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Community Organizing and Comprehensive Community Initiatives

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In order for comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) to be sustained beyond their initial funding period, they must "take hold" in a community and develop the capacity of community members to control and guide the community-building process. Given that CCIs are usually formulated largely by sources external to the community, such as private foundations and government agencies, it can be difficult for CCIs to achieve the necessary level of local participation. Furthermore, conflicts over the dynamic of power within the CCI, and differences over internal versus external interest, can make interaction between external agents and community members problematic. The author suggests that CCIs can increase their chances of promoting effective, sustainable community development through the devotion of resources to a community organizing process that is implemented early in the initiative, and remains an integrated part of the search to identify and build upon the assets of the community.

Introduction

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) face a common dilemma: How can an externally initiated effort develop and facilitate the local control, support, and capacity necessary for an initiative to be effectively based and sustained in a community? Although CCIs target community-level change, they are formulated largely by sources external to the community, such as private foundations and government agencies. In order to initiate a process of community development and reform that can be

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sustained beyond the period of initial funding, the initiative faces the challenge of taking hold in a community and working to develop the capacity of community members to control and guide the community-building process.¹ Given that these efforts are initiated, for the most part, *outside* the community, how can they most effectively achieve this level of genuine local participation and work effectively to build local capacity?²

In this essay, we will focus on community organizing as an integral element of the solution to this dilemma. Although there is substantial agreement about the value of community mobilization and organization in any initiative that seeks to build community, no consensus exists about the use of community organizing as a tool in the work of CCIs. Few initiatives have dedicated significant resources to developing effective community organizing, although some have done more than others. In this essay, we suggest that CCIs can make better use of the community organizing process to increase their chances of promoting effective, sustainable community development.

We consider community organizing to be an ongoing *process* rather than merely a *phase* or *outreach strategy* of a community-building effort. We suggest that this broader conception of community organizing may be the key to the successful grounding of the initiative in the community. Our objective here is not to discuss the mechanics of community organizing but to make an argument for a more effective use of community organizing as an integral element of community-building initiatives. We do not seek to detail the *how* of organizing but rather the *why*. We hope that this essay can serve as a helpful framework for others to discuss issues of detail such as developing an organizing strategy and selecting community organizers.

Defining Community Organizing

In contrast to models of organizing that rely mainly on confrontational tactics, target a limited set of short-term issues, and may leave few lasting skills in the hands of community members, we conceive of community organizing as a long-term, relationship-building and capacity-building process that attempts to identify, include, and build upon a range of key resources, both

internal and external to the community. The key to organizing for CCIs is effectively engaging a broad range of community members and helping them to develop and build upon the skills and relationships necessary to sustain the community-building effort beyond the life of the initiative. By our definition, a community organizing process thus includes: the identification of key local resources, the gathering of information about the community context, the development and training of local leaders to prepare them to serve effectively as representatives of the community and as full partners in an initiative, and the strengthening of the network of the various interests both internal and external to a community. By this definition, however, few CCIs make an early and sustained effort in this regard.

Effective Community Organizing for CCIs

An organizing process that aims to identify local resources and build local capacity is crucial to *all* elements of the initiative. However, in many of the current CCIs, community organizing is considered a strategy for broad resident outreach that is usually initiated only once programs have been designed and launched. A better use of community organizing's strengths would be its integration into the *entire* process of initiative design, planning, and implementation. To illustrate this point we will consider the utility of organizing to some of the key elements of initiative planning and implementation.

Defining the target community. The target community for an initiative is often selected by actors external to the neighborhood who may lack complete information or understanding about the diversity of individuals who reside within the target area and, more important, how those individuals interact and coexist with each other. Most often the target area for the initiative is selected on the basis of preexisting boundaries, such as census tracts or neighborhood designations, without reference to the actual patterns of interaction within those boundaries. Often, decisions about target area and its needs are made on the basis of public perceptions about a community, which may differ from the realities experienced by those who live in that area, leaving open

the possibility that initial decisions about the initiative will not advance the goal of a community sense of ownership.

One clear role for organizing is to learn more about the networks and relationships among the individuals and groups who live and work within the targeted geographic area. This approach would both engage the community and clarify the definitions of community characteristics by answering questions such as the following: What meaning do the preexisting boundaries hold for the residents of the area? To what extent do the physical boundaries chosen by the initiative coincide with meaningful patterns of social, political, and economic interaction by the residents of that area? What is the nature of the different communities that coexist within the larger community and how do they interrelate? Do existing networks and patterns of interaction promote a strong sense of community among the residents, and if not, what potential exists for community members to develop and work toward a shared vision?

In one initiative, for example, by engaging neighborhood residents in the process of delineating boundaries for the initiative, the decision was made to designate both a core and secondary target area. These areas were chosen both on the basis of residents' indications of the community areas in the most dire need of development and the range of community assets that should be included within the geographical scope of the initiative.

Understanding the community context. Many CCIs explicitly seek to build upon existing strengths in a community rather than looking upon development as a deficit-correcting exercise. Successfully building on community strengths requires not only identifying assets but also understanding what it will take to effectively mobilize and coordinate those assets. Moreover, while much of the rationale for selecting a community may be based on external perceptions and available data, a workable strategic plan and set of priorities for the initiative will require an understanding of the residents' own experience of their community.

Better understanding the community context—especially the hidden resources of a community (e.g. informal leaders, underground economy, informal networks)—is an essential part of determining where local strengths lie and how residents view the

community. Community organizing is a tool specifically designed for bringing this information to light. Through talking with residents and stakeholders, an organizer can help determine how things really work in this community—where informal networks of communication and interaction exist, what residents perceive as their greatest needs, what their experience has been with past development efforts, and how they can be integrated into a new one.

Even the process of surveying the community, if used with organizing in mind, can have additional benefits. In the preliminary stages of one multi-site community development initiative, a series of training sessions were held to help community residents develop the skills required to conduct a community asset survey of the neighborhood. The community plan that followed was formulated, in large part, based on the information gathered from the survey. The planning team included those who had participated in the survey and those who had informed their interviewers that they would like to be a part of the subsequent planning process. Not only did this survey process result in the identification of common areas of concern and the growth of new bonds and relationships between residents, but those who participated in the survey developed new skills and a capacity to serve their neighborhood in an important way.

Governance structure for the initiative. Many CCIs aim to include a range of players—residents, agency heads, business owners, and government officials—in the governance of the initiative, often explicitly stating that those individuals traditionally shut out of decision-making channels will be ensured a meaningful role in the decision-making process. This effort at community-based governance of an initiative is key to the facilitation of eventual community ownership. An effective organizing process will help a CCI reach beyond those local actors who already have connections to the external power structure to reach informal leaders who will bring legitimacy, knowledge of the community, and access to a broader constituency to the decision-making body. By exploring the networks and systems beyond the community, organizing can also identify players from outside the community who would bring important skills, knowledge, and resources as

members of the governance structure. In short, by dedicating the resources and time necessary to gather information about the community and its members, a community organizing process can help identify who should be involved, how they can be recruited, and what skill development, if any, those individuals would need to participate meaningfully in the initiative.

Building the capacity and skills of residents and stakeholders. It is not enough for CCIs simply to identify the existing and potential leaders in a community. Building the capacity of individuals to carry out the tasks associated with the implementation of an initiative is an explicit goal of CCIs. In practice, this means identifying or creating opportunities for the development of skills such as conflict resolution, meeting facilitation, administering funds, and community organizing. It is with these skills that residents and stakeholders can begin to assess and develop their own power and ultimately control and direct resources in the community. The chance to build skills also enhances residents' belief that they can control and affect their own destiny in a positive way.

A sense of community. A challenge faced by all CCIs is developing and sustaining the support and involvement of the community residents and stakeholders. It has been argued that a stronger sense of community leads to more effective community action. Certainly, for the initiative to successfully gain the cooperation and input of those most directly impacted by the effort, residents and stakeholders must be encouraged to feel a part of a shared effort. An organizing process can determine the factors that lead residents to identify positively with being members of the community, the forms of social interaction that reinforce feelings of belonging and membership, and the mechanisms through which the residents of the community care for and share with each other, and it can help to facilitate opportunities to build on existing networks.

For resident participation to be sustained throughout the life of the initiative, one of the objectives should be to work toward meeting the immediate needs of the community as identified by the residents. Organizing around a specific short-term issue, such as trash removal or the boycott of a community business,

may effectively generate short-term interest and participation. The challenge is to turn short-term support into a commitment to a long-term effort through the collective development of a shared vision.

Challenges to Community Organizing in CCIs

Why is community organizing not used more effectively in CCIs? In part, this is due to a limited appreciation of the utility of organizing for building capacity and developing community support. However, it is also due to several factors that challenge the implementation of an effective community organizing process. In this section, we briefly examine some of the key challenges to community organizing in CCIs.

Power and community control. While much of the rhetoric describing these initiatives indicates that power will be transferred, at least in part, to community residents and stakeholders, the power dynamics between external actors such as private foundations and local government and internal actors such as community-based organizations, human service agencies, community businesses, and community residents make power sharing extremely complicated, if not problematic. Not only might there be conflicts between internal and external interests, but there are often competing agendas both among internal participants and among external participants. To the extent that the initiative is explicitly intended eventually to be owned and controlled by members of the community, the conflicts may be heightened both on the part of external interests reluctant to relinquish control and among internal interests who seek to control new resources.

Limited resources. Few of the current CCIs allocate funding specifically for community organizing. Often community organizing is the first item to be cut from an initiative budget. Staff efforts to dedicate the maximum amount of funding toward operating and program costs can leave little funding for the process of learning about the community and organizing community members to participate in the initiative.

Time. Just as important as dedicating sufficient resources to fund community organizing is the dedication of the time to initiate and develop an effective process. Often, the pressure for

programmatic action and visible outcomes leaves little time for the incremental and often time consuming process of exploring the community context and identifying and training local leaders.

Strategy. Though we have argued for a broader conception of community organizing, we have not attempted, in this paper, to outline the mechanics of an organizing strategy. This leaves unclear *how* the tasks we have outlined above are actually carried out. An important challenge for a CCI is to select those who will carry out the organizing tasks and integrate them into the work of the initiative. Critical questions about the mechanics of community organizing that deserve exploration include the following: Who should carry out the various organizing tasks? What experience and skills are needed in order for the organizers to be effective? What is the best make-up of an organizing team? How can the organizers best learn about the community context? How should the organizers negotiate and carry out the multiple roles of information gathering, recruitment, mediation, leadership development, and training?

Conclusion

In order to develop the local control, support, and capacity necessary for a CCI to be based and sustained in a community, a more effective use of community organizing is needed. A community organizing process, as we have presented it here, should focus on building the capacity of community members to design, implement, and sustain the initiative. The organizing process should seek to identify and build upon the assets of the community and work to develop existing networks and links to outside resources. In order to be effective, it is important that the organizing process be initiated early and made an integral part of the initiative. Through this type of organizing, CCIs can improve their potential to become supported and sustained by community members, and the mission of each effort will no longer be simply maintaining or meeting the goals of an initiative, but it will instead be to carry out a plan owned by the community that is designed to ensure its healthy existence.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this essay, by “community,” we mean the geographical area targeted by an initiative, and by “community members,” we refer to the range of individuals who live and work in that targeted area.
2. We do not mean to imply that community-building efforts initiated from *within* the community do not require a similar focus on community organizing—however, our focus in this paper is on the CCI phenomenon and the particular tensions raised by the inside-outside structure of CCIs.

