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SERVING OPPRESSED  
COMMUNITIES:  
THE SELF-HELP APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The self-help approach based upon author's thirteen years of association (as a community organizer, block club member, investigator, consultant) with East Akron Block Clubs, is presented as a method of helping the oppressed communities help themselves. The paper includes relevant information from a 1980 survey conducted by the author to understand the dynamics of effective neighborhood leadership in this area. The sample consisting of 78 respondents included: 20 presidents, 11 vice presidents, 19 secretaries, 14 treasurers, and 14 regular members of 20 active Block Clubs serving a population of approximately 5000 people.

\* The self-help approach is not intended to be applicable to all communities. It is not appropriate for those areas where the urban decay is apparently insurmountable. In essence, the self-help approach is presented as a practical-realistic approach to serve only those oppressed geographical areas where, 1) a community can be identified, 2) the residents indicate a genuine interest in community welfare, and 3) a majority of residents are willing to work with their neighbors for achieving a better community life for all.

Introduction

The East Akron Community House, a Settlement House in Akron, Ohio, invited the author to "develop a program of community development with a view to achieve social justice and

equal opportunity through democratic processes and non-violent methods." This work began in early 1970 in an area that reflected years of general neglect where residents complained about stray dogs, run-down dilapidated housing, scattered rubbish, congestion, abandoned cars, vacant houses, lack of open spaces, dark and dangerous streets, and a continuous smell of chemicals in the air. However, a closer look revealed that poverty, crime, powerlessness, and, above all, a sense of hopelessness were the deep-rooted problems. In spite of the seemingly insurmountable obstacles, area residents were surprisingly warm and friendly, demonstrated genuine pride in their homes, and unmistakably indicated a readiness for change. These ingredients pointed to a situation where the existing dormant human resource could be motivated to engage in a self-help process with a definite outcome of a satisfying community life in the foreseeable future.

The author left the East Akron Community House in September, 1971, after eight Block Clubs and a Council of Block Club Presidents were established and their membership was actively engaged in neighborhood improvement projects. Since then, author's association with Block Clubs has included membership in one of the Block Clubs, periodical review of the process, occasional consultation, and attendance in selected neighborhood activities.

Akron, often referred to as the "Rubber Capital" of the world, is located in the heavily industrialized Northeastern Ohio. Its present population (1) is 237,077, a decline of 38,348 persons during the last 10 years, indicating the consequences of rubber and other related industry cutting back or moving out of Akron.

There are approximately 22,000 people in

four neighborhoods of East Akron. One neighborhood of approximately 5,000 people is situated in the immediate vicinity of East Akron Community House (the only Settlement House in the city of Akron). It is a predominantly black neighborhood where the block clubs are located, and is referred to as East Akron Neighborhood in this paper.

The East Akron Neighborhood was 20 to 25 years old when East Akron Community House was established in 1915 to aid the assimilation and acculturation of European immigrants. Within one generation, they prospered and moved out of the neighborhood. The second group of people who came to live in this neighborhood were Appalachian whites. They followed the earlier residents' example and left the neighborhood within the decade of 1940-1950. Black people are the third population group to find their first homes here (2); many of them are long-time residents and would like to live in this neighborhood as long as they can.

East Akron Community House determined in 1969, "to muster the resources and skills needed to enable residents to influence and/or control decision making process and neighborhood serving institutions." (3) During the same time period settlement houses around the country, in response to their constituencies' demands, were in the process of or were working toward neighborhood control. It was also during this time when maximum feasible participation concept propounded by War on Poverty was being seriously debated and analyzed. (4)

### Community Development

In East Akron Neighborhood, a program of community development was seen as a method of motivating people directly affected by neighborhood problems to organize and undertake

well-planned action steps as a group, for dealing with such problems. Such a definition may seem to be somewhat narrow, but is realistic and manageable. The term community referred to, "an aggregate of families and individuals settled in a fairly compact and contiguous area, with significant elements of common life, as shown by manners, customs, traditions, and modes of speech." The word development implied the element of self-help and citizen participation in a decision making process for the growth of community spirit and community activities. Citizen participation meant active involvement of individual residents in joint endeavors for better living conditions within the neighborhood.

Community development as a method of solving neighborhood problems is based on the assumption that social change can be brought about more effectively in geographical areas where people live, since the well-being of an individual is directly related to the place he calls home, the street he lives on, and the neighborhood where he raises his family. Geographic communities comprised of populations with multiple needs, need assistance in recognizing their common needs, and organizing as a means to achieve common goals assumes pooling of resources, reinforcement of self-confidence and development of a sense of power to deal effectively with neighborhood problems. Cooperation among residents is somewhat expected. However, cooperation is not seen as an ultimate good, individual efforts are still valid. (5)

### Organizing

The idea of neighborhood organizing was not new to the community, since attempts were made in the past by concerned residents to get together with their neighbors. Additionally, some service agencies in the area had taken steps to organize residents around specific

issues. Such attempts had invariably been a passing phenomenon. The most recent attempt by the Community Action program of the War on Poverty had not materialized. During initial contacts, the resident position to the idea but had indicated some apprehensiveness about it. (6) Obviously, organizing was a feasible idea. But, maintenance of the groups organized was the challenge.

It was therefore assumed that organized groups are likely to keep up their initial momentum if the local leadership is developed to meet the challenge. In a general way, leaders who could work with people and stimulate them and could help the groups use all the abilities and experiences of its members (7) were not known to the residents. On the basis of a preliminary study it was found that there were not many who had such a specific minimum leadership experience. There were some with church-related experience, others had political experience at the precinct level, and quite a few had a life-long informal problem-solving experience. Their methods of helping included listening and referral. Apparently, there was a need for development of existing leaders.

Since residents were keen to meet with their neighbors on the block to share common concerns and to get to know each other, the strategy to organize, therefore, focussed on initial socializing. It was assumed that once the residents got together appropriate leadership would develop if appropriate steps were taken. It was also understood that socializing as a means to achieve the goal of initial organizing could become an end in it-self unless the organizer skillfully identified rallying points, to develop ideological commitment to achieve social change.

, Organizing focuses on the location of common problems and joint efforts aimed at

their solution. Ecklein and Lauffer's view of organizing "as a means of achieving and guiding local control over problems that originate elsewhere in society" (8) appeared to be in tune with a genuine desire of the residents to exert some local control on those facets of community life that were historically directed from outside; such as education, employment opportunities, housing, social services, and political process of two major political parties. Neighborhood improvement, as an overall non-controversial and worthwhile initial goal emerged as a top priority and Block Organization was accepted as a means to achieve it. The idea to hold meetings in a house on the Block had a tremendous appeal and was perhaps in line with Kahn's thinking that "block organizing is a highly manageable technique usually an urban technique." (9) The term Block Club was readily agreed upon, as everybody seemed to be familiar with the term. It was understood to mean a group of concerned residents who get together to improve their block by working together. In view of the limited resources and the experimental nature of the project, 25 block area comprising of 4-5,000 people with census tract 5034 as its core area was determined as the program implementation area; it was chosen for its proximity to the Community House, resident's knowledge of the agency, and readily available demographic information. Streets in the implementation area were designated as blocks on the basis of a face-to-face relationship and identification with the street as one's residence. To create a general sense of accomplishment in the neighborhood, a pilot block was selected. The resident concerns on this block appeared to be resolvable with minimum effort and the residents were willing to make that effort. However, it was understood that residents would need assistance in: getting together, identifying common problems, building relationships, finding resources, and selecting action steps toward problem resolu-

tion. It was also assumed that pilot block accomplishments would generate a positive environment for organizing the neighborhood.

Community Organizers have successfully used inclusion of formal leaders in developing community associations (10) since enhancement of social relationships is seen as bringing about greater capacity to deal with common problems. This approach was slightly modified to suit the East Akron neighborhood. It was assumed that the realistic way to motivate the residents to come forward and participate in a neighborhood organization effort would be through identification of a contact person who may or may not be a formal leader. The contact persons were seen as concerned citizens who are willing to volunteer their time and effort to achieve changes on the block. Often, they are long time residents and feel a sense of belongingness towards their neighborhood, they are well-known in the area and are generally trusted.

The organization was primarily to be neighborhood based and would not be equipped to use conflict and confrontation as deliberate strategies in its formative stage. In that sense the block clubs organization was to be different from five types of contemporary mass organizations; Alinsky-type programs (1959), the mass organization as part of civil rights movement (1963, 1968), the Mobilization for Youth (1964), the Community Action Program of War on Poverty (1965), and The Welfare Rights Movement (1966). (11) The Community organizer, "a qualified social work practitioner with specialized training in community organization", (12) was to be a catalyst in the initial stages of organization.

Block Club-Council of Block Club Presidents, a two level, input and feedback structure, was envisioned as the only grassroots organization accessible to the residents to



voice their concerns, seek help and support, volunteer for services, and to participate in a decision making process to deal with those concerns. Block clubs would deal with block concerns and the Council of Block Club Presidents would have the responsibility to deal with the problems affecting the entire program implementation area. It was hypothesized that such a viable human resource structure would develop maturity, creativity, flexibility, and confidence as it began to undertake problem solving activities. Development of such a working structure became the primary objective of the community development effort and any problem resolution was seen as a by-product during early stages.

The methodology to organize block clubs developed as a carefully implemented step-by-step process that included: an on-foot survey, (13) a working map, problem observation, informal meetings, house calls, establishing linkages, unit gatherings, finding and getting natural leaders (14) interested, resident involvement in the planning committees, and block formation meetings. The first eight block clubs were organized during 1970-71 and a Council of Block Club Presidents was formed. This concluded the first phase of organization, a neighborhood structure was in place and ready to work for neighborhood improvement. Its first major challenge came sooner than anticipated. The structure successfully mobilized human resources to close a notorious bar in the neighborhood in early 1972. (15) The presence of the bar had created danger to life and property for more than a decade. This single event strengthened and stabilized the block club-council leadership and created an overall environment of neighborhood power and self-confidence in the community. The organizing phase was completed in 1975 when 22 block clubs were organized. As the block clubs got organized, the Council of Block Club Presidents was expanded accordingly to accom-

modate each new block club.

A summary of their accomplishments (16) is presented to illustrate the wide range of programs and activities of Block Clubs and the Council. This is not a total list.

### Recreation and Cultural

Over the years, the Block Clubs have developed meaningful, locally suited recreational and cultural programs that include an annual Labor Day parade and beauty pageant. A softball league, summer picnic, family night, and Christmas light decoration contest are some of the other regular features.

The sustained efforts of the Block Clubs have resulted in providing much needed three parks for the neighborhood: Homestead mini park, Talbot-Whitney mini park, and Joy Park.

### Health and Sanitation

Rodent population in the neighborhood is now under control. Trash barrels been placed on vacant lots and rotten trees have been removed. Stray dogs are no longer a nuisance.

### Political Action

A neighborhood elementary school was reopened after remaining closed for one year. Voter registration is a regular activity of the Block Clubs. Police community relations have improved. Abandoned cars have been removed. High gas billings are protested, and appropriately adjusted. Candidates for political office seek Block Club leaders for support.

### Neighborhood Beautification

Lawncare, flower gardens, street paving sidewalks projects, proper maintenance of home

lawns, clean-up and fix-up projects, planting and trimming trees on devil strips, are some of the ongoing activities for beautifying the neighborhood.

### Safety

Missing traffic signs and additional street lighting have been secured. Neighborhood Citizens Alert Program to deter house burglaries is in place. Block homes for school children during emergencies are available. Overweight trucks are no longer driving on residential streets.

### Housing

The housing task force has secured homestead exemptions, grants, and loans. A number of vacant houses have been rehabilitated.

### Miscellaneous

Other activities include a community sponsored annual family Christmas dinner, telephone and personal contact with shut-ins, Kelly Avenue street extension project, food buckets for Christmas and Thanksgiving, assistance to disaster victims, raising money for children who need shoes, and much needed help to senior citizens by filling forms, cutting grass, raking leaves, shovelling snow, and providing transportation.

Block Club-Neighborhood Council is primarily a self-help project and is very cost effective. East Akron Community House provides staff services for the Council of Block Club Presidents and assists Block Clubs as and when necessary. Local universities and colleges place their students for field work experience here and local newspapers have written about the project favorably. Other citizen groups in the city have made inquiries.

The Community Organization effort initiated in 1970 has stood the test of time during the last 13 years. It is alive and well and will achieve significant objectives in the near future. The success of this project is primarily due to the effective pattern that has developed over the years as a result of an on-the-job training provided by the Block Club-Council of Block Club Presidents structure.

### Citizen Participation & Leadership Development

Each block club has four officers: President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer. Generally, at least one additional person gets involved with block club leadership. This person may not be interested in running for office or does not get elected for office. Taking into consideration the entire Block Clubs organization (20 active Block Clubs, and a Council of Block Club Presidents), more than 100 persons are involved in leadership roles on a day-to-day basis. Each block club President is also a member of the Council of Block Club Presidents and gets to be nominated to at least one of the 8 standing committees of the Council. The Block Club-Council of Block Club Presidents provides at least three levels of participation; very active participation for block club presidents; active participation for 3 officers and one member of each block club; and regular participation for the remaining membership of the clubs. During any one month, 200 to 250 residents of the neighborhood are involved in a decision making process directly related to neighborhood programs, activities, and problem solving. On a short notice, a group of 100 persons can be mobilized to go to the city hall for a meeting.

Officer's training, orientation workshops, refresher courses, and overnight retreats for

planning and policy formulation are regular feature of the organization. This has enhanced the personal growth of a large number of residents in addition to the development of effective leadership for block clubs and the council.

To collect the significant data regarding the Block Club Leadership, a survey was undertaken in 1980 wherein 78 leaders participated. The sample included: 20 presidents; 11 vice presidents, 19 secretaries, 14 treasurers, and 14 regular members of 20 active Block Clubs serving a population of approximately 5000 people. It was found that 72% of the leaders had less than \$10,000 income per year, only 50% had completed high school, 80% were not born in Ohio, 63% were 55 years and over, 27% were male and 73% were female. The findings substantiate the assumption that local natural leadership can be effectively activated if provided an opportunity for true participation. A direct relationship to high education, high income, or younger age was not established.

### Conclusions

The main assumption of the self-help approach--that people can be organized around common concerns in geographical areas where they live and an attainable problem solving program can be identified, initiated, and accomplished on a self-help basis--is substantiated by the survey. A second assumption that a vigorous neighborhood based organization can be developed if the accomplished projects are truly community identified and community initiated is also well documented.

The first Block Clubs organized in early seventies were seen as vehicles of change on a long term basis rather than organizations built around specific issues. It was assumed that Block Clubs would become a part of the

neighborhood life and an effective leadership pattern would emerge. The survey indicates that prior to the organization of Block Clubs, only a few individuals had some indirect leadership experience at the neighborhood level. However, church-related and political party work were the two most common leadership experiences of the respondents. The Block Club activities and projects over the years, ranging from achieving a better garbage pick-up service and meaningful advocacy and appropriate political activism to reopening of a closed elementary school, seem to have accomplished the objective of providing a natural setting for training neighborhood leadership.

During initial contacts, residents had indicated their willingness to meet with other neighbors on the block to share common concerns and to get to know each other. It was feared that once the block residents got together, socializing as a means to achieve block organizing could become an end in itself unless other rallying points were skillfully identified to develop ideological commitment to achieve social change. The survey indicated that the local leadership was aware of this possibility, and maintained a well planned balance between the resident's need to socialize and their commitment to achieve change.

The Self-Help Approach is not intended to be applicable to all communities. It is not appropriate for those areas where the urban decay is apparently insurmountable. In essence, the Self-Help Approach is a practical-realistic approach to serve only those oppressed geographical areas where, 1) a community can be identified, 2) the residents indicate a genuine interest in community welfare, and 3) a majority of residents are willing to work with their neighbors for achieving a better community life for all. The Self-Help ap-

proach is also based on the premise that residents need assistance in getting organized and that social workers as catalysts can activate the dormant strength of selected communities by assisting the local natural leadership for initiating the organization process.

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15. For a detailed discussion refer to Kaul, Mohan L., "Block Clubs and Social Action: A Case Study in Community Conflict," in Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, (March, 1976), 4, 437-450.

16. Information in this section is based on the data supplied by Grady Appleton, Director, Neighborhood Organization and Development, East Akron.