

## **I. The Crises Which Now Face Us and Democracy, Demanding New Thinking and Expanded Education on Collective Action:**

In many Northern as well as Southern democracies, there is great concern about the current health of democracy. This concern stems from a series of factors.

First, it grows from declining participation in voting and civic life, growing cynicism about government and other major institutions, and a growing sense of the unaccountability of bureaucracies and politicians. These concerns extend to the private sector, large nonprofits, the media and universities as well, with increasing numbers of people seeing them as being controlled by rich and powerful interests which are not concerned about improving society.

Second, this concern about democracy emanates also from the growing sense of powerlessness which is so common today. Society is increasing complex, things are changing very rapidly, it is so difficult to get accurate information, and decisions are shifting to higher and more distant venues. How can people understand what is going on and control it?

A third trend contributes to this alienation. It is the growing concern in many societies that there is a decline in the sense of the shared values which have held societies together. They worry that traditions are being abandoned and the social fabric is weakening. The growing gap between rich and poor people and between people with different levels of education and digital skills is aggravating this situation.

Finally, there is the old stark reality that women, visible minorities, recent immigrants, lower castes and people with limited incomes continue to be excluded from playing any influential role in most countries.

Together these trends increase the need for educational programs which help people address these issues collectively and democratically and to develop skills in civic engagement, politics, and Collective Action with the goal of creating a more open and equitable society.

## **II. The Historic Theories On Democracy and How They Can be Strengthened?**

Contemporary movements for democratic change draw from six principal schools of democratic thought. Each can be traced through history to ancient times but still has a great impact on contemporary thinking and action on issues of Community and Social Change. And each provides its own perspective and insights into the process of democratic change.

The first three address the central issue – **To what extent should citizens be directly involved in governance?** They give answers which are in constant tension with each other.

1. **Constitutional and representative democracy:** This is perhaps the most commonly held theory, which can be seen as a neoliberal theory. It stresses two elements as being central to democratic government. The first is the existence of a **constitution** which establishes the basic framework and laws which define how government will function. The second element is the notion that, instead of direct democracy with people participating directly in government decisions, elected people should decide policy issues and then judged during the next election.
2. **Participatory democracy.** Critics of representative democracy see it as diluting people's involvement and voice and ceding power to elite groups of full-time government officials. They stress the need to develop new ways of increasing people's direct participation in policy-making.<sup>1</sup>
3. **Civil society as central to democracy:** Over the last century many nations have witnessed great growth in civil society, a "third sector" which is seldom stressed in traditional theories of representative government or in constitutions. They create important opportunities for people to develop their leadership and civic skills, collective strength and collective thinking.

The second set of theories of democracy focus on a second central question -- How much power should be vested in the democratically controlled state to address issues of social and economic justice and development? The three main opposing views are --

4. **Libertarianism.** This view harkens back to earlier days of very limited government. It stresses the danger that a powerful government – even one which is controlled by the voters – limits individual freedom by imposing restrictive policies on people. Libertarians are particularly critical of government regulation of business, rising taxes, social programs, and tax policies which redistribute income and limit their individual choice of how to spend their earnings.
5. **Social democracy.** This theory stresses the need to address issues of equity and justice by using the power of the state to redress injustices, create opportunity, and foster greater economic, social and political equality. It stresses that democracy cannot function optimally unless all the citizens have a decent standard of living and real opportunities to advance within the society.
6. **State socialism and people's democracies.** The Marxist-Leninist definition built on the theory that a democracy should be a "dictatorship of the proletariat" which would use "democratic centralism" to govern, with the executive branch being free of meaningful constitutional constraints, political opposition, or independent civil society or private sector organizations.

The tensions between these six theories press us to balance issues of participation and delegation to others, issues of government power vs. people's individual freedom, issues of political and economic rights.

### **III. Redefining Democracy to Promote Justice, Freedom, Community and Voice:**

Drawing from these roots, what is our Community and Social Change definition of the key elements of the political systems which best fosters participation, voice, freedom and justice?

For the purposes of this analysis, our definition of democracy draws from several of the schools of democratic thought to form a composite. A democracy which fosters social and economic change is characterized by the following key elements:

- A written or de facto constitution and set of institutions which ensure the rule of law
- An active state sector which promotes “development” and equity
- A strong emphasis on permitting the growth of an independent civil society
- Measures to actively facilitate the growth of civil society, especially organizations which involve and represent poor and excluded people and others often left out of civic discourse
- Maximum transparency, open decision-making processes, and other measures which enable civil society organizations and individuals to participate in and influence public debate and policy-making, including policy regarding the private sector

### **IV. What Are the Main Traditions and Strategies for Collective Action?**

There are several alternative ways in which people join together to promote stronger democracy, social change and the development of an increasingly free and just society. Each of these strategies has its strong points as well as its weaknesses. We therefore can learn from all of them and construct a new combination of strategies which are most appropriate in a particular context and in addressing a particular set of challenges and opportunities.

In short, a fundamental part of Change Education is studying the theory and lessons from each of these views of democracy and from alternate ways of acting collectively, and then examine how they might be applied in real life community settings where we are working collectively.

We see knowledge of the “tools of collective action” as being fundamental to any significant change strategy. Democratic change requires the involvement of large numbers of people in setting the agenda, taking the leadership, and making major

decisions. Creating this level of involvement requires skill in fostering people's participation and channeling it into action.

How deep must a person's collective action skills and knowledge be? That depends upon the roles he/she plays and the strategies their organizations follow. Professional "organizers" organizing large numbers of people to build power and press major institutions for reforms need extensive skills in every aspect of collective action, including leadership development and sophisticated campaign strategy development. Those who concentrate instead on service delivery or community development programs or on community change education need a basic grounding in participatory techniques to ensure their approach is democratic and their programs are responsive to community needs, accountable to the people they serve, and successful in accessing resources from recalcitrant public agencies or other institutions. The following diagram illustrates this need among different levels of knowledge which are required by different types of community workers – developers, organizers and service providers.

Unfortunately, there currently are very few opportunities for concentrated study of the tools of collective action either in academic institutions or in the nonprofit and NGO sector. Another barrier is time: it is very difficult to concentrate on this study when you have limited resources and even less time. Most people therefore learn the tools of Collective Action on the job, through trial and error, usually without a skilled supervisor or mentor. This process greatly slows change and often leads to defeats, frustration and disillusionment.

Furthermore, few people are exposed to more than one or two alternative strategies for seeking change. This leaves them unfamiliar with other strategies which might be useful and, perhaps, more appropriate and effective than the approaches they have used before. This limits their options and their impact.

There are six major alternative collective strategies for pursuing community and social change.

1. Different cultures have different traditions for how people have organized themselves collectively as they have sought to improve their lives and their communities. In many cultures there are centuries-old **traditions of self-organization**, with people accustomed to working collectively on their land or in guilds, sharing services, or making community decisions. In others, there is a far more individualistic set of traditions which complicate rather than facilitate the building of broad-based, relatively democratic vehicles for acting collectively.
2. Some powerful traditions have taken hold more recently. In India, for example, the inspiration of Gandhi's strategy of **nonviolent mass movements** still has enormous influence. It has become central to Indian traditions on social and political issues, making it remarkably "natural" for seemingly spontaneous mass movements to emerge on issues of women's rights, the

rights of dalits (or “untouchables”), labor rights, environmental justice and other issues. These mass movements often spread from region to region without staff and without even an identifiable cadre of people who are setting strategy and tactics for expanding the action.<sup>1</sup>

3. In the US, the highly practical techniques first developed by Saul Alinsky, Fred Ross and the labor movement -- the great “organizers” of the mid-twentieth century – have been steadily refined by successive schools of **community organizing** to dominate contemporary thinking about how to change communities and public policies for the better. The great movements of the 1960’s have, at least for the short run, given way to these kinds of professionally burnished organizing efforts which now exist in hundreds of communities throughout the United States. There are similar organizing efforts in many other countries, North and South.

Latin America has birthed an important school of community organizing which has its own unique strengths. That continent has been heavily influenced by the theory and practice developed by Paulo Freire and others, and by “liberation theology”. Their **popular education** approach to organizing concentrates on creating opportunities for ordinary people to increase their consciousness of the circumstances they live in, the forces which created those circumstances, and how they can become actors in changing them significantly. Learning and conscientization, or consciousness-raising, are central. If there is action, its legitimacy depends upon whether it has grown out of this discernment process in which people go through a learning process, examining key aspects of their individual lives and the life of their communities, and constantly asking “But why? But why?” so they can understand why they live as they do and then identify how they might act to change those circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

4. A fourth strategy is common in many countries in the global South and North. Faced with pressing community needs, community people create their own programs and institutions and take on direct responsibility for meeting those needs. This **self-help community development approach** may concentrate solely on developing and operating community programs which, for example, improve housing, create economic ventures or provide public health services.

In some cases, a group is even more ambitious and it attempts to build an alternative institution which will operate programs over the long run, gradually building the financial base, staffing, and systems to develop a permanent capacity to sustain these programs. An alternative strategy is one which concentrates on developing model programs with the goal of

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<sup>1</sup> The attached paper by Ranjita Mohanty of PRIA in India provides background on how movement traditions have impacted India’s approaches to Collective Action.

<sup>2</sup> The attached paper by Carlos Cortez Ruiz reviews the Latin American traditions which impact Collective Action in Mexico and elsewhere.

demonstrating their value to other institutions and policy-makers and thereby influencing their future programming and policies.

5. For many reformers and revolutionaries, a fifth strategy is fundamental -- the development of a **mass-based political party** to gain power through electoral processes (or revolutionary means). Nelson Mandela and his colleagues, for example, developed the African National Congress as a political party with a growing membership, elected officers, a political platform, a program of political education, collective efforts to reform the electoral system, and candidates for political office. In liberation struggles like South Africa, this was sometimes linked to the party's revolutionary work, including use of violent as well as nonviolent strategies.

In less dramatic circumstances, more limited political approaches may greatly enhance a group's strength. These can include registering voters, educating them on the issues, encouraging people to run for public office, holding them accountable to the community's agenda, and – within the confines of what is legal and safe locally – working to influence political parties, elections, and referenda.

6. A sixth route stresses the growth of **pluralism and a vibrant, polycentric civil society** in overcoming the monopoly of power. The Polish intellectual and writer Adam Michnik typifies this school of thought. Michnik attributed the Poles' success in gaining independence and creating democracy largely to years of growth in the numbers and vitality of small, often humble volunteer organizations throughout society. Pluralism grew as people gathered in labor, religious, civic, study and other groups to discuss and work on issues which concerned them. Step by step, this weakened the regime's foundation, leading eventually to its quick capitulation to demands from Solidarity's membership and others who demanded fundamental economic and political change.

Each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses. For this reason it is highly advantageous for organizers and leaders of social change efforts to have opportunities to learn from all of them, becoming prepared to use whichever strategy or tactic may be most effective at any given time.

Needless to say broad social movements are unequalled in their ambition and their ability to bring about sweeping changes. They can surface issues which have been submerged for centuries, leading to transformation in public attitudes, public policies, institutions, and conditions and opportunities for extraordinary numbers of people. They can create entirely new sets of leaders and institutions. Whether violent or nonviolent, their impact can be revolutionary or at least transformational.

The most common limitations of movements are equally familiar. The spirit may fade, the leadership may calcify, the gains may never be institutionalized, and the principles may be corrupted. Alternatively, reaction to the gains which come from

democratic pressures can lead to countermoves by the opposition, perhaps reversing the gains and even making the situation worse than it was before.

Organizations are important as they enable people to tackle issues and develop skills and knowledge as they do so. Some organizations build up to the stage where they have a major impact, especially when they band together with other group and allies. However, they seldom have the force and massive, sometimes fundamental impact which mass social movements have had throughout history.

Programmatic approaches often provide vital services or projects, while also providing invaluable experience for the leaders and staffs of the groups which either initiate them or convince others to do so. However, history shows that it is all too easy for groups to bog down in sustaining their programs and organization, often losing any vision they had of the big picture and the need to try different approaches to maximizing people's impact on central issues.

Community organizing can make a tremendous contribution in developing leaders, constituencies, and issue campaigns, and in winning reforms in policies, the flow of resources, or institutional behavior. Those reforms sometimes have very impressive results but, all too frequently, organizing groups may concentrate on tactics, tactics, tactics and fail to develop long-range strategies which will have a fundamental impact on issues of power and privilege.

Popular education has had a major impact in some countries, leading to the building of deep roots in base communities, educating and liberating people, and inspiring movement-like action. However, it has not spread widely beyond Latin America, and its victories in that region have sometimes proven transient.

Finally, electoral strategies have been central in many countries. In Europe and elsewhere labor and social democratic parties had a massive impact, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. In the US, African Americans and Latinos have made considerable progress through voter registration and electing people to office. However, the dilemma everywhere has been to find ways of keeping elected people accountable and responsive to the needs and wishes of those who elected them.

## **V. Learning the Tools of Collective Action –**

### **What do people need to learn, and how can they best learn it?**

Although many people play central roles in catalyzing Collective Action for community and social change without much training or other preparation, there obviously are great advantages to being better prepared before tackling this enormous challenge. Trial and error is never the most efficient way to work, and it can be particularly frustrating if the goal is to bring large numbers of people together to

tackle significant social and community problems. The issues are complex, the resistance is enormous, and the task of bringing people together, developing consensus and moving into effective action requires great skills, knowledge, and strategy.

There clearly is much to learn from others who have faced similar challenges. Education and training programs, peer learning opportunities, case studies and other readings can be of crucial help to people facing great barriers as they struggle for greater voice, freedom and justice.

As noted above, in examining what people need to understand to be fully effective in creating positive change, we have found it useful to use three large categories of knowledge and competency -- Collective Action; Strategic Thinking, Analysis and Reflection; and Issue Expertise (e.g. Community Development).

As these divisions are somewhat arbitrary, there inevitably are areas of overlap.<sup>3</sup> For example, many change agents see the skills involved in “organizing” for action as inextricably linked to informed, clever “strategizing” and to disciplined “reflection”. With this caveat in mind, it still is useful to isolate the three broad areas of knowledge and competency, to break each of them into smaller components, and then to examine them separately in some detail. In this paper we focus primarily on the “building blocks” of knowledge and skills which are important for catalyzing Collective Action for social and community change.

We have identified five building blocks, or modules, of knowledge and skills which are essential for social change leaders and organizers –

1. Understanding yourself and the community
2. Learning how to bring people together
3. Learning how to build effective ongoing organizations and to create alternative institutions
4. Influencing the policies and practices of major institutions
5. Learning how to do it better through assessment and organizational

The order and manner in which these modules are learned will vary enormously depending upon whether a person learns on the job or through a structured educational program at a university or nonprofit.

The building blocks can be mastered in various ways. Most commonly they are learned on-the-job through action, trial and error. Activists may have the good fortune to work with others who have extensive experience, or to participate in at least some limited training.

However, relatively few people are lucky enough either (1) to undergo systematic training over time or (2) to have an in-depth education which gives them the broad

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<sup>3</sup> See Venn diagram above.

background, skill training, development of their critical thinking and conceptual skills, and experience in reflective practice which can maximize their preparation for tackling the enormous challenges of catalyzing Collective Action on major community and social issues.

## **BUILDING BLOCK #1 –**

### **Understanding Yourself and the Community**

To prepare yourself to be effective in fostering democratic participation, it is vital to start with the most basic fundamentals –

- An understanding of yourself;
- An understanding of the community where you are working; and
- A strong capacity to listen and learn

Mastering these fundamentals greatly enhances a person's capacity to enter or shift roles within a community, bring people together, help them build critical ties of community and common purpose, and move them forward in planning and then launching collective action.

#### **A. Understanding Yourself**

The first step in preparing for work at the community level requires focusing inward. It begins with people learning how to deepen their knowledge of themselves -- who they are and what motivates them -- and how they relate to people individually and in groups.

This initial self-assessment should enable a person to explore and understand the following questions:

- Who am I? What is my story? My identity? What issues of gender, race, class, privilege affect my behavior and how others react to me?
- Why am I doing this? Why am I here learning how to bring about social change? What is the source of my passion? What role do I see myself playing?
- What do I want to learn from the people I'm meeting with and from the group?
- How do I relate to the rest of the group? What is my impact on the group's dynamics? How well do I communicate and build relationships with the people I am trying to reach? How should and can I change?
- How skilled am I in listening deeply to people and understanding their concerns and motivations? How expert am I at discerning how interested they might be in working with others on those issues, and at assessing their leadership potential?

As people become expert in reflecting on these questions and deepening their knowledge and skills in interaction, they grow greatly in their capacity to listen, build relationships, bring people together, build community, and identify common interests and goals.

These questions are especially important for a person who is from outside a community, perhaps different in education, income, racial or religious background, age or upbringing. The paper by Peter Taylor goes into considerable detail about this process of reflection, including the importance of people exploring their own identities and fully understanding their own motivations, preconceptions, and style as they approach this delicate work. It also describes how the Participation, Power and Social Change Program of the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Sussex structures its courses to help students learn these skills.

In a non-academic setting, NTL in the US is highly regarded for the workshops it conducts specifically to help people understand themselves on these issues. Those weeklong sessions help people develop the skills and routines to reflect regularly on these issues, monitoring their progress on such questions as the following:

- What am I learning? How am I changing?
- Do I play a facilitative role, bringing out the best in other people and giving them visibility and reinforcement, or am I too visible or controlling?
- How am I relating to the group? How should I change this relationship?

Other courses in universities and nonprofit settings concentrate on other aspects of the challenge of deepening a person's understanding of themselves as well as their interpersonal skills. These are designed to enable them to understand themselves better in the context of gender, race, class, national origin, and privilege. They may focus on deconstructing racism or other biases and on understanding issues of privilege and power so people can fully comprehend tensions and imbalances in power or roles which they face and devise ways for addressing them. Role playing, personal testimony, and small group work are particularly effective pedagogies in this area.

Some social and community change organizations have strong traditions and systems of reflective practice. In the US, for example, it is an almost universal part of organizer training to reflect monthly in writing on what they are learning. Their reflections are then subjected to a tough critique by their peers and supervisors, focusing on what went well, what didn't, what was learned, and what should be done differently next time.

## **B. Understanding the Community and Its Dynamics**

A second step in preparing for promoting social or community change is to study a community's culture, traditions and history. Without that understanding, change

agents will make many missteps, risking increasing any skepticism that they are “outsiders” who neither understand the community nor can work with residents to bring about the changes the residents want. Such ignorance creates barriers to building the trust and strong working relationships which are essential to organizing and/or educating people and eliciting community participation.

For international work, it is common practice for people to develop their knowledge and cultural competency before they begin work in another country. Nonprofits, public agencies and even businesses often require this preparation before people take on an assignment in another culture. Reading, lectures by people familiar with the other country, discussions, scenario and role playing are common educational tools for this preparation.

Ironically, however, it is rare for people to give similar attention to becoming culturally competent before working in communities which are closer to home even when those areas are culturally, socially or economically very different from their own communities. This may seriously handicap their work, especially if they have not developed an understanding of such questions as –

- How do people relate to each other?
- How do they perceive strangers from other communities?
- Do they understand the role you are playing, as an organizer, educator, or researcher, and what attitudes are they likely to have towards you?
- Will they encounter any risks if they talk with you?
- In their community and culture, what are the best ways of entering into the conversation?
- What will people think when faced with the questions you plan to pose?
- What do you need to understand about their culture when you consider these issues and how best to bring people together?

Some nonprofits, or individuals within NGOs, are serious about developing extensive knowledge of the culture, history, and trends in nearby communities where they work. This is, however, relatively rare.

This is an area in which academic programs can be particularly helpful in greatly strengthening practice. With faculty members specializing in sociology, anthropology, social psychology, community history, Black and Hispanic studies, race and class, and other fields, many institutions of higher education can offer excellent courses to prepare people to understand the culture of local communities and how they can work in them most effectively. The University of Pennsylvania, for example, offers over 60 courses which center on the adjacent neighborhoods, studying everything from local religious institutions to neighborhood schools to patterns of land use and conflicts over plans for the community’s future.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This program is described and analyzed in several books including David Maurrasse’s book [Beyond the Campus: How Colleges and Universities Develop Partnerships](#)

UAM's Masters in Rural Development starts its students by immersing them in understanding local peasant communities. The curriculum proceeds in stages, starting with readings, research, and discussions concerning Mexico's peasant population which is at the core of the program's "bottom-up" community development approach to rural change. For three months students study peasant life and conditions, reading extensively, conducting research and interviews in villages, and reflecting on their experience. They interact with sociologists, economists, agronomists and other academics as well as practitioners who are adjunct faculty or workshop leaders.

When the students gather on campus, they work and learn in small groups for four days and then spend Fridays in cross-group dialogue. While everyone reads the same materials, each small group takes a different perspective on those materials. For example, while one group analyzes peasants in relation to the land or the broader economy, another assesses how they traditionally organize themselves and what new forms of organization are emerging, and yet another will discuss peasants and their culture. Friday's joint discussion allows students to compare what they have learned using different perspectives, a particularly stimulating approach to cross-disciplinary learning.

Academic programs can be equally useful in helping prepare people to work in their own communities. In those situations people face different challenges – their assumption that they already understand the area, their lack of "distance" from it, the possible narrowness of their own experience and perspective, and the need for new insights and openness. Because these challenges are familiar to academics in such diverse disciplines as sociology, anthropology, history and social work, college programs can be particularly useful in addressing them.

### **C. Engaging with People in the Community and Listening**

For community work, people must also learn which outreach techniques are most effective in a particular place and culture. For example, while in some communities going door to door may be effective, in others such cold calls by a stranger may be unwelcome or ineffective in starting a meaningful conversation. Depending upon the culture, politics and community dynamics, they may even be considered offensive or dangerous.

Cultural differences are major factors in determining what works best. The Uganda Rural Development and Training Institute and the African Rural University stress reaching out to women and girls as the most likely leaders for bringing people together for community development.

In India, PRIA has found street plays called nukkad natak to be an effective means for communicating a message because they are informative as well as entertaining. For example, nukkad natak proved to be an effective medium for communicating with people during a pre-election voter awareness campaign (PEVAC). The villagers can identify with the characters in the play and learn about

the election nuances. The themes of nukkad natak revolved around: qualities of elected representatives, importance and advantages of free and fair elections, women as elected representatives, process of casting vote etc.

Nukkad natak is a highly effective medium of information dissemination especially in communities where literacy level is low. They are performed at places where a ready audience is available such as weekly markets or near a panchayat building. The scripts are written in local dialects and they incorporate folk music and traditional dances. People can catch up with the tunes of these songs and understand the message being conveyed through them. Youth from the village are selected and trained to enact roles in the play. These plays are interactive and engaged the audience by posing questions to them.

In other countries, the best conversations start where people gather naturally for relaxation or community life – parks or churches, tea houses and clubs. Casa de Maryland in the US, for example, sends organizers out on Sunday afternoons to the places where immigrant women domestic workers get together to talk after church. Concordia University in Montreal works through coffee houses where people congregate.

Academic programs and organizing schools vary greatly in how well they prepare people for what initially seems like a simple task – going out to talk with people. Many offer little, if any, background education on either the cultural and interpersonal factors which people need to understand, or on can be learned from prior experience concerning the most effective ways of engaging people in conversation about local issues and what should be done

Fortunately, some organizations and higher educational institutions prepare people thoroughly to handle these issues. For example, Metropolitan Autonomous University in Mexico provides its postgraduate students with an intense participatory process for developing a strong understanding of their communities and the broader environment in which they are striving to bring about change. The first three months of their Certificate, Masters and PhD programs in Rural Development are devoted to studying and becoming rooted in peasant villages. Students learn from a rigorous combination of experiences, including extensive reading and analysis of sociological and other studies of peasant life, and being trained in interview and research techniques. They then conduct interviews in the villages, before coming back to discuss with faculty and peers what they have learned about village traditions of self-organization, their relationship to the land and overall economy, and their traditions and culture. This background gives students practical interviewing and relationship-building skills as well as extensive knowledge -- an excellent foundation for community development and organizational work as well as for community-based research and community service.

Some nonprofits share this commitment to preparing people for outreach and recruitment. For instance, over five decades professional community organizers in

the US have developed the art and science of “one-on-ones”. Because they stress the importance of the initial contact with individuals in the community, they train organizers and leaders extensively in how to use that contact, or “one on one”, to learn about the person, to begin developing an ongoing relationship, and to gain an understanding of community concerns.

People are trained and scripted for this work. Before conducting their first interview, they shadow a person who is already expert in the technique, observing how it’s done. After detailed instruction in how to conduct the interview, they practice interviewing through role playing which is then critiqued by skilled observers. They also learn how to “share their story” with the people they interview, sharing their personal story of what drives them to be involved in talking with people about community issues – the best way to set the tone for a conversation which should involve a sharing of stories and values and begin building a relationship.

After conducting an interview themselves, they are debriefed by an experienced organizer who reviews and critiques each step in their interview, how they presented their story, how they responded to the other person’s answers and other sharing, and how skilled they were in discerning what issues really concerned people. This practice is repeated several times until a new person masters the technique. Subsequently, the organizer routinely reports in writing on the number of people interviewed, what they are learning and how many interviewees are becoming involved with the organization and beginning to assume leadership roles.

Educational programs should help people understand this entire process and how it fits into building community participation. There are many examples of university faculty preparing their students extremely well for either extension or participatory research work in nearby communities.

They also should have opportunities to learn several sets of competencies, including the following ones.

### **Step 1: Starting Out:**

- How can you discover the best places to encounter people?
- Which member of a family you should contact?
- Should you schedule a time to meet or not?

*In rural Uganda, the African Rural University and xxx, organize communities through a “visionary leadership” approach, approaching women in a family, having them bring the family together to agree on a vision of one way they would like to work together to improve their life within a year, and then helping them develop the leadership to achieve their vision. Each family is trained in this approach, including the emphasis on starting with women and girls, as are students at the organization’s girls school, the University, and in job training programs.*

## Step 2: Building Relationships and Sharing Values:

- What is the best way to begin the conversation?
- How can you best share your own story in order to start building a relationship with the other person?
- How can you encourage them to tell their story, and open up about the issues which concern them?

*Harvard's Kennedy School of Government offers a course in Public Dialogue, which is taught by Professor Marshall Ganz who is an experienced community organizer who helps people learn the art of "story-telling" – including the basic skill of telling your personal story in a way which encourages others to share their own stories, and thus their values, their quest for meaning, and their openness to creating new relationships with others who appreciate their values and vision. The course includes extensive study of leading thinkers and social change.*

## Step 3: Discovering People's Concerns and Motivations:

- How can you discern whether a person might be willing to meet with others who share their concerns and whether they might consider joining with others to work on the issue?
- How can you motivate people? Tap their motivations?

*Casa de Maryland organizes immigrant women domestic workers by going to the laundromats, parks and other spots they frequent on their days off, especially Sunday after church. Their conversations focus on the working conditions and immigration issues which concern them and what can be done.*

## Step 4:

- How should you conclude and then follow up on the conversation when you want to build an ongoing relationship?
- Processes of note-taking and analysis by the student/trainee, peers and educators

## **Step 5: Evaluating Success and Learning from Experience:**

One prime criterion for evaluating one-on-ones is the extent to which an interviewer has succeeded in creating a two-way conversation which has led to mutual sharing of concerns and values. Community organizers see that two-way conversation as fundamental because it provides the basis for developing an ongoing relationship between the person who has been reached and the group which is methodically organizing community residents.

## **BUILDING BLOCK #2:**

### **Learning How to Bring People Together**

Organizers and popular educators stress the importance of developing excellent skills in bringing people together and creating groups with increasingly strong bonds and shared values and views. Those skills are equally necessary for eliciting people's involvement in research, planning and other activities.

For popular educators the primary goal of the group process is consciousness-raising. Their expertise is in helping people grow in understanding their life circumstances, the forces which shape them, the value of their own experience and knowledge, and their capacity to become active rather than passive, to begin shaping their own destiny. This learning happens in group settings and benefits enormously from having a trained popular educator facilitating the discussion.

While great movements and important community-building efforts have emerged from this popular educational process, especially in Latin America, for a "popular educator" the process does not necessarily lead to joint action. Priority is given instead to the process' effect on the individual – how it raises his or her consciousness, liberates and empowers them, and helps them recognize that they can become actors in history, develop "agency", and work to change things in an increasingly fundamental way.

In contrast, for "community organizers", the primary goal in bringing people together is to prepare them for action. Typically, after many one-on-one individual interviews, organizers brings together people who share a common concern, are neighbors, or have some other basis for affinity. They choose a convenient time and a place which is inviting, usually someone's home or a local meeting spot, and they carefully prepare for the first meeting. And they begin a dialogue which is designed to lead to consensus on an action agenda.

The most effective popular educators, organizers and change agents develop – through study or experience – extensive knowledge of psychology, group dynamics,

group process, and reflective practice. They also must develop expertise in group process and in consensus-building.

### **A. Expertise in Group Process:**

While an organizer's goal is action, skilled organizers nevertheless devote great attention to process. Like popular educators, they have developed a set of tools which are highly effective at gradually building closer relationships among the people they bring together. They provide people with opportunities to share their common experiences and values, and then open up conversations on the issues they care about.

Participatory researchers and planners also need skills in group work and eliciting the participation of people who may not be accustomed to speaking in public or being listened to. They too need to learn group process skills or they will be frustrated in their desire to help others become fully involved, contributing participants in researching a community issue, developing community plans or otherwise addressing community needs.

The skills and knowledge needed to organize and manage this participatory process include mastery of sophisticated analytic, planning, facilitation and reflective processes as well as skills in addressing "nuts and bolts". For example, an organizer needs to become expert in --

- Analyzing the individual interview results and other information to decide whom to invite and what themes or topics should be stressed during the conversation
- Analyzing what kind of invitation and setting would work best in creating a conversational, relationship-building atmosphere, taking into account local cultural factors, where people feel comfortable, the settings people find most conducive to conversation, who should do the inviting, and other protocols
- Planning a meeting and conversational process in detail, including the agenda, roles to be played, and the most effective approach to facilitation
- Planning how best to begin building close relationships among the participants, including how to involve people in telling their personal stories, getting to know each other, and sharing their common values and issues
- Planning how and when to begin surfacing common issues, exploring them, and building consensus on a particular issue and ensuring people develop an increasing understanding of the issue, the root causes, the key actors and pressure points, etc.

While some have mastered this full set of skills, most social change leaders and organizers, educators and researchers learn on the job with little opportunity to study and learn some of the more challenging skills. Clearly, it would be extremely helpful if far more change agents had access to curricula which would help them develop these skills through background reading and study, practice, evaluation, reflection, exposure to alternative approaches, and a process of continual improvement. Both

college educators teaching community organizing and professional trainers in the nonprofit world help people master these tools so they can educate or organize people or encouraging them to participate actively in research, planning, or program or campaign development. But there are too few of them.

### **B. Expertise in Building Consensus:**

Another challenge is moving people from focusing on their individual concerns to developing a consensus on a common issue they might tackle together.

The community organizing process is designed to facilitate this process. Organizers must become skilled in drawing consensus from a group, helping people move from discussing their individual concerns to finding one or two common issues which unite them. They also need to become adept in helping people analyze a shared concern and transform it into an issue on which they can take effective action.

This process requires helping people learn to speak up in the group, share their personal concerns, and really listen to each other. Even more challenging is the task of helping people decide to defer their own pressing needs in order to find a unifying issue which builds their collective strength.

The community organizing tradition dictates that organizers be neutral so they can elicit the views of the group without expressing their own views. What they bring is expertise in organizing people, moving into direct action and guiding reflective practice so that people learn, but they are trained to avoid expressing their personal views. (In reality many organizers do not adhere to this “rule”.)

“Story-telling” is useful in building a unified group. The Kennedy School postgraduate course in Public Discourse brings great intellectual rigor to analyzing the role of stories in giving people a sense of identity and agency, creating a sense of connection with others, and motivating and educating people so they can submerge their own individual concerns to work on common issues. The professor sees this process as central to building the relationships and understandings which make collective action possible and undergird strong, thoughtful, and united action groups.

Popular educators are equally rigorous in the intellectual discipline with which they approach group process. Reacting strongly against professional dominance of traditional education and civic life, they have developed new tools to help ordinary people enter into a conversation on equal grounds and to learn together. Their educational process is designed for people who have humble educations, who have been oppressed, and silent with dramatically new opportunities to participate fully in the conversation, the thinking, and the peer educational process.

However, unlike people imbued with the organizing tradition of playing a purely facilitative role, Paulo Freire and other popular educators see their role as “animators” as well as facilitators. They have a dual role as participants in the conversation as

well as facilitators. They stress that the educator comes into the room with his/her own knowledge, experience and views and that – rather than suppressing that and playing a purely facilitation role -- they should be “in the circle” sharing their knowledge and views and pressing people to think more deeply and fundamentally. However, to avoid either dominating the discussion or manipulating it, the popular educator should –

- Be open with the group about the knowledge and views they bring into the room so that nothing is hidden
- Avoid dominating the group or making it too reliant on them
- Be excellent in asking guiding questions which ensure that everyone is on an equal footing in the discussion and that neither they nor other people have an advantage because of their knowledge or position
- Be skilled in getting people to keep probing into their own knowledge by exploring key questions – “But why” did that happen? But why? But why? – digging deeper and deeper and eventually getting to the root causes, the radical nature of the needs and remedies
- Be accomplished in moving back and forth between their facilitation role and their role contributing their own views to the group

### **BUILDING BLOCK #3 –**

#### **Learning About Building Effective Ongoing Organizations**

Since democratic social change requires some level of organization, people playing key roles in the change effort must become increasingly well-organized. Bringing people together, helping them decide what to do and then doing it requires at least a rudimentary level of organization. And the need for organizational skills grows if people then gel into an ongoing group: they must gradually develop basic systems for easily communicating with each other, monitoring events, planning ahead, dividing up duties, and getting their work done. These challenges grow exponentially when people create a formal organization, an ongoing movement, a coalition, partnership or new institution, or some other vehicle for continuing work on social and community change.

While people may learn these skills from experience, they can progress much more quickly if they have access to learning opportunities which help them avoid the setbacks and frustration of trial-and-error learning. Having access to an experienced advisor, useful written materials or a workshop is invaluable.

Unfortunately, those resources are seldom available. While some nonprofit and NGO intermediaries provide community and social change agents with this help, few have the resources to meet more than a small fraction of the training and technical assistance needs of front-line organizations.

Furthermore, there are relatively few academic or nonprofit educational programs anywhere in the world which are accessible and geared to helping change agents gain this knowledge. This leaves most social and community change organizations on their own in grappling with these educational needs. Considering these challenges, it is quite remarkable how many groups have emerged and been effective, and how much they have accomplished over the years.

There are two governance and management issues on which it is especially crucial that learning opportunities be expanded. These are the issues of developing bottom-up leadership and control, and developing effective internal management systems and practices.

#### **A. Developing Bottom-Up Leadership and Control**

People-driven organizations need leadership development strategies which ensure that the leaders chosen by the constituency become fully prepared for their increasingly complex responsibilities and act democratically. .

Skillful leadership development requires avoiding the dangers of being either too mechanical or too theoretical. It must enable people to master both theory and practice and can be especially helpful if it provides people with access to balanced learning opportunities which draw from both the academic world and the world of on-the-ground practice.

A comprehensive and robust approach to leadership development should incorporate four components:

1. Basic **skill development for emerging leaders**, including opportunities to learn skills in public speaking, taking on growing responsibilities, leading small groups, planning and running meetings, facilitating group processes including deep listening, building consensus and planning action steps, etc.
2. A program **helping people learn how to be facilitative leaders**, with skills in involving others and developing their talents, creating relationships and agreements among them, and constantly nurturing democracy and responsiveness within the group by sharing leadership, rotating out of leadership positions so others can take over, and other means
3. A process of **continuing education which deepens people's understanding** of themselves, others within the group, the environment in which they are working and the broader society
4. A process of continuously **creating opportunities for new people to emerge as leaders**, testing and developing their self-confidence and skills as they work on issues or otherwise engage in the group's work. To be democratic

over the long-run, movements and organizations must keep broadening and rejuvenating their leadership, reaching out to bring in new people, ideas and energies which can be incorporated into the joint efforts so they are constantly revitalized and continue to represent the constituency and be responsive and accountable to it.

While it is a rare educational or training program which offers this breadth, this is, in fact, what people need to be fully effective in creating community or social change.

Fortunately, some educators, trainers, researchers, and change agents are constantly learning more about how to develop these skills through experiential learning as well as reading, classroom work, and reflective practice. This is enriching some educational programs inside social movements, academic institutions, and the nonprofit and NGO worlds. Those outstanding programs have much to teach others about how to create similar learning opportunities in a growing number of institutions and organizations.

For example, organizing training schools and groups like the Philippines' Institute for Popular Democracy are particularly expert concerning the recruiting and grooming of new leaders. Similarly, some popular educators in social movements and academic institutions are doing outstanding work in developing people's facilitative leadership and group process skills and deepening their understanding of their environment. There are also fine examples of using participatory research and citizen monitoring to develop the sophistication and "political" understanding of ordinary citizens and community leaders, and strong models in both academic and non-academic settings of excellent educational strategies for deepening people's understanding of the issues.<sup>5</sup>

New York University's is expert in using "cooperative inquiry" to bring activists together around exploring a common issue, contributing their own experiences to this peer learning process while dividing up research and other responsibilities. This is another way of democratizing knowledge development and developing leaders for community and social change work.

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<sup>5</sup> In the United States, the world of community organizing has grown greatly in sophistication over the last 20 years. A key factor has been the rise of eight national organizing networks, each of which is involved in creating, supporting and linking dozens of grassroots groups. These networks are gradually expanding their training for volunteer leaders as well as professional organizers. At the local level, great attention is devoted to developing the skills and knowledge of a growing number of leaders by providing them with training, coaching, and continuing evaluation and critique. At the regional or national levels, there may also be opportunities to participate in workshops and peer learning sessions and/or to assume leadership responsibilities on those wider stages.

## **B. Developing Skills in Management**

Another big challenge for change agents is the need to develop skills in management. This starts with self-management – developing good practices in managing oneself, using time efficiently, planning, preparing well in advance, following through, and the vital personal issue of balancing the demands of social change work with a personal life. It quickly moves to management of people -- working with people, guiding their collaboration and development, informally leading or managing their action. Even with a fledgling group, the next step is helping people find ways to communicate regularly, divide responsibilities and share power.

The management challenges of working within informal as well as formal groups are considerable. Furthermore, few people come to this work with management experience, the issues and forces they tackle are complex and often highly resistant to change, and resources and back-up are scarce.

There is a crying need for expanded opportunities to learn these skills. Even in wealthier countries, there are few nonprofit support organizations which offer extensive training or management assistance. And most academic management education is designed for business executives, public administrators, and the top leaders of major nonprofits, not people working at the grassroots or in small activist organizations.

One useful response is that of academics scattered throughout Brazil who work through a national organization (IBASE) in devising special academic programs and free consulting help for leaders of the Landless People's Movement and other grassroots organizations and movements. In the US the Center for Community Change and some other nonprofit intermediaries provide free consulting and training on management issues ranging from strategic planning to Board and leadership development and leadership transitions. The Center combines this with technical assistance on the substantive issues grassroots groups face and the policy and political dimensions of their work.

Students earning a Masters in Community Economic Development in Tanzania or the US through Southern New Hampshire University take courses in planning, project management and organizational management.<sup>6</sup> Among the courses offered are the following:

- ICD 501 Accounting
- ICD 509 Financial Management
- ICD 515 Organizational Management for Community Organizations
- ICD 531 Project Design and Management
- ICD 782 Information, Management, Analysis and Presentation
- CED709 Fund Raising and Promotion

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<sup>6</sup> See Michel Adjibodou's profile of the SNHU program below.

CED 722 Negotiation Strategies  
 CED 726 Strategic Management  
 CED 730 Community Organizing and CED  
 CED 731 Diversity in Organizations

Los Angeles Trade Tech's Associate in Arts degree in Community Economic Development offers similar management and planning courses, specifically geared to the kinds of organizations where students are currently working or are likely to work. Unfortunately, such programs are extremely rare everywhere in the world.

Equally rare are either degree programs or individual courses which are designed specifically to prepare people to provide organizational development help to grassroots groups and social movements. This contributes to the dearth in organizational development practitioners or, indeed, places where people can systematically learn the following interrelated skills –

- Providing help to grassroots and activist groups – assistance roles, accountability, providing immediate help vs. skill transfer, etc.
- Creating new groups
- Developing formal organizations – structural alternatives, legal and other considerations, phasing
- Developing leaders, rotation of leadership, other strategies for accountability and representation
- Strategic planning
- Personnel and volunteer management
- Financial planning and management
- Fundraising
- Internal communications
- External communications and reporting
- Technology
- Increasing the organization's sustainability
- Developing partnerships, alliances and coalitions
- Crisis, change and transition management
- Assessment and organizational learning
- Organizational rejuvenation

#### **BUILDING BLOCK #4 –**

##### **Influencing the Policies and Practices of Major Institutions**

Social change organizations very often focus on trying to influence major institutions – government, corporations, large nonprofits, and others – to persuade them to reform their policies to benefit poor and excluded people. Needless to say, this usually requires great power, clever strategy, excellent plans and tactics, partners

and allies because large institutions are slow to change, especially when they see change as against their interests.

In short, policy change requires extensive preparation and, very often, the mounting of an ambitious, long-term, multifaceted campaign. Therefore, in addition to the expertise already described, effective Collective Action requires that organizers and change leaders become skilled in five more areas –

- Developing people’s understanding of their issues
- Developing a power analysis as background for planning action
- Devising clever strategies for action
- Moving people into action
- Becoming skilled in conducting systematic campaigns

### **A. Learning How to Develop People’s Understanding of Their Policy Issues**

It is clear that people’s power is amplified as they become increasingly sophisticated on their issues. While they may score an initial victory on an issue simply because they have marshaled large numbers of people or promoted an idea whose time has come, long-range success depends upon them combining that power with growing knowledge and sophistication. Deeper understanding of the issue, the root causes, the key actors, how decisions are made, how they can be influenced, and strategies and tactics which others have found to be effective – all these can greatly enhance their impact.

While this may seem obvious, it is a difficult lesson for many organizing and social change organizations which are convinced of the rightness of their cause and passionate about the issues. The heady atmosphere of the struggle makes it tempting to cut corners instead of doing careful research, mastering an issue, and learning from past efforts to tackle an issue. Experience may show, for example, that an apparent victory was hollow, that it dealt with a symptom rather than the root cause and thus only led to superficial changes. Without sufficient study, a group may not learn about hidden resources or policy alternatives which might achieve more, or not know that the changes they have been told are impossible are, in fact, quite feasible and may even have been won elsewhere using a different strategy.

In short, specialized substantive knowledge is essential. It is tragic that activists, organizers and other social change agents currently have access to few educational opportunities which are designed specifically to help them develop that knowledge on the issues which concern them. The papers by Denise Fairchild and Michel Adjibodou below analyze the need for Issue Expertise in Development as an example of the kind of background in specific issues which can greatly strengthen a group’s success.

These educational opportunities would, of course, be most useful and most heavily pursued if they start with people’s immediate concerns and are designed to

help them develop strategies to bring about tangible change relatively quickly. It is for this reason community organizing traditions stress involving people in choosing “immediate, winnable” issues. However, while good organizing typically starts with quite small initial gains, these are chosen to be empowering and to build people’s experience in winning, self-confidence, understanding of the deeper issues, and motivation to continue on to higher levels of reform.

There is therefore great value in educational programs which enable people to deepen their understanding of the issues they are addressing so they can move readily from small, immediate symptoms to a broader understanding and greater impact – “from the local to the global”.

- What are the underlying causes?
- Who makes the decisions, and what factors do they consider?
- Are there policy or structural issues which determine what’s possible?
- What potential strategies surface after deeper research and a power analysis, including an analysis of potential allies?
- What technical knowledge must the group master in order to influence decisions?

Popular education is especially effective in addressing this need. The animator’s role is to press people to keep thinking more deeply until they understand the underlying causes of the issue they face. Gramsci, Freire, and liberation theology developed whole sets of teaching tools and methods which are highly effective in helping people move from surface understandings to grasping the deeper issues and forces, and then using that knowledge to create effective strategies for change.

Unfortunately, few groups have access to skilled popular educators to guide this learning process. In the US, for example, even many professional organizers lack the skills, time, or commitment to deepening people’s sophistication on the issues. Many key leaders of the North American organizing tradition do not stress this element of leadership development, including especially the development of a “world view” or ideological understanding of the issues.

Participatory action research (PAR) is extraordinarily helpful in deepening people’s mastery of issues. People become intimately familiar with the facts and the nuances. By being directly involved in the research, deciding what to explore, learning how to uncover the information, interviewing people, observing events, studying key documents, and analyzing what they are finding. They become experts, well prepared to present their case and defend it, to explain facts, to match the expertise of their opponents, and to develop recommendations for change which are based on a deep understanding of the possibilities.

There are excellent examples of PAR’s effectiveness in all kinds of settings. Some of these are led by academics committed to participatory techniques and

community change work. Others involve professional organizers and popular educators who are based with nonprofits or NGOs rather than universities.

One form of participatory research is “Citizen Monitoring”. It focuses on helping people understand public policies and their impact by involving them directly in researching a policy issue they care about. It enables them to monitor how policies are impacting people, document and present convincing evidence of that impact, and use that information to influence public policies. Citizen monitoring may be relatively simple, such as sending 40 people who are eligible for a government benefit to the responsible agency and monitoring whether there is equal treatment of women and men or people with different racial backgrounds. Other citizen monitoring projects are far more elaborate, training people extensively in community research including conducting interviews, analyzing key documents, preparing reports and providing public testimony.<sup>1</sup> Quick or intensive, this research produces data to use to document any agency failings and argue for reform.

Whether a group is emphasizing policy reform or instead developing projects and services to meet community needs, the need for detailed technical knowledge as well as knowledge of the facts, decision-making processes, key actors and the like is of the utmost importance. The paper on Development by Denise Fairchild which is included below illustrates this need in the context of community improvement and other development issues on which – no matter what strategy they follow -- groups will have little impact unless they have access to specialized knowledge and expertise.

### **B. Learning How to Conduct a Power Analysis as Background for Action**

One area of expertise on which some nonprofits, NGOs and academics have quite fully developed their approaches, tools, and training programs has been the area of “power analysis”. Analyzing power relationships, assessing the power of different institutions and individuals, building collective power, allying with other sources of power, developing strategies for exerting power and neutralizing the power of others – these are basic tools for community organizing and social change in many parts of the world.

Power analysis has gradually become a fundamental tool for a range of social change strategies. Central to organizing traditions, it is equally fundamental to popular education, a process which involves people in looking deeper and deeper into understanding the underlying causes of an issue. In this context the animator may probe the following questions -- But why are people losing their land? But why is that allowed? But why do those decision-makers permit it? But why aren't they accountable to us rather than to others on these issues?

Power analysis has equal potential for community developers who assume responsibility for creating and managing programs which will help develop their communities or provide needed services. To build housing, launch economic

ventures or provide basic health care, for example, they need access to money and cooperation from the public, private, and/or philanthropic sectors. While their principal approach to gaining this support is building up their own programs and institutional capacity rather than challenging existing ones, they too must understand who has the power, how they exercise it, and how their own organization can develop sufficient power to gain the resources and help it needs. They typically develop that power by building alliances inside and outside powerful institutions as well as developing their own strength, expertise, and quality program plans.<sup>7</sup>

This learning happens most frequently through a combination of instruction and experience. Both nonprofit training programs and university courses on organizing typically prepare a person for conducting a power analysis by introducing him/her to the concepts and techniques and give them some experience through simulation and role play. They then send people to the field to conduct one-to-one interviews. Debriefing and reflection are then used as techniques to enable people to reflect on what they did well, what difficulties they incurred, and what they would do differently in the future. Assessment by their peers and instructors rounds out this learning experience, which is then repeated to give people practice and opportunities to perfect their techniques.

### **C. Developing Effective Strategies and Plans for Action**

These analyses are of little use unless they are linked to a clever strategy for action. Strategic thinking is an art as well as a science, and some people are naturally gifted in strategy. They are reflective, inclined to think ahead, examine contingencies, see connections, consider a broad range of opportunities, and plan on the basis of this analysis. Others, especially people who are driven by the desire for quick action and progress, often do not have this natural gift. They may be far more skilled in tactics than strategy. They know the mechanics but may not have developed the critical thinking skills and disciplines they need to plan carefully and maximize their impact.

As Cortez Ruiz points out,<sup>8</sup> learning strategic thinking has been likened to learning how to play chess. It is a complex process in which players must continually think ahead, observe and adapt. To win they must know how the game is played, learn how others have played it and won, think ahead to consider the full range of possible moves and countermoves, take all these factors into account in choosing the most promising strategy, and develop detailed plans for pursuing it.

This process in turn should lead to continuing evaluation of the changing circumstances and quick adaptation to take those changes into account. The word “strategy” comes from the Greek “strategos” – meaning “hill”. It stresses the importance of planning an action by going to a high point, surveying the landscape, analyzing all the forces and trends, looking ahead to the future, including likely

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<sup>7</sup> See Building Block #6 in the Development paper below.

<sup>8</sup> Paper on Strategies and Reflection by Carlos Cortez Ruiz, below.

intervening events, and developing a plan based on a SWOT analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in your situation.

As the CARST Task Force paper stresses, being strategic involves far more than technique: it is a way of thinking.

“From a CARST perspective, **being strategic** means being able to define a purpose and goals which take into consideration multiple source of knowledge beyond our rational/traditional forms of thinking and learning. A CARST approach therefore looks at emotions, intuition and imagination as reliable and rich forms of processing information, knowing and learning. It values diversity as a source of knowledge. Purposeful action takes into consideration our differences and uses tensions and conflicts that emerge from our differences as opportunities for learning and building common goals that include the multiple needs and expectations from the diverse members of the group.”

In a speech in May 1967 Dr. Martin Luther King told the following story which illustrates the importance of strategy --

“In any movement, every now and then, you must take off from the battlefield and try desperately to see where you are going. Remember one day Jesus said that he wanted to think about the situation surrounding his life and all the days ahead. He decided that he had to get away from things--get away even from the realm of action in order to see these things. And when the writer of the first gospel introduced that magnificent message that Jesus gave on the mountain, he opened the fifth chapter of Matthew by saying, 'and seeing the multitude he went up into the mountains.' You see, every now and then, in order to see the multitude you must get away from the multitude. And this is why we are here. We are trying to see the multitude. We are trying to see where we are going and how we are going to get there.”

The Kennedy School course on Community Organizing includes two days on strategy. It starts with the students identifying tough questions they need to think about for their own organizations (real or hypothetical). They then study a short case of an organization, from start through its evolution to the present, working in teams to discuss major decision points and develop strategies to present to the larger group. After that discussion, they discuss their own organizations' strategic issues with their colleagues.

In addition, each student is given practice in being strategic as they do field work , including analyzing it and discussing it with other students and instructors. Furthermore, course readings and case studies and discussion groups familiarize them with the wide variety of strategies others have used to bring about community and social change, including –

- Confrontational, collaborative and civil disobedience strategies
- Relationship building and value-sharing strategies
- Direct action
- Starting with small, winnable issues and then moving to more difficult ones
- Long-term campaign strategies
- Inside/outside strategies
- Alliance and coalition-building strategies
- Movement-building strategies
- Electoral and political strategies
- Legal and litigation strategies
- Strategies for influencing attitudes
- Educational and cultural strategies

Mastering a number of these alternative strategies substantially increases a group's ability to win on its priority issues. Too many groups master only one, with two unfortunate results: their actions become somewhat predictable, and their strategy may not be the most effective in a new arena or situation. It is therefore important for change leaders and organizers to have opportunities to learn a variety of approaches, developing sufficient knowledge and skill to apply whichever one is most likely to be effective in a particular situation.

#### **D. Moving People Into Action**

To have any significant impact, change agents obviously must become expert at moving people into action. Skilled organizers and community developers have learned to defer action until people have developed the skills, knowledge and latent power to have an impact, and they then are very strategic in helping people decide what issue to tackle and how.

They must also become skilled in weighing and choosing among such central alternative strategies as –

- Creating alternative programs and institutions;
- Creating demonstration or model programs which provide examples of what should be replicated(above)
- Using organizing and/or advocacy to win changes, running campaigns
- Developing “inside/outside strategies”, formal or informal
- Engaging in electoral politics, perhaps governing
- Becoming skilled in changing attitudes through persuasive leadership, popular education (including participatory research), using media and communications, and developing cultural appeals

Whichever strategy(ies) the group selects, they then must master a set of skills in carrying out that strategies.

If they follow an organizing and advocacy strategy, it is particularly important that they become skilled in conducting systematic campaigns, including –

- Researching the issue
- Choosing targets to influence, setting intermediate and long-range goals, choosing the most effective strategy(ies) for addressing them
- Developing leadership, and sustaining, broadening and refreshing it
- Conducting continuing education for leaders and followers
- Moving into action, exercising power
- Negotiating
- Celebrating and consolidating victories
- Monitoring and enforcing those victories and agreements
- Managing multifaceted campaigns including the challenges of sustaining the effort over time, institutionalizing capacity, compromising with “targets”, working with partners and funders
- Coping with mission drift, becoming skilled in rejuvenating the organization

## **BUILDING BLOCK #5**

### **Learning How to Do It Better: Techniques for Assessment and Organizational Learning**

If people are to become increasingly effective in working collectively, they must constantly assess how well they are doing and what they can learn from their experience, and then apply that learning to their ongoing work. This is a critical part of long-term capacity-building -- helping social change organizations become “learning organizations” with skills in “reflective practice”. It provides vital feedback, enabling people to learn from their experience, including their mistakes, so they can take corrective action and improve their planning and strategy.

In this work skilled change agents follow a three-step process – a “learning circle” of planning, action and reflection, and then further planning, action and reflection.

First, they start by planning thoroughly, involving people in the community in the research, analysis and planning so they develop their own skills, become directly knowledgeable about the situation they face, and participate fully in the key decisions.

Second, they put their plan into action, perhaps through relatively simple steps, perhaps through a complex, ambitious campaign.

And, thirdly, they reflect thoroughly on what they can learn from their experience, successful or unsuccessful. This reflection involves candid critiques as well as self-reflection on what went well, what didn’t and what should be done differently next

time. This knowledge is then applied as they begin the next phase of planning ahead, starting another ‘learning circle’.

The process of reflection creates “teachable moments” when people can take the next step in deepening their understanding of the situation they face. It provides a concrete context within which to –

- Deepen their analysis of power, including assessing the relative power of the key actors they are dealing with, the power relationships among them, and what people and institutions may be exerting great influence behind the scenes;
- Deepen their understanding of how decisions are made by political, governmental or private institutions;
- Develop greater knowledge of the economic, demographic and social factors which have a determinative impact on the situation they are addressing; and
- Strengthen their strategies for action on the basis of this deeper experience and knowledge.

Since such organizations are always resource-poor and overstretched, it is particularly important that their leaders have opportunities to learn how to develop simple, practical assessment tools and systems for –

- Assessing what has worked, what hasn’t and what can be done better
- Monitoring their progress, including monitoring their past achievements to ensure that their gains are consolidated and that any agreements with other parties are enforced
- Planning steps for continually building their group’s capacity and power

These systems should be devised to become integral to a group’s ways of working rather than being an added task which overloaded people and organizations are tempted to skip.<sup>9</sup>

The paper by the CARST Task Force and Peter Taylor’s description of IDS’s MA in Participation, Power and Social Change describe the pedagogical issues and processes which facilitate learning of these disciplines and skills in some detail.

## **6. Conclusion:**

The reason we stress lifelong learning and process is that no one can learn all these skills and areas of knowledge quickly or at one stage in their work helping create community and social change. Because the listing of skills to master is daunting, and each eventually requires in depth understanding, people would benefit

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<sup>9</sup> For further details on these issues see *Evaluation: The Good News for Funders* by Andrew Mott, published by the Neighborhood Funders Group in 2003.

most from having access to a continuing educational process over the years rather than a single educational intervention.

This is equally true of the challenge of developing the Issue Expertise on issues which are the focus for the change efforts, as is illustrated by the papers on Development by Denise Fairchild and Michel Adjibodou, *infra*.

Our overall point is that it is essential to recognize that this work is highly complex and difficult and that it therefore requires an intensive, substantial response from educational institutions which are accustomed to providing multiyear educational experiences to prepare people for lifetime careers in other fields. At present there are very few colleges or universities anywhere in the world which have identified this challenge as critical to the future and therefore responded with significant new educational programs at any level – beginning, postgraduate, or continuing education.

Furthermore, the NGOs and nonprofits which contribute or wish to contribute to addressing this great educational gap by offering training on these topics find themselves starved for resources and unable to expand their programs. They often have great difficulty even maintaining the programs they initiate (this is true for college-based programs as well: very useful programs have been discontinued at a range of colleges including the Pratt Institute, Los Angeles Trade Tech, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and other places in the States and other countries).

It is for this reason that it is so important that the International Working Group for University Education for Community Change have the backing it needs to lead a global effort to advance this critical field of study through building a growing network and initiating a number of efforts to support peer learning, collaboration, and increased visibility and support for Community and Social Change Studies.

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<sup>i</sup> In the US, for example, the National Citizens Monitoring Project involved groups in 80 cities in an extensive participatory research process on the most important federal program for addressing issues of jobs, housing and community improvement. Each group received modest funding, extensive training, and ongoing technical assistance as it thoroughly researched how the program was being managed by local governments. Using research protocols developed by the parent national coalition, they interviewed officials and leading citizens, reviewed proposals, reports, hearing records, and other materials in government files, conducted a needs assessment in low-income communities, and developed an annual written report on their findings, including illegalities and bad practices they had uncovered. Their report contrasted the results of the needs assessment with the actual spending patterns.

This research process provided a strong basis for involving people from several organizations, who then became the nucleus for a local coalition. The data then provided an

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extraordinarily strong base for local advocacy by the coalitions which then won major victories in many cities. For example, the San Francisco coalition exposed how the public were shut out of participation in the city's budgeting process, they were able to mobilize the facts as well as the power to convince the city commissioners to open up that process, and those gains are still in effect 30 years later.

The local data were aggregated nationally. Local monitors were then brought to Washington to review the data and work with national nonprofits in developing the national conclusions and recommendations for reform at the federal level. Like the local victories, the national effort also had a major lasting impact, changing federal policy on issues of open process, transparency, and targeting the funding to meet the needs of lower-income people and communities.