating of liberating institutional alternatives (Gandhi, 1951:68). Above all, this mixed group of economists, sociologists, social workers, and political activists was united in its commitment to the ideal of social justice, to be achieved through experimentation with the establishment of institutions embodying economic justice, created and sustained by the people themselves from the grass roots up.

Gradually the idea of what we eventually agreed to call a rural new town emerged, built upon New Deal precedents, (Borsodi, 1935; Banfield, 1951) upon the experience of the Mexican ejido, and most especially upon the Israeli moshav (Weitz, 1971). Unlike the more familiar kibbutz, the moshav is a cooperative settlement which does not eliminate all private property and in which children live in the home, rather than in the children's houses.² Physically, the moshav consists of one or more clusters of houses in the midst of a large tract of land. Adjacent to, or within walking distance of each home, is a small plot which serves the family as a kitchen garden, and perhaps for some poultry and a cow or a goat. Beyond these plots are large fields which are cooperatively farmed, utilizing modern machinery, where appropriate, and producing cash crops. The moshav might also include cooperatively owned and managed industrial and commercial enterprises.

In applying this idea to black people in the rural South the thought was that the rural new town might, among other things, function as the social, cultural, and recreational hub of a much larger geographic area. There was no thought that this community would become an isolated enclave. Non-residents might well be employed within it, and its residents, in turn, might commute elsewhere to seek employment. One of the early ideas was that the rural new town might in addition to its agricultural enterprises, enter the prefabricated housing field. Whereas initially it would serve primarily its own residents, in the long run it would provide housing for a much larger geographic area.

Most of these ideas have been modified over the years, but one of the key concepts, the idea of the community land trust, has remained largely unchanged.³ The idea is that, whereas residents would own their homes and the improvements which they make on their individual plots, ownership of the land would rest with the Trust, which is indirectly controlled by the residents. Residents of the Rural New Town would have full and exclusive usership rights to the land, paying only nominal user fees. They forfeit these rights only when they personally cease to use them. Usership rights may be inherited, but not sold, leased, or mortgaged. The effects of the Land Trust would be to "decommoditize" the land, and thus safeguard the newly independent farmer's right to his/her property, regardless of the fluctuations of the harvest or the market. The perpetual Trust would guarantee that land cannot be repossessed by creditors in times of hardship. It would eliminate the possibility of land speculation, and absentee landlordism would be permanently avoided. (Guide to Community Land Trust, 1972).

It may be helpful to contrast the rural new town idea with land reform efforts in other parts of the world. Such efforts have often foundered due to their limited, unidimensional approach involving land distribution only. But successful land reform can be achieved only when additional capital resources are made available to facilitate agricultural, as well as commercial and industrial development. In the case of the rural new town the original idea was to raise the necessary development capital partly from governmental, but primarily from private sources on an eleemosynary investment basis. Charitable foundations, corporations, organizations and individuals would be called upon to make "social investments" in the rural new town on a long term, low interest-rate basis. Outright grants would be sought only for purposes of land purchases. The theory was that loans, in the long run, help make the recipient independent of the lender. By contrast, gifts have a way of perpetuating dependency and generating the need for additional gifts.

These were some of the ideas and the key concepts developed by the Exeter group. They were first formulated for possible application overseas, in India, Latin America, or the Phillipines. Only gradually did the group move toward a recognition of their applicability to the underdeveloped rural areas of the United States. This is where the second half of our story of the origins of NCI enters the picture.

This part of the story begins with Slater King, a man who was born in Albany, Georgia, attended Oberlin College, returned to help his father run a small grocery store, started his own business, and then became involved in the civil rights movement of the early 1960's. Slater King was one of the leaders of the 1962 "Albany Movement", when Martin Luther

King brought Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) staff and workers to Albany to non-violently challenge the iron grip to legally sanctioned racial segregation in this deep southern community.

From a concern with civil rights, Slater King moved to an ever increasing preoccupation with the issues of economic justice and black cultural renaissance. In these efforts he was joined by Charles Sherrod, the director of the Southwest Georgia Project, which was the rural counterpart of the Albany Movement. Sherrod, an ordained minister, had moved to Southwest Georgia in 1960, in the early days of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as a rural community organizer.

Through the efforts of Robert Swann, a member of the Exeter group and the director of the International Independence Institute, probably more than any other single person, a small group of black leaders from the South, plus a few others, were given the opportunity to travel to Israel in the Summer of 1968. The group included both King and Sherrod. The trip was cosponsored by the International Independence Institute and the National Sharecroppers Fund and was financed by the Norman Fund.

That's when it all began. The group returned from their trip greatly moved by their Israeli experiences. They were especially impressed both by the moshav, and by the idea of the Jewish National Fund.⁴ Soon after their return they set up a meeting in Atlanta and established the nucleus of the organization that was to become NCI.

New Communities was incorporated in the Fall of 1968 as a non-profit Georgia corporation. Its original board of directors included not only all those who had traveled to Israel, but also representatives of such organizations as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, National Sharecroppers Funds, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Southern Rural Project, and, in an advisory capacity, the Southern Regional Council. Subsequently, this board of directors was expanded so as to include an ever increasing number of residents of Southwest Georgia, and potential residents of the rural new town.

Slater King was killed in a tragic automobile accident in March, 1969. But prior to this death he was able to take an option in behalf of NCI, on a 4,800 acre farm, some 20 miles to the North of Albany. Later that year, an adjacent tract containing 927 acres was added to the original acreage. In the meantime, New Communities met with success in its application for an initial \$98,000 planning grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity, under Title ID.

Rationale

Why did we ever get into this? Any major social undertaking such as NCI invariably emerges from a complex of overt and covert objectives. There are collective goals and personal goals, political goals and ethical goals, short range goals and long range goals, the goals of the planners and organizers and the goals of each of the actual or potential participants, the goals which sparked the beginning and those that have evolved as a result of experience. As we proceed, we will touch upon most of these issues, but for the moment we will attempt to interpret several broader, universal goals, as they apply to NCI: the idea of the good life, the personal and collective sense of dignity and self-worth, and the ideal of freedom.

In a practical, concrete way, probably the essence of what most people call 'the good life' is captured by the idea of "home". Home includes house, and family, and neighborhood, and community. Home, regardless of its objective content, connotes comfort, security, and well being. Even if for a particular individual it is not, and perhaps never has been, a positive reality, it naturally remains an emotion charged, often romanticized ideal. Only in the light of this kind of awareness can we properly assess what has happened to rural families in America during the past thirty or forty years.

Between the years 1940 and 1970, the farm population of the United States decreased by 73 percent. The statistical documentation which bears witness to the plight of the family farm and of farm laborers need hardly be expanded upon here. (Southern Exposure, 1974). Not only the industrialization of agriculture and the concomitant demand for large capital inputs, but also, and inexcusably, the overt policies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture have served to drive marginal farmers and farmhands off the land. It is less economies of scale than politics of bigness that have driven the small farmer out of farming. (Marshall and Thompson, 1975). The so-called urban crisis is to be explained in important part as a result of the massive migration of unprepared rural families into the central cities. The problem is that the government, following the established dominant values of the society, has viewed the farm primarily as an economic production unit rather than as a way of life and as a home.

One of the primary goals of NCI has been to create a new opportunity for those many thousands of rural families in Southwest Georgia who have resisted the flight to the city because, despite the hardships, they have preferred to remain at home. Unlike in Floyd McKissick's Soul City, the idea has not been to attempt to lure people back from the metropolis. The aim is clear and simple, to create the material and social basis for a meaningful and good life upon the land.

Freedom is not a commodity that one individual or group can transfer to another. Freedom is created by concreate acts of self-liberation from the symbolic and material constraints imposed by others. (Gottschalk, 1975: 106) Though such a highly abstract notion has hardly been the topic of daily conversation among the members of NCI, its practical implications are evidenced throughout:

1. Structured in the form of a Community Development Corporation (CDC), NCI aims to achieve maximal economic autonomy. The goal is to make NCI an economic success, not simply another charitable enterprise. American society has a way of responding to (or, in fact, avoiding) every conceivable social problem by inventing another social service. NCI is not a social service agency. It is an approach to the restructuring of people's lives and livelihood. (Gottschalk, 1973).

2. From the very beginning NCI was viewed as a place where black people might give expression to idea and life styles which are independent of those imposed by the dominant white society from without, or above. This meaning of the word freedom which is essential to the building of a sense of dignity is to be viewed not only in individual terms. It is a collective enterprise and experience, a goal which, as we shall illustrate below, is much easier to express than to place into practice.

NCI cannot be understood except as a part of the contemporary struggle for racial integrity, identity, and liberation. If there is a common ideology which binds the many varied people who have become a part of NCI then it is this shared vision which, for lack of a better term, we call black liberation. For the former farm hands, day laborers and domestics its meaning is very specific and concrete; for black leaders its meaning is much broader; and for those of us who have come from afar it is a part of a large vision which includes the liberation of all people, not excluding ourselves.

3. First and last there is the land. In recent years much has been written about the need to learn again how to live within the world as a part of nature rather than as exploiters of it. But for rural black people who have never physically left the land, who have been largely excluded from modern technology and are strangers to bureaucratic ways, the call for a return to the land has an entirely different meaning. For generations they have been squatters, tenant, farmers, sharecroppers, hired day laborers working other people's land. The erosion of land ownership among rural blacks during the present century is a largely unknown chapter in the long sad history of these people upon the North American continent. But here, at NCI, we are beginning to reverse the tide. For the first time in their memory, poor black people can say that this is our land to build and make prosper, and to hold in trust for future generations.

The ultimate ecological message is to bring people into harmony with their environment - their material as well as their social environment. That, too, is the goal of NCI, to create a community which economically and socially is whole unto itself, not in isolation from others, but with the freedom to be maximally self-defining and therefore self-liberating.

The Way It Was

Ideals and goals are beautiful, but practice makes imperfect. The difficult reality which emerges from a chronic shortage of development capital, from the imperfections of people and the limitations of knowledge, from political rivalries and bureaucratic stupidities can make the noblest of visions a source of incessant worry and recurrent trauma.

Probably most of the problems are unavoidable. How, for example, does one ask people to take risks who, because of their extreme poverty, cannot afford to risk?⁵ How does one gain the participation of people in a new town before there is a town and before there are people? How does one avoid behaving in the manner predominant in American society, rewarding individual success and punishing failure? How does one with complete fairness select the first residents for a new town? How does one reaffirm the principle of social equality while creating a complex community which requires the recognition of specialized talents and the election or appointment of legitimizing authorities? Finally, to return to a theme raised earlier, how does one remain financially solvent and not sell out one's ideals to satisfy the demands of those who have granted support?

Since that eventful day in early 1970 when the deed to the land was formally signed, NCI has survived, struggling from problem to problem and crisis to crisis:

- # The annual payments on the land of over \$100,000 have been an ever present threat to economic survival. Contrary to plan, the cost of these payments have had to be borne by farm operations. Yet, to date, the farm has not had a single profit making season.
- # NCI has often suffered from inexperienced management, as evidenced by inadequate economic planning, poor bookkeeping, unclear lines of authority, inadequate concern for public relations, and many other problems attributable to a lack of management skills.

- # The Title I-D planning grant from OEO was never followed up by additional OEO funds primarily, though not only, because of harsh political opposition on the local and state level.
- # For several years the annual harvest of vegetable crops was conducted by college student volunteers (a practice now discontinued). The institutional conflicts between local people and volunteers on the one hand, and the cultural conflicts between black and white college students on the other served as a major and dismaying source of disruption.⁶
- # In 1974 a major confrontation developed between "management" and "workers". The workers on the farm began to seek affiliation with the United Farm Workers Union and to demand higher pay and better working conditions. Those in management positions and most board members countered with the argument that, in a community enterprise such as this, all are one: there is no place for labor-management distinctions in the traditional sense.
- # A social survey conducted in 1969 among a sampling of 92 rural black households in and near Lee County indicated that, more than anything else, these families hoped that NCI might be able to provide them with a better house (not a job, or money, or social services. To date, NCI has been unable to move toward meeting this major popular demand. There is no way to estimate how many prospective residents have by this time become disenchanted.
- # The deep seated racism indigenous to the rural South has been a source of potential or real threat throughout the history of NCI. When fires broke out in the woodlands there was suspicious of arson. When commercial dealings with local merchants are undertaken the prices offered are suspect. When a local ordinance is enforced or a permit sought, the exercise of racial bias is to be assumed.

Yet, despite these seemingly endless crises and perennial problems, and many others too embarrassing and too petty to mention, NCI continues to live. Problems and crises are not solved, they are outlived.

The Dilemmas of CDC'S

A community development corporation has been defined as "an organization created and controlled by the people living in impoverished

areas for the purpose of planning, stimulating, financing, and when necessary, owning and operating business that will provide employment, income and a better life for the residents of these areas." (Faux 1971: 29). CDC'S are business corporations with social welfare objectives. As businesses they need to remain economically solvent and, ideally, show a profit. In the service of their social welfare goals, they must remain maximally democratic and responsive to the demands of their local constituencies.

Unfortunately, these two goals, business success and community responsiveness, are frequently in conflict. For example, when at NCI the good, loyal, but only moderately competent farm manager had to be dismissed, it became a difficult, drawn out ordeal for the leadership groups. At other times, when new personnel were hired, there were occasional charges of favoritism, or even nepotism. And yet, one might justly ask, "is this wrong?" Is it not fair to assume that more highly qualified people coming from more distant places neither need nor deserve the jobs in the way that friends and relatives do?

At the annual meeting of NCI which took place in the winter of 1974, members were invited by the chairman to give expression to their dreams for the future of NCI. One of the people arose and courageously suggested that, hopefully, one day a big factory, perhaps something like an automobile assembly plant might be established on NCI land. There would be jobs and prosperity for all. Many enthusiastic heads nodded in agreement. A beautiful dream, they thought. But, no, warned the much more cautious and experienced chairman. If NCI stands for anything, then it stands for self-determination and community control. Prosperity at the price of a return to slavery is the paradise of fools. . . The Chairman won the day.

In the long run NCI must achieve economic independence. The major donor foundations and church groups are impatiently awaiting this event. From their point of view this is a costly experiment. We are not always certain how well they understand and how long they might be prepared to give their support while the people at NCI search for and find appropriate expression for their true souls.

In the spring of 1975, a commercial farm management firm was engaged by some of these donor friends of NCI to conduct a comprehensive business evaluation of current conditions and future prospects. The summary of the firm's recommendations concludes with the following paragraph: (Evans, 1975).

From our point of view, NCI defies all laws of economic survival. It should not be in existence because it is

highly financed at 8½ - 9% interest; directed by committees, managed by a preacher and a former Extension agent, and operated by a group of poor individuals, some of whom are illiterate. There is no way such a combination can survive; but it has, it is, and it will survive because these people want it to succeed. . . .

The Planning Process

To the extent that social planning has reference to the design of future reality, it has little relevance to what has occurred at NCI. At best, the plans and ideas projected by the Exeter and Atlanta groups served to provide an initial source of inspiration. They specified an abstract communal idea which continues to serve as a symbolic rallying point, but rarely as a practical guide for decision or action.

But planning is more than designing; it is also doing. Social planning is not simply planning for, but rather planning with people, involving them maximally in every step of the action. In NCI this has been the explicit planning strategy from the very beginning. Thus, all meetings of all groups and committees have been open to all interested individuals, and broad participation has been encouraged, often at a severe cost to efficiency and order.

Especially in the early days, this process often left the author with a sense of utter bewilderment. What had been decided? Indeed, what had been discussed? Over the years board meetings became better organized and the author's ear more finely attuned. Today, these meetings are more regularly in the control of the more experienced, more skilled members of the group. But even now, when decisions are made, one never knows whether they will be acted upon. The decision making process remains largely a learning/teaching experience. In effect, the real operational decisions are made not in meetings, but in living and doing. Beyond this, the key decisions affecting the life and death of NCI continue to be made either completely externally, e.g. in the offices of the creditors and the large donor foundations, or by members of a small executive group.

The familiar, allegedly rational, planning paradigm leading from problem definition to selection from among alternative solutions, to implementation, and then to the evaluation of results has rarely applied to NCI. (Lippitt, 1958: 123; Gurin and Pealman, 1972:62) In large part, long range planning and careful decision making have been forced to give way to the frequently recurring need to respond to crises. Often there have been no real options, only imperatives which forced decisions. At other times, some of the most important decisions seemed to be made more in the light of faith than knowledge. Thus, when in 1969 the board of

NCI agreed to the purchase of 6000 acres in Lee County, thereby undertaking a financial obligation of over a million dollars, there was little attempt to plan ahead and to determine how the annual payments might be met. On all traditionally rational grounds it was a fool-hardly decision. And yet, it has turned out to be one of the most crucial and best decisions that NCI has made. Within the present political climate in America, it is unlikely that one of the most powerful insurance companies in America would foreclose on the mortgage of the largest black landholding in the country. Given the very size of NCI, how can the major charitable foundations in America dare to let it fail?

From the time of his earliest involvement, the author's primary role has been that of idea-man, advisor, friend, and occasional publicist, fund raiser, grant writer, and social researcher. He has been a member of the board of directors of NCI from the time of its inception. He has never been a formal employee of NCI and has never asked for, nor received any payment from the organization. The author resides not in Lee County, but in Florida, some 100 miles away.

There has always been a generalized mistrust of "experts" among the leaders of NCI. It derives from an intuitive sense that experts, even when they are well intentioned, tend to exploit, to misunderstand, and to impose their own values in a manner that does violence to the ideals of NCI. Rev. Sherrod, who has served NCI as the major leadership force almost since the beginning, has consistently insisted upon a policy of radical self determination. According to this view, the people must learn from doing, often from doing and failing and then trying again, with minimal interference and advice from the outside. Thus, if decisions are made by the board and not acted upon, it is because there has been insufficient popular readiness for action. According to this view, the success of NCI is to be measured not in terms of monetary profits or other easily measurable accomplishments, but rather in the personal growth, in the sense of self-confidence and dignity of the people.

Perhaps this sounds like rhetoric and yet there is ample evidence that NCI has conducted much of its business in the shadow of these principles. The fact is that the success of NCI, in the traditional sense of the word, has been severely constricted because of this approach. More than once has this policy cost heavily in financial terms and alienated well-intentioned but impatient friends.

Within the context of the quasi-caste system which continues to characterize most of the rural South, the word of the "man" (i.e., the white man) is experienced by most poor blacks as the expression of an absolute. That is the "man's" word and the power that is implicit within it is experienced as a fact rather than as an expression of opinion, or an idea.⁷ The presence and the words of the author, one of the few white

persons on the board of directors of NCI, have inevitably been received within the light of this experience. In theory, the danger rests at both extremes, either to accept the word of the white man uncritically, or to reject it out of hand. In this setting, whereas all members of NCI have consistently behaved in relation to each other (though not to the external world) as if this cross-racial issue had been fully resolved, in effect, it remains only a few inches beneath the surface. For each individual, depending on his particular experiences, background, and personality it continues as a different, unspoken problem.

The author began his association with NCI with a view of himself as a moderately experienced social administrator, social planner, and community organizer. He somewhat naively produced endless pages of plans, organizational models, and programmatic suggestions, hoping that one or another of these might take root or serve as the stimulus for new ideas or alternative approaches. Perhaps in some small sense that has happened. Yet, over the years, he has learned to assume an ever less assertive role, volunteering only specific, circumscribed skills, such as in proposal writing or in public relations. In meetings his approach has now become less one of submitting suggestions and plans, than aiming to remain alert to the opportunity to lend support to initiatives taken by others and of raising pertinent, but overlooked questions.

The short range effect of the social planning process has been to precariously keep NCI afloat, while providing exceptional opportunities for what Friedman (1973) has called "mutual learning", benefiting a relatively small number of rural people, black community leaders, and a few stray sheep (such as the author) within a unique experimental setting. . . .But, one day soon the whole enterprise may really take off and then become a part of a model for the much needed rural renaissance in America. (Toward a Platform for Rural America, 1975).

Conclusions

It might have been easier if the federal government had sold NCI some of its lands at \$2.00 an acre, much in the way that it sold land to white homesteaders in the 19th Century. (Public Land Law Review Commission, 1968). It would have been easier if the government had helped to establish a community development bank which makes low cost loans to small farmers and entrepreneurs, similar to the community development banks that the U.S. Government helps to sponsor in third world countries.⁸ If, as a result, sufficient front-end capital had been realized then a successful, self-liquidating housing program might have commenced at NCI years ago. (Kirshner and Morey, 1973). If the USDA had a different approach to small farms and if it were institutionally less racist (Marshall and Thompson, 1975) then everything would have been easier...

But it has not been so, and it will not be as long as most of the people in this country continue to overtly believe in inequality. For the present, the society is so structured that even where public actions are taken to ostensibly assist those who are poor, invariably the rich get richer and the powerful gain power. That is why radical initiatives must primarily emanate from action which includes the people at the roots. Sadly, for the moment, many of the poor, too, share in the belief in inequality. Only when we begin to see changes in this outlook, only when poor and unfree people⁹ begin to develop practical images of liberating institutional alternatives that meet the need of their lives, can we, together with them and as a part of them, begin to consider how to faithfully restructure the entire society, and build the New World.

The following are some of the major practice lessons that we have learned, to date, from the experience of NCI:

- # In working at the grass roots the planner/organizer must think and act in a manner which betrays his/her sincere conviction that she/he has at least as much to learn as to teach.
- # The planner/organizer must never allow him/herself to forget that what for the organizer is another project, for the people is their life: a particular project may fail, but life may not.
- # Non-coercive, radical social change is a long, tiresome process requiring great patience. Progress is not to be measured in months or years, but in generations.
- # In radical organizing among poor people survival itself sometimes becomes the major measure of success, not specific outputs. Out of survival over time may come the kind of individual and collective change that gives meaning to the entire effort. The practical result is likely to be one which is very different from that which had originally been intended.
- # The planner/organizer must have faith and trust in the people. This trust must exceed even the trust in his/her own knowledge. Especially poor people have a phenomenal capacity to cope in the face of adversity, one which far exceeds in importance our ability to help or to advise.

Notes

1. The Southwest Georgia Project is an offshot of SNCC. It predates NCI in Southwest Georgia and has, on the whole, a more direct, politically activist orientation. NCI was built, in large part, upon the social and political foundations created by SWGP.
2. In recent years some of the kibbutzim have begun to modify their original position with regard to children's houses.
3. For a more comprehensive discussion of the community land trust see, The Community Land Trust (1972).
4. The Jewish National Fund (JNF), created more than 70 years ago, functions like a community land trust. All kibbutzim and moshavim in Israel are built on land leased from JNF.
5. It is naive to think that poor people, because they are poor and have little to loose, are willing and able to take risks.
6. A black African observer, due to his marginal role, was in a unique position to report on these events. (Akingbade, 1972).
7. I am especially indebted to James A. Goodman, who read an early draft of this paper, for this interpretation.
8. In 1971, Senator Proxmire introduced legislation to this effect. (The National Community Development Act of 1971).
9. In this instance, the reference is not only to poor, rural blacks, but also to poor Whites, Chicanos, Native Americans, women, old people, indeed to that true majority of society which is, in effect, not yet fully free.

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