

## **Power to the People: Thirty-five Years of Community Organizing**

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Community organizing must be judged a remarkable if unheralded success: over the past thirty-five years organizers have built several consequential national networks of grassroots groups, nurtured a dozen training centers, and -- in concert with a variety of social movements -- greatly enlarged the tactical toolkit of citizen action. Everyone building grassroots citizens' organizations can draw upon well tested techniques of protest (rallies, marches, demonstrations, boycotts), political action (voter registration, lobbying, electoral campaigns), mutual aid (small businesses, co-ops, credit unions, low-income housing development, economic development corporations), organizational and leadership development (one-on-ones, house meetings, conventions), fundraising (door-to-door canvasses, phone banks), and media access (press conferences, issue framing, publications). Although it has always contained the democratic promise of empowering the disenfranchised, community organizing is also celebrated by Harry Boyte and communitarians as embodying visions of public philosophy ranging from civic republicanism to progressive populism and the cooperative commonwealth.

The label "community organizing" has been attached to a variety of activities drawing on disparate traditions and historical periods. The turn-of-the century settlement house movement, exemplified by Jane Addams's Hull House in Chicago, continues to influence social workers with its example of neighborhood improvement and social uplift. Saul Alinsky was more attracted to the militant alternative modeled by the CIO industrial union drives and the radical neighborhood organizing of unemployed councils in the late 1930s. Tactics of nonviolent direct action were refined from the mid-1950s through the

1960s by the civil rights movement in the South, which, as sociologist Aldon Morris has shown, mobilized networks of local black churches, NAACP chapters, and black colleges -- with assistance from such movement catalysts as the Highlander Center and the Fellowship for Reconciliation. Courageous action by civil rights workers inspired New Left community organizing projects under the banners of "power to the people" and "let the people decide." Even the federal War on Poverty's Community Action Program sporadically encouraged organizing to achieve its mandate of the "maximum feasible participation" of the poor.

Around 1970 several national networks began to coalesce and develop systematic and distinctive approaches to community organizing. These include the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), ACORN, Citizen Action, National People's Action, PICO, DART, and the Gamaliel Foundation. Each was indebted, in greater or lesser degree, to Alinsky and his early organizing programs in Chicago through IAF. Many influential organizers, including Tom Gaudette and Fred Ross, Sr., developed their characteristic approaches based on experience with Alinsky's projects. With IAF support Ross founded the Community Service Organization in California in 1949, enlisting talented young organizers Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta to develop a network of organizations in Mexican American communities, and later worked with them in the United Farm Workers union. Although Alinsky and many others have argued that community organizing is a discipline distinct from wider social movements, his early projects drew energy and inspiration from such movements: Chicago's Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council was established in 1939 during the Packinghouse Workers organizing drive, and civil rights activities energized such 1960s projects as The Woodlawn Organization in Chicago and FIGHT in Rochester.

Methodical training of community organizers can be dated from 1969, when Midas Muffler founder Gordon Sherman gave Alinsky a sizable grant. As IAF executive director, Edward Chambers continued the program following Alinsky's death in 1972, setting training at the heart of IAF's expanded organizing activity, centered on federations of religious parishes and congregations. IAF's most successful projects have been based in Texas, where Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) in San Antonio helped elect Henry Cisneros as the city's first Hispanic mayor. As IAF state director, Ernesto Cortes, Jr. built a powerful network of six affiliates, collectively known as Texas Interfaith; he is now the IAF southwest regional organizer. IAF's East Brooklyn Congregations set up Nehemiah Homes to build 2,100 low-cost houses and became a model for federal housing assistance. Baltimore's BUILD has tackled education, jobs, and housing. IAF presently has 57 affiliates in 21 states, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

The IAF model of organizing religious congregations into powerful local and regional networks has been taken up by three other groups -- PICO, Gamaliel, and DART -- most of whose leaders got their start with IAF.

PICO was founded in 1972 by John Baumann, S.J. as the Pacific Institute for Community Organization, headquartered in Oakland, California. As it expanded from the West Coast, PICO characterized its acronym as standing for People Improving Communities through Organizing. In 2005 it renamed itself the PICO National Network, emphasizing the autonomy of its affiliated organizations, and its role developing national strategy, training, and consultation. PICO works to “increase access to health care, improve public schools, make neighborhoods safer, build affordable housing, redevelop communities, and revitalize democracy.” Recently PICO has been developing a strategy of consolidating power in metropolitan areas, and exploring a state-wide effort to influence

public policy on children's health in California as well as having an impact on such national issues as immigration reform. In 2008 PICO has 50 local and regional affiliates, representing 150 cities in 17 states, with 1000 member institutions claiming to represent a million people.

The Gamaliel Foundation, created in Chicago in 1968 to assist a low-income African-American community, was reoriented to focus on community organizing when Gregory Galluzzo was hired as executive director in 1986. Seeing its basic function as training and leadership development, Gamaliel's goal is "to assist local community leaders to create, maintain and expand independent, grassroots, and powerful faith-based community organizations." Gamaliel is also refocusing its efforts on wider metropolitan areas and assessing how to impact national policy on immigration reform. As of 2008 Gamaliel has 60 affiliates in 21 states, Britain, and five provinces of South Africa, and claims to represent over a million people.

DART, the Direct Action and Research Training Center, was founded in 1982, and has 20 affiliated organizations in six states. John Calkins is the executive director. DART is headquartered in Miami, Florida, and practices strictly congregation-based community organization. DART conducts five-day orientation trainings for community leaders and has a four-month training program for organizers.

ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, began in 1970 as a spin-off from the National Welfare Rights Organization, founded by George Wiley, who enlisted civil rights workers and trained them in an Alinsky-influenced program at Syracuse University. From a base in Arkansas, Wade Rathke and Gary Delgado developed a replicable model of forming membership organizations and developing leaders in low-income neighborhoods -- relying substantially on young middle-class staff

working for subsistence wages. ACORN has established local housing corporations to rehabilitate homes, and has successfully pressured banks to provide mortgages and home improvement loans in low-income communities. ACORN has led “living wage” campaigns in many cities, and has forged alliances with labor unions. The Institute for Social Justice serves as ACORN's training arm. ACORN claims some 350,000 member families in 850 neighborhood chapters in over 100 cities.

Also focused on housing, former IAF organizer Shel Trapp and community activist Gail Cincotta founded National People's Action (NPA) and its associated National Training and Information Center in Chicago in 1972, to coordinate a loose network of some 300 neighborhood, church, union, farm and seniors' organizations. Emphasizing campaigns against insurance and bank "redlining," NPA helped pass the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act of 1975, the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977, and the National Affordable Housing Act of 1990. NTIC/NPA showed its organizational maturity by managing the retirement of Trapp and the death of Cincotta in 2001 with a transition to new leadership cultivated within its ranks. NPA continues to attract some 1,200 people to its annual conference in Washington, DC, and 250 to its annual leadership training program.

Inspired by their experience with the civil rights, women's, New Left, and labor movements, Heather Booth and Steve Max founded the Midwest Academy in Chicago in 1973 and later the associated Citizen Action network. Citizen Action affiliates included both statewide membership organizations with local chapters and statewide coalitions of labor, citizen, farm, and senior organizations. All used the door-to-door canvass model to recruit members and raise money. Citizen Action did extensive electoral work in support of Democratic candidates, and made national health insurance a priority campaign. In 1997 the national office of Citizen Action was caught illegally channeling money to Teamster reform president Ron Carey's campaign for reelection. Angry

affiliates demanded the national office be dissolved. In 1999 Heather Booth and others founded USAction to coordinate the remaining Citizen Action state chapters and help rebuild the network. In 2007 USAction claims to represent 3 million members in 23 state affiliates and other associated organizations.

Grassroots organizations outside the national networks have often found it difficult to move beyond an initial period of enthusiasm and early successes to acquire disciplined approaches to sustaining and developing their organizations. The need to nurture independent groups has led to the growing importance of training and technical assistance centers -- what Gary Delgado calls "training intermediaries." The Highlander Center in Tennessee, an early example founded in 1932 by Myles Horton, developed a unique educational approach to grassroots leadership development. Mike Miller's Organize Training Center in San Francisco draws on his background as a civil rights worker and an IAF organizer. Si Kahn's Grassroots Leadership in the Carolinas has initiated an innovative "barriers and bridges" project to deal with such diversity issues as racism, sexism and homophobia. The Center for Third World Organizing, founded by ACORN veteran Delgado, works with a network of organizations in communities of color, as does another spin-off, the Applied Research Center in Oakland. The Western States Center in Portland serves groups in eight Rocky Mountain and Pacific Northwest states, providing training conferences for activists and progressive public officials. The Center for Community Change, headquartered in Washington, DC, provides technical assistance to community groups across the country. Lois Gibb's Center for Health, Environment and Justice (formerly the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste) plays a similar function as a technical assistance center and conference sponsor for grassroots groups in the environmental justice movement.

The distinction between social movements and community organizations is increasingly blurred. An interesting hybrid was Neighbor to Neighbor (N2N), founded by Fred Ross, Jr., who adapted his father's house meeting model to rally progressives in the 1980s to oppose U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and El Salvador. In another innovative effort, the Peace Development Fund blends the role of foundation and training center by providing small grants, technical assistance, and leadership development to grassroots peace and social justice organizations across the country. Similarly, on a local or regional level, the Funding Exchange network of progressive community foundations bring together activists working on diverse issues through community advisory boards.

Populism has proved to be a double-edged sword: since the 1980s the religious and populist right borrowed many techniques from progressive community organizers. In a fascinating parallel to the IAF model, fundamentalist church networks were mobilized by Beverly LaHaye's Concerned Women for America, Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, James Dobson's Focus on the Family, and Donald Wildmon's American Family Association to combat abortion rights, pornography, gay and lesbian rights, secularism in the public schools, and other manifestations of liberalism. On state level, groups like Lon Mabon's Oregon Citizens Alliance built campaigns against gay and lesbian rights on a network of fundamentalist congregations. In another surprising parallel, Alan Gottlieb and Ron Arnold adapted their Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise in Bellevue, Washington, as a right-wing "training intermediary" to coordinate the Wise Use Movement, a counter-environmentalist network of ranching, mining, timber, and property owner associations, as well as hunting, motorcycling, and off-road vehicle clubs.

Community organizing as a vocation continues to present many difficulties, including poor salaries and limited benefits, stressful working conditions, the absence of clear career ladders, and the lack of professional development opportunities, mentorship, and

administrative sophistication. There is no widely recognized union or professional association, although the National Organizers Alliance has become an important support system. Emerging university training programs may help define the field, and career paths could be explicitly expanded to include work with other types of nonprofit advocacy and service organizations in a variety of movements, as well as labor union organizing. Recruiting and mentoring young people of color, a vital task, will be easier when organizing careers are more attractive.

Community organizing continues into the Twenty-first Century with no single guru, no vanguard organization, and no hegemonic model. Nevertheless, a consensus is growing that strategies for regional, state, and national impacts must be developed. Both congregation-based community organizations and direct-membership neighborhood associations are exploring new partnerships, alliances, and relationships -- with labor unions, universities, and advocacy think-tanks. The field of community organization has long had tactical sophistication, and it is now developing a strategic vision of how to win significant structural reforms in American society. Organizers are exploring alliances with potential allies, including other social movements, unions, and the state and local chapters of national activist organizations with middle and upper-middle class members - - the Sierra Club has been one group open to innovative alliances. Progressive activists must learn how to connect and mediate among community organizations and these diverse movements. Only then will they be able to build the majority coalition necessary to achieve the radical democratic vision embodied in the Arkansas state motto borrowed by ACORN: "The People Shall Rule."



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