

## NOTES FROM MEXICO CITY MEETING

In late June, 2007, the International Working Group for University Education for Community Change brought together seventeen educators and practitioners who are committed to expanding practitioner education for people involved in community organizing and social change work around the world. The meeting was in Mexico City and was hosted by the Rural Development faculty at Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM).

This meeting was the kick-off for the Working Group's second phase. Building on prior meetings in New York and ongoing discussion, our work during this phase will concentrate on achieving three goals –

- Creating a peer learning process which enables participants to explore a series of issues related to practitioner education in this growing field of study, including ways of combining field work, classroom work and reflection, alternative pedagogies, and the content of the learning;
- Collaborating in developing a book which will reflect the work of different task forces and additional research on a series of issues related to building this field of studies; and
- Development of a plan for creating an ongoing international network which enables growing numbers of educators and practitioners to learn from and collaborate with each other with the goal of strengthening practice and expanding the number and breadth of such programs over the next 10-20 years.

More than half of the three day meeting was devoted to meetings of three Task Forces, each of which was charged with exploring one of the three major areas of knowledge and skills which the Working Group sees as vital to well-balanced curricula in Community Change Studies. These three areas were identified by consensus during the Group's earlier meeting at New York University. They are:

- The tools of collective action
- Strategic thinking, analysis and reflection
- Issue expertise

There are many different issue areas in which a particular student/community change practitioner may wish to develop their knowledge and skills (e.g. public health, social work, environmental studies, education), in the NYU meeting we decided to concentrate the Issue Expertise Task Force's work on Community Development because several Working Group members have particular expertise and interest in that area. (We had hoped to develop additional resources to cover other specialized areas in which participation, organizing, building power and advocacy are vital if the goal is to reduce the concentration of wealth and privilege and bring about broad community change.)

Before and after the three days of meetings there were rich opportunities to meet with UAM's faculty and students, discuss their educational programs, and visit several of their projects in rural Chiapas. These visits demonstrated the immense value of site visits and peer discussions as sources of peer learning and inspiration. They were particularly provocative because of UAM's remarkable wealth of experience, creativity, and bedrock

commitment to working directly with peasants, indigenous people, and other social actors to bring about social change.

These notes are in several sections. They include a summary of the discussions and decisions made in plenary sessions<sup>1</sup>, reports from the three Task Forces, and reports on the optional visits to UAM's campus and to Chiapas's rural communities.

### Summary of Plenary Sessions:

The meeting began with welcomes, introductions and exercises to enable all of us to get to know people we hadn't known previously. In particular, we shared our "stories" of why we are devoting our careers to social change and how we became involved as educators inside universities and/or with grassroots groups. Early in the meeting we also discussed the background for the convening, the goals for the three days, and the goals and process for the next 15 months.

During plenary sessions we discussed a number of central issues. These included our shared experience about the major struggle involved in trying to turn major institutions into major social change actors because of their resistance to change and their nervousness about controversial programs such as those oriented to enhancing people's ability to bring about major changes at the community or societal level.

We also discussed how universally the service and extension roles of universities are not valued, and how the growing relationship between universities and the private sector undercuts their emphasis on service. A key issue for us is -- How can this be changed?

We reminded ourselves that we are dealing with different realities in different countries. There are great differences in the politics, social structure, and historic role of universities. Latin American universities, for example, are tied more closely to social change than North American ones. They are not so removed and abstract. African universities were independent but they have been pulled into the public sector. Few are involved in teaching community and social change, and the students go to them primarily to be able to get better jobs.

In that context we began discussing the difficulties of coming up with common language to describe what we're teaching. The terms "community change" or "social change", for example, are dangerous language in many countries in Africa and elsewhere. This makes it challenging to clarify exactly what unites us, what we mean by community change, and how it differs from other approaches to issues of poverty, power, and opportunity.

We discussed the variety of students we're trying to reach –

- Some are already actively involved in social change
- Some want to develop the knowledge and skills to work in social change

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<sup>1</sup> Rather than repeat information available in previous materials and earlier plans which have been changed, these notes have been organized to highlight the agreements reached during the meeting, including modifications in our plans and process.

- Some are unaware that social change is necessary and that careers in that field are possible

During the meeting we brainstormed on our long-term vision for the network. The following visions were offered:

- A network which leads to lasting connections; these connections will last if everyone really has something to share
- The capacity to influence things at international level
  - With a structure which allows us to link local and global
  - With the flexibility to operate at different levels
  - With strong networks in Africa, Asia, Latin America and other continents
  - Linking universities with social organizations
  - A network committed to developing human capacities to be human
- A network of progressives which helps link internships for students to do action and research, and which provides national and international connections
  - A network in which community groups and universities are in parity
  - A place which strengthens university efforts to help young people reflect on where world is going and how it can be changed, which creates opportunities for discussions which are connected throughout the world
  - An influence which helps people change the US so it grows in knowledge and respect for other people
  - Place where academics could go and find others with similar concerns, and students would say, yes, this is what I've been looking for
  - Helps academics overcome their fear of dreaming, which helps them believe they can do something including revolutionary social change, helps them become public intellectuals
  - Acceptance that theory should be defined by what's going on the ground, and that community members' knowledge is respected (overcoming class bias and barriers)
  - Respect for these programs as critical for development, no longer just an alternative program
  - Increased number of these programs
  - Recover sense of university as space and opportunity for change
  - New spaces for encounter with the community
  - Adequate resources
  - Help younger people dream – have to face reality so they fight for a better world
  - Give people hope
  - Education which is purposeful, not just doling out information
  - Welcomes diversity as powerful means of learning
  - Helps people overcome their feeling that their thoughts mean nothing
  - Creates international opportunities to co-create knowledge
  - People see careers in social change and have many options, starting in school
  - 30 years from now – don't need this because we have changed the world in how we treat each other

During the meeting, the issue of the tension between teaching specialized technical skills and education which is more oriented to community and social change surfaced. It was also addressed in two of the Task Forces – Collective Action and Community Development.

There was a consensus that there is a need for both. In community development work, for instance, there is a great need for educational programs which develop people's technical skills and knowledge so they can be successful in planning and implementing community economic development projects. This requires extensive knowledge and practical skills in finance, real estate development, various approaches to economic development, project management, partnerships with the private and public sectors, etc.

Similar technical knowledge is needed in such fields as public health or environmental studies. As in the community development field, some educators focus exclusively on in depth education on the substance of the work, while others also stress the process skills and strategies they see as fundamental. This is particularly true of this Working Group which brings together educators who concluded that their work must be grounded in community-driven processes, and this requires developing skills in eliciting participation, involvement, leadership development, power-building and focusing on root causes. With its commitment to community and social change, the Working Group is "Not training people just to be better agronomists but to change power relations, the distribution of resources, and to open up opportunity."

What is "community change"? We did not devote much time to hammering out a common definition, knowing that each person may use different language. We agreed we all share a commitment to –

- Participation
- Changing power relations
- Eliminating/reducing inequality and privilege

The education should lead to "Giving poor people the means to change their lives."

During the meeting we clarified that each Task Force is to take three steps in developing its analysis. These steps are as follows:

1. Focus first on the short-term
  - Share current knowledge and consolidate it
  - Pull together curricula and other materials
  - Identify gaps (e.g. coalition-building; teaching strategic thinking)
2. Explore the medium-term issues
  - Explore the gaps (e.g. training for the people who are most affected by the issues)
  - Explore creative, new, provocative thinking and approaches
  - Perhaps seek volunteers to start dialogue, e-learning group, develop ideas
3. Begin analyzing the long-term issues
  - Address the tough nuts (e.g. local to global)

Two of the three days were devoted to Task Force meetings, during which they began this exploration. They then reported back to the full Group. The Task Forces on Strategic Thinking, Analysis and Reflection (STAR) and on Issue Expertise/Community Development requested that resources be set aside so they could meet again before the next major meeting. This would enable them to work more closely with their co-conveners in the analysis.

We then discussed possible revisions in our plans for the next year. There was a consensus that we should stress Task Force and other smaller group work as that format enables people to concentrate more on the issues on which they can be particularly helpful. We discussed the fact that this would require reallocation of travel funds as the original budget did not include funding for smaller group meetings. This may require cost-sharing and rethinking of the final meeting.

We tentatively chose April in or near Barcelona as the site for the final meeting of the International Working Group. The Steering Committee will meet in September to refine plans for this phase, including budget changes to accommodate small meetings, new steps to make the Group truly international and balanced, and the time schedule.