COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND DEVELOPMENT

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Second Edition

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Community Organizing and Development

SECOND EDITION

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Preface

Community organizing means mobilizing people to solve their own problems. Through community organizing, people learn that their problems have social causes and that fighting back is a more reasonable, dignified approach than passive acceptance and personal alienation. Community organizing enhances knowledge of how to pressure government and business, enables people to set up their own locally controlled organizations, and increases political power. As people learn that working together in progressive organizations is successful, they gain confidence that they can fight and win and that, collectively, they can resolve many of their problems.

This book is for people who have decided to spend their energy in community organizing. It is not intended to substitute for experience but to alert future organizers to needed skills, options, and possible problems. We offer a variety of principles, organizing models, and patterns for development as well as examples of successful organizations and those that have failed.

An organizer's job is demanding, whether the person works full-time with neighbors in rebuilding a community or part-time with an environmental organization to prevent dumping poisonous chemicals. The job of organizing requires patience, knowledge, and experience. The results may be long in coming and the glory transitory. So, why do people do it? How do they become involved?

The touchstone of community organizing is the existence of a problem, for which the victims typically are blamed. They are pressured to accept their situation rather than to fight it. The bitterness that results from being told to accept what is to someone else's advantage may motivate a lifetime desire to battle oppression through community organizing.

Individuals may be motivated to work through community organizing by their own experience or empathy for the experience of others. Consider a woman who works and leaves her child with a neighbor. The child is hurt in a fire. The mother is told she is a bad parent and is forced to bear the guilt of a situation she cannot resolve. But the accident was not really her fault. Inadequate daycare facilities and discrimination against women make it difficult to earn enough money to pay for child care. Her

problem is socially caused and susceptible to collective solution. The injustice of blaming individuals who are the victims of socially caused problems creates a slow-burning anger that keeps community organizers at their task.

In this book we present an approach to organizing in changing political and social settings. We try to bridge the gap between the first-hand experiences of organizers and academic knowledge about community change, social mobilization, and organizations. We call attention to the choices—the tradeoffs—that community organizers are likely to meet during their careers.

We balance descriptions of stirring protest actions with the day-in–day-out activities necessary for the continual success of an organization. Action campaigns are the dramatic, visible side of community organizing. We all have images of protesters chaining themselves to bulldozers to block the destruction of a historic building. We can picture students sitting in at their university's administrative center. We can imagine Saul Alinsky's scheme of a "bathroom-in," in which protesters tie up the restroom at a public airport until their demands are met.

Protests are important tactics in organizing, but successful community organizers need more than a flair for dramatic action. The newsworthy social action campaign is the culmination of many months of daily effort in building an organization and mastering the political environment. Organizers must run complicated and changing organizations while dealing with politicians and bureaucrats. Building an organization is hard work, requiring competence with many separate tools: mobilizing the membership, following a budget, raising funds, running meetings, and reaching democratic decisions among people with diverse interests. Once mastered, these skills provide a basis for accomplishing longer-term development projects, so that people working together can do things for themselves, such as organizing a food cooperative to purchase higher-quality food at lower cost, providing job training for new skills, or maintaining a network in which the elderly help each other.

CHANGES IN THE SECOND EDITION

In this second edition, we have provided a tighter flow of the chapters and updated examples. We pay more attention to social action campaigns, coalition formation, and problems facing the organizers, and less attention to the technical tools of social research. We contrast separate models for organizing and examine contending philosophies of direct action. Three new chapters have been added: the historic context of progressive organizing, community-based economic development, and the future of organizing. In addition, the second edition reflects three changes in perspective:

- *Progressive Organizations.* We have increased the emphasis on issue-based organizations concerned with civil rights, feminism, environmentalism, housing, economic development, and public interest groups working to achieve openness in government. In these conservative times, it is impossible to separate problems in neighborhoods and communities from broader social issues.
- *The History of Organizing.* We pay greater attention to the historical continuity of community work. Future organizers should find the slow but steady progress of

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community organizing energizing and the vitality and ability of community organizing to rebound from defeats encouraging.

- *Community Organizers and the Professionalization of Social Work.* In this day of computers, community-business partnerships, and complexity in governmental social programs, professional knowledge is vital. In this edition we emphasize the contribution of professionally trained social workers as teachers, supporters, and resource persons for community organizations. Professional education in community organizing must communicate a respect for others, a respect that enables organizers with formal training to work with those less educated without imposing their own values. Training in organizing must teach flexibility in approaching problems and dealing with changing circumstances. And, most important, learning professional skills involves developing empathy for others.

THE CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

This book contains six parts. The first presents our approach to community organizing, along with its history. In Part II, we discuss how collective actions can increase personal empowerment, describe progressive organizations in different community setting, and examine the organizer's role in bringing about needed changes.

Part III provides background on the political and social environment in which organizing takes place and describes tools for finding out about the problems facing particular communities. Part IV presents techniques for mobilization and then explains how organizational meetings become a tool for encouraging collective involvement.

In Part V, we discuss protest and pressure tactics to compel government and businesses to accommodate community needs. In Part VI, we turn to the developmental model to examine how progressive organizations run their own community-based programs. Particular attention is paid to using the tools of organizing to bring about economic development for social change.

In the epilogue, we present our hopes for organizing and development and our concerns about future problems. This concluding chapter communicates our philosophy that organizing is an ongoing and adaptive process that survives because it reflects the needs of people in a changing society.

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Community organizing is a search for social power and an effort to combat perceived helplessness through learning that what appears personal is often political. Organizing is a way of collectively solving problems like unemployment, deteriorated housing, or sexism and racism. The message of organizing is that a better world is achievable if people work together as a community.

In the first part of the book, we place current goals and values of community organizing in their historic traditions. Chapter 1 introduces our definition of community development. Chapter 2 recounts the history of community organizing. The history of organizing provides a source for optimism, with its numerous illustrations of the success of the downtrodden against the dominant, and the poor against the rich.

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1 The Goals of Community Organizing

A lone Greenpeace rower challenges a nuclear ship; neighborhood groups pressure city hall for affordable housing; grandmothers, mothers, and daughters march on Washington to protest court decisions on abortion rights; residents demand recompense for homes and health lost to toxic wastes; environmentalists strive to protect the trees and hills in the Northwest from clear cuts. Community actions are part of our daily lives, a part of the evening news.

Community organizing has the power to transform society. Successful grass-roots movements of blacks, workers, feminists, and gays have secured and implemented legal rights. Community organizations address problems such as a lack of affordable housing, drug abuse, discrimination, and lack of access to health care. Organizing helps develop people's skills, their sense of efficacy and competence, and their sense of self-worth. Community organizing creates a capacity for democracy and for sustained social change. It can make society more adaptable and governments more accountable.

PEOPLE, PROBLEMS, AND POWER

Community organizing means bringing people together to combat shared problems and to increase their say about decisions that affect their lives. *Community development* occurs when people form their own organizations to provide a long-term capacity for problem solving.

People face a variety of socially caused problems. Urban renewal programs may destroy housing for the poor. Gangs may terrorize the elderly. Housing discrimination may concentrate the poor and minorities in neighborhoods served by inadequate school systems. The combined burdens of child rearing and earning a living are falling increasingly on women, but women have more difficulty getting jobs that pay enough to support a family. Many industries are leaving communities, causing widespread unemployment. These and many other problems can motivate community action.

Community organizing helps people overcome the feeling that they face problems alone or that they are to blame for their problems. Community organizing combats the sense of helplessness people feel in dealing with the problems that confront them.

Why People Feel Helpless

We expect people to feel helpless in authoritarian regimes, but people may feel intimidated and helpless even in a democracy. Although they perceive injustice and seethe with resentment, people may feel so powerless they don't think about coming together to solve shared problems.

People feel powerless because their problems are complex and require knowledge they often lack. Whom do you fight when a city development agency, working with national real estate promoters, destroys neighborhood housing to build a shopping mall made accessible by a highway funded by a state agency? What happens if a chemical company chooses a site for a toxic waste disposal near a town's supply of clean water, or if the public hospital is deluged with acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) victims, or if the economically dispossessed mix with the mentally handicapped to form a new and highly visible group of homeless people? Feeling helpless is natural when faced with such overwhelming problems.

Some people feel helpless because they blame themselves for problems they did not cause. Though newly unemployed steelworkers know a distant corporation shut their mill, many of them blame themselves for their misfortunes: "If only I were more deserving or worked elsewhere or had a different set of skills, this would not have happened." Battered women and victims of rape often react in a similar way. "If I had been a better wife, prepared tastier foods, or looked prettier, perhaps he would not have hit me." Or, "Maybe my clothes were too provocative; the police said I shouldn't have been walking by that park at night."

It is to the perpetrator's advantage when victims blame themselves. Self-blame among women allows abusive men to avoid the consequences of their actions. These violent men avoid divorce, avoid thinking of themselves as violent, and avoid imprisonment when they have done real damage. Similarly, unemployed workers who blame themselves allow companies that shut plants to continue to wreak havoc on the communities that have provided them with a home and labor force. Blaming themselves for circumstances they did not cause makes many people helpless, because they cannot respond constructively until they admit that someone or something else is at fault.

Fear of retaliation is a powerful explanation for why many people do not raise their voices in protest. People who marched for civil rights had to face hostile police, who dispersed them with water cannons and set dogs to attack them. Their homes were bombed and their lives threatened. Bosses sometimes fire people who are identified as troublemakers. The impact of such firings is not lost on those who remain. Retaliation may include arrests of those provoked into violence, planting false evidence, disseminating harmful rumors, and blackballing—that is, circulating lists of known "troublemakers" to employers, to prevent the person from being hired.

In part, the reason people suffer in silence and fail to protest is that they have been taught that those in authority must be right and questioning authority is wrong. Those

in charge, whether government officials or business leaders, maintain their positions by claiming they represent legitimate authority and cannot and should not be challenged. As Piven and Cloward describe:

> An elaborate system of beliefs and ritual behaviors . . . defines for people what is right and what is wrong and why; what is possible and what is impossible. . . . Because this superstructure of beliefs and rituals is evolved in the context of unequal power, it is inevitable that beliefs and rituals reinforce inequality, by rendering the powerful divine and the challengers evil. (Piven & Cloward, 1977, p. 1)

Even when people earnestly want to protest the conditions they live under and solve the problems they face, they often don't know how. People have little experience with or information about the process of protest—making posters, putting out newsletters, contacting the press, handling permits, and the like. The traditions of protest are downplayed in the schools to avoid threatening "the superstructure of beliefs and rituals" that support those in power.

Another reason why people feel helpless is that they are often dependent on precisely those that are causing them harm. Citizens understand that their families are being poisoned by dirty air, undrinkable water, and tainted food. They worry about the effects of industrial wastes on their health but are unwilling to antagonize the companies that provide their jobs. Wives who are abused stay in a marriage because they cannot figure out how to support themselves and their children without their husband's income.

This state of perceived helplessness is reinforced by the continuing de-skilling of the labor force, which is a product of industrialization and urbanization. As people took routine jobs in factories, they gradually lost the skills that made them self-sufficient on farms—repairing machinery, making furniture, doing bookkeeping, nursing animals and people, canning, and designing and sewing clothes and shoes. When factory workers are thrown out of work, they have few skills to offer a labor market.

Finally, isolation often keeps people from organizing. People feel vulnerable when they feel alone; they feel ineffective as long as they are the only ones complaining. One person can accomplish too little, and an isolated individual is easy for the opposition to pick off, defuse, or ignore. Sometimes it is geographic isolation that causes the problem, as occurs among the handicapped, or environmentalists, or even housewives. More often, it is social space that isolates people, the social distance between poor black women and middle-class white women, between blue-collar and white-collar labor, between those educated at school and those educated through life's experiences, between ethnic groups, and between status categories.

For all these reasons, then, even in a democracy, people feel powerless, and their lack of protest is misconstrued as consent or approval. Community organizing combats these sources of powerlessness.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IS A SEARCH FOR POWER

Community organizing increases people's capacity to solve problems, by building democratic organizations that focus and multiply the power of many individuals.

Community development involves local empowerment through organized groups of people acting collectively to control decisions, projects, programs and policies that affect them as a community.

Community organizing resolves many of the sources of powerlessness. It works to end people's isolation, to get them to recognize shared problems as political rather than personal; it confronts the myth that decision makers are right because they are in power. Community organizing strives to build both the skills for democracy and the capacity for economic betterment. It helps protect organization members from intimidation and reprisal. Community organizations gather and focus information, pressure government agencies, and demonstrate that popular protest can be successful. Each successful group activity makes community members feel more confident and competent about solving their problems.

Community organizing involves a struggle for power, often between the "haves" and the "have-nots" (Alinsky, 1969):

Power is the ability to affect decisions that shape social outcomes.

Individuals and groups struggle over who has power to make decisions on questions as broad as the future direction of society and as specific as who benefits and who pays for particular government services. Community-controlled businesses, such as food cooperatives or day-care centers, demonstrate power because they enable people to declare their independence from the marketplace and government, to make their own decisions. Organizations that cope with deprivation and alienation demonstrate power because they reallocate resources and decision-making authority.

The power goals of the community movement signified in a demonstration. (Courtesy Allen Zak)

How Community Organizations Gain Power

Community organizations gain power by taking control of the public agenda, by using legal actions, expertise, and the threat of force, and by harnessing the energies of committed people. They question authority, and their successes build more power. Asking questions and debating policies imply that authorities do not have legitimate and exclusive control. To prevent such threats to their power, authorities attempt to keep many issues of interest to community organizations off the public agenda. Issues can be kept from public discussion by obscuring them or by redefining social problems as personal ones.

Controlling the Agenda. People in authority try to control the public agenda by "non-decision making." Non-decision making means that crucial questions are not contested because they do not come under public scrutiny. Unlike open conflicts, in which sides are clear and issues clearly laid out,

> non-decision making is the practice of limiting the scope of actual decision making to "safe" issues by manipulating the dominant community values, myths, and political institutions and procedures. (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963, p. 632)

Typically, the issues people agree on are laid out clearly; other issues are obscured.

Until recently, few contested the right of a business to move from one community to another to increase its profits. Society's right to impose sanctions on such businesses remained a non-decision. It was a cultural premise that profit maximization was not to be questioned, and so the issue was never raised.

Community organizations determine the issues to be discussed publicly, turning non-decisions into contested issues. Community organizations gain power by calling attention to problems. Few politicians or bureaucrats advocate poor housing, destruction of neighborhoods, ignoring the homeless, isolating the elderly, or polluting the environment. These are problems that politicians agree *should* be solved; yet, they do not see it as in their interests to spend public money to solve them, when they can spend the money on other things instead, or keep tax rates low. Community organizations can focus public attention on social issues and shame those in authority for their indifference. Setting an agenda does not ensure a victory, but it does deprive authorities of the power they gain from determining which issues will be discussed.

Combating Personalization. Personalization is another way those in power control the public agenda. They argue that *they* represent the general interest and that members of community organizations, by contrast, are concerned only with their personal interests. A request for company-sponsored day care is described as a selfish attempt on the part of women (not men) to have someone else take over their responsibilities. The legitimacy of the need to work and to ensure the health and safety of one's child is denied.

The first step in combating personalization is *consciousness raising.* It involves a sharing of experiences to learn that what appears personal is really political. The concept has been popularized in the feminist literature as

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